



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

50 FAMOUS  
STORIES RETOLD

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James Baldwin

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



# FIFTY FAMOUS STORIES RETOLD

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JAMES BALDWIN





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## THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES.

**T**here was once a king whose name was Di-o-nys-i-us. He was so unjust and cruel that he won for himself the name of tyrant. He knew that almost everybody hated him, and so he was always in dread lest some one should take his life.

But he was very rich, and he lived in a fine palace where there were many beautiful and costly things, and he was waited upon by a host of servants who were always ready to do his bidding. One day a friend of his, whose name was Dam-o-cles, said to him,—

“How happy you must be! You have here everything that any man could wish.”

“Perhaps you would like to change places with me,” said the tyrant.

“No, not that, O king!” said Dam-o-cles; “but I think, that, if I could only have your riches and your pleas-ures for one day, I should not want any greater hap-pi-ness.”

“Very well,” said the tyrant. “You shall have them.”

And so, the next day, Damocles was led into the palace, and all the servants were bidden to treat him as their master. He sat down at a table in the banquet hall, and rich foods were placed before him. Nothing was wanting that could give him pleasure. There were costly wines, and beautiful flowers, and rare perfumes, and de-light-ful music. He rested himself among soft cushions, and felt that he was



The Sword of Damocles.



the happiest man in all the world.

Then he chanced to raise his eyes toward the ceiling. What was it that was dangling above him, with its point almost touching his head? It was a sharp sword, and it was hung by only a single horse-hair. What if the hair should break? There was danger every moment that it would do so.

The smile faded from the lips of Damocles. His face became ashy pale. His hands trembled. He wanted no more food; he could drink no more wine; he took no more delight in the music. He longed to be out of the palace, and away, he cared not where.

“What is the matter?” said the tyrant.

“That sword! that sword!” cried Damocles. He was so badly frightened that he dared not move.

“Yes,” said Di-o-nys-i-us, “I know there is a sword above your head, and that it may fall at any moment. But why should that trouble you? I have a sword over my head all the time. I am every moment in dread lest something may cause me to lose my life.”

“Let me go,” said Damocles. “I now see that I was mis-tak-en, and that the rich and pow-er-ful are not so happy as they seem. Let me go back to my old home in the poor little cot-tage among the mountains.”

And so long as he lived, he never again wanted to be rich, or to change places, even for a moment, with the king.

## DAMON AND PYTHIAS.

A young man whose name was Pyth-i-as had done something which the tyrant Dionysius did not like. For this offense he was dragged to prison, and a day was set when he should be put to death. His home was far away, and he wanted very much to see his father and mother and friends before he died.

“Only give me leave to go home and say good-bye to those whom I love,” he said, “and then I will come back and give up my life.”

The tyrant laughed at him.

“How can I know that you will keep your promise?” he said. “You only want to cheat me, and save your-self.”

Then a young man whose name was Da-mon spoke and said,—

“O king! put me in prison in place of my friend Pyth-i-as, and let him go to his own country to put his affairs in order, and to bid his friends fare-well. I know that he will come back as he promised, for he is a man who has never broken his word. But if he is not here on the day which you have set, then I will die in his stead.”

The tyrant was sur-prised that anybody should make such an offer. He at last agreed to let Pythias go, and gave orders that the young man Da-mon should be shut up in prison.

Time passed, and by and by the day drew near which

had been set for Pythias to die; and he had not come back. The tyrant ordered the jailer to keep close watch upon Damon, and not let him escape. But Damon did not try to escape. He still had faith in the truth and honor of his friend. He said, "If Pythias does not come back in time, it will not be his fault. It will be because he is hindered against his will."

At last the day came, and then the very hour. Damon was ready to die. His trust in his friend was as firm as ever; and he said that he did not grieve at having to suffer for one whom he loved so much.

Then the jailer came to lead him to his death; but at the same moment Pythias stood in the door. He had been delayed by storms and ship-wreck, and he had feared that he was too late. He greeted Damon kindly, and then gave himself into the hands of the jailer. He was happy because he thought that he had come in time, even though it was at the last moment.

The tyrant was not so bad but that he could see good in others. He felt that men who loved and trusted each other, as did Damon and Pythias, ought not to suffer unjustly. And so he set them both free.

"I would give all my wealth to have one such friend," he said.

## A LACONIC ANSWER.

**M**any miles beyond Rome there was a famous country which we call Greece. The people of Greece were not u-nit-ed like the Romans; but instead there were sev-er-al states, each of which had its own rulers.

Some of the people in the southern part of the country were called Spar-tans, and they were noted for their simple habits and their brav-er-y. The name of their land was La-co-ni-a, and so they were sometimes called La-cons.

One of the strange rules which the Spartans had, was that they should speak briefly, and never use more words than were needed. And so a short answer is often spoken of as being *la-con-ic*; that is, as being such an answer as a Lacon would be likely to give.

There was in the northern part of Greece a land called Mac-e-don; and this land was at one time ruled over by a war-like king named Philip.

Philip of Mac-e-don wanted to become the master of all Greece. So he raised a great army, and made war upon the other states, until nearly all of them were forced to call him their king. Then he sent a letter to the Spartans in La-co-ni-a, and said, "If I go down into your country, I will level your great city to the ground."

In a few days, an answer was brought back to him. When he opened the letter, he found only one word written there.

That word was "IF."

It was as much as to say, "We are not afraid of you so long as the little word 'if' stands in your way."

## THE BRAVE THREE HUNDRED.

All Greece was in danger. A mighty army, led by the great King of Persia, had come from the east. It was marching along the seashore, and in a few days would be in Greece. The great king had sent messengers into every city and state, bidding them give him water and earth in token that the land and the sea were his. But they said,—

“No: we will be free.”

And so there was a great stir through-out all the land. The men armed themselves, and made haste to go out and drive back their foe; and the women staid at home, weeping and waiting, and trembling with fear.

There was only one way by which the Persian army could go into Greece on that side, and that was by a narrow pass between the mountains and the sea. This pass was guarded by Le-on-i-das, the King of the Spartans, with three hundred Spartan soldiers.

Soon the Persian soldiers were seen coming. There were so many of them that no man could count them. How could a handful of men hope to stand against so great a host?

And yet Le-on-i-das and his Spartans held their ground. They had made up their minds to die at their post. Some one brought them word that there were so many Persians that their arrows dark-ened the sun.

“So much the better,” said the Spartans; “we shall fight in the shade.”

Bravely they stood in the narrow pass. Bravely they faced their foes. To Spartans there was no such thing as fear. The Persians came forward, only to meet death at the points of their spears.

But one by one the Spartans fell. At last their spears were broken; yet still they stood side by side, fighting to the last. Some fought with swords, some with daggers, and some with only their fists and teeth.

All day long the army of the Persians was kept at bay. But when the sun went down, there was not one Spartan left alive. Where they had stood there was only a heap of the slain, all bristled over with spears and arrows.

Twenty thousand Persian soldiers had fallen before that handful of men. And Greece was saved.

Thousands of years have passed since then; but men still like to tell the story of Leonidas and the brave three hundred who died for their country's sake.

## ALEXANDER AND BUCEPHALUS.

One day King Philip bought a fine horse called Bu-ceph-a-lus. He was a noble an-i-mal, and the king paid a very high price for him. But he was wild and savage, and no man could mount him, or do anything at all with him.

They tried to whip him, but that only made him worse. At last the king bade his servants take him away.

“It is a pity to ruin so fine a horse as that,” said Al-ex-an-der, the king’s young son. “Those men do not know how to treat him.”

“Perhaps you can do better than they,” said his father scorn-ful-ly.

“I know,” said Al-ex-an-der, “that, if you would only give me leave to try, I could manage this horse better than any one else.”

“And if you fail to do so, what then?” asked Philip.

“I will pay you the price of the horse,” said the lad.

While everybody was laughing, Alexander ran up to Bu-ceph-a-lus, and turned his head toward the sun. He had noticed that the horse was afraid of his own shadow.

He then spoke gently to the horse, and patted him with his hand. When he had qui-et-ed him a little, he made a quick spring, and leaped upon the horse’s back.

Everybody expected to see the boy killed outright. But he kept his place, and let the horse run as fast as he would. By and by, when Bucephalus had become tired, Alexander

reined him in, and rode back to the place where his father was standing.

All the men who were there shouted when they saw that the boy had proved himself to be the master of the horse.

He leaped to the ground, and his father ran and kissed him.

“My son,” said the king, “Macedon is too small a place for you. You must seek a larger kingdom that will be worthy of you.”

After that, Alexander and Bucephalus were the best of friends. They were said to be always together, for when one of them was seen, the other was sure to be not far away. But the horse would never allow any one to mount him but his master.

Alexander became the most famous king and warrior that was ever known; and for that reason he is always called Alexander the Great. Bucephalus carried him through many countries and in many fierce battles, and more than once did he save his master’s life.



## DIOGENES THE WISE MAN.

**A**t Cor-inth, in Greece, there lived a very wise man whose name was Di-og-e-nes. Men came from all parts of the land to see him and hear him talk.

But wise as he was, he had some very queer ways. He did not believe that any man ought to have more things than he re-al-ly needed; and he said that no man needed much. And so he did not live in a house, but slept in a tub or barrel, which he rolled about from place to place. He spent his days sitting in the sun, and saying wise things to those who were around him.

At noon one day, Di-og-e-nes was seen walking through the streets with a lighted lantern, and looking all around as if in search of something.

“Why do you carry a lantern when the sun is shining?” some one said.

“I am looking for an honest man,” answered Diogenes.

When Alexander the Great went to Cor-inth, all the fore-most men in the city came out to see him and to praise him. But Diogenes did not come; and he was the only man for whose o-pin-ions Alexander cared.

And so, since the wise man would not come to see the king, the king went to see the wise man. He found Diogenes in an out-of-the-way place, lying on the ground by his tub. He was en-joy-ing the heat and the light of the sun.

When he saw the king and a great many people coming,



Diogenes and Alexander.

he sat up and looked at Alexander. Alexander greeted him and said,—

“Diogenes, I have heard a great deal about your wisdom. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

“Yes,” said Diogenes. “You can stand a little on one side, so as not to keep the sunshine from me.”

This answer was so dif-fer-ent from what he expected, that the king was much sur-prised. But it did not make him angry; it only made him admire the strange man all the more. When he turned to ride back, he said to his officers,—

“Say what you will; if I were not Alexander, I would like to be Diogenes.”