

THE UPSIDE-DOWN CASTLE.

A REWORKING OF

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S *THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES*

by **John Linton Roberson.**

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Once upon a time, there lived an emperor whose reign seemed in question from the day he took over the throne from his dearly beloved, deceased father. Fortunately, being the emperor, it was thought bad taste to remind him of his lack of legitimacy in the minds of so many of his subjects. Nor did anyone, except the fools living on nuts and berries in the fenced woods outside the city walls, still repeat the stories that the new emperor had poisoned his brother to get the crown, then smashed in his head with a flagpole bearing the seal of the kingdom when the poison, which had been rather weak and poorly mixed, failed to do its job and his slightly elder brother had shown up for the coronation anyway. It was true this had happened in full view of all the people, but that was no reason to disturb the peace with any prolonged fuss about it. Even the elder prince's last words had been, "Please don't bear a grudge." The kingdom could not be a happy and prosperous one, everyone knew, if their crown was subjected to the insults and complaints some troublemakers could not help slinging at it, even if they were true. And the crown rested on this prince's head, so that was that. Besides, the princes were nearly identical anyway, and their factions had largely been united around a common favorite color.

Even the emperor's numerous advisors, though the emperor was simple, and loud whenever he ought to have been thinking, did not dare question very much of what the emperor said, for the emperor was attended at all times by his huge dog Rover. When the emperor was questioned, he would start to stutter, twitch and sweat, and this reminded Rover of many times, back when his master could be told he was wrong, when he would be locked in a room with the prince, who would pet him and call him his best friend, but

then drink until he had the nerve to kick the poor dog about the room. And Rover ate the grandest food he had ever known now, as much of it as he wanted. Rover, who never wanted to go back to the way it had been before, and the shame and pain he remembered, would growl dreadfully at anyone whose advice did not echo that of the emperor.

“I think the whole castle should be rebuilt upside-down,” said the emperor one fine summer’s day, walking along the terrace. “Then I wouldn’t have to go so far up the stairs to see the murals on the ceiling.”

“Yes, emperor,” they said, and it was soon done. But almost immediately, the emperor noticed the disadvantages of this remodeling, and demanded in an angry shout to know whose stupid idea it had been to turn the stupid castle upside down anyway.

Between the nineteen of them, the odds of whose throat would be settled upon for Rover to tear out would be better, they sensed, if none spoke, so none did. But one, of the small number among them who were old and wise and had advised the emperor’s father, looked at the rest, quivering and biting their lips, and could no longer contain his disgust. “What a bunch of revolting cowards you all are!” he said. Then he turned to the emperor and said, “You don’t remember? You raved about that idea from day one! Hell, *I* was the only one who *told* you it was a damn fool idea!-”

“So,” said the emperor quietly, “you accept responsibility for your *input*?” Though he tried to be as firm and still as a mighty oak, the aides could hear the jingle of the leash as his hand involuntarily quivered, and Rover began to growl.

But the advisor had been around dogs all his life. His parents had dogs and his before him, all the way back to the kings he was sure his family had been in the old country. He wasn’t about to pretend he had no spine just because some mutt was miffed.

“No,” he said, “I accept that it was *stupid*, and that *you* were stupid for thinking of it and ordering it. *We told* you what would happen if you did, but you just kept munching on pretzels.” The emperor was sure he had something stinging to say back to that, but his lips froze in a red-faced grin and all that came out between them was a series of low whoops that could have been words, had the syllables been in the proper order. He got even tenser once that happened, which only in turn made it worse. Made him sound like a damn chimp, his dad always used to say.

Rover could take no more of this little man with a little voice who was causing so much upset. He jumped like a flash and with a *gnash, gnash, gnash*; pop went to old man's trachea and carotid in one violent blur. The arterial spray stuck to everyone. They backed away, slowly, in unison, as Rover lapped up from the growing puddle under the dead man's head.

The next day, every hour on the hour, before anyone would have normally been waking up, all the heralds and criers shouted the disgraceful behavior of the now-dead aide. That in order to cover up the raiding of the public treasury and most particularly the war chests, recently reported to be nearly empty, he had talked the noble, young, trusting emperor into this infamous disgrace against the ancient dwelling place of the nation's fourscore emperors, and the symbol of the pride of the kingdom itself. Unfortunately, but thanks to none other than the traitor, fall to the people to sacrifice in order to replenish the emptied funds it had taken to tell them all this. It would be hard. But the emperor was sure they had a sense of duty and would be strong enough to accept this without bothering him about it, unlike his advisor. Besides, why make a fuss? Wasn't the emperor angry enough already?

Of course it was expected that they would have to vent some steam before embarking on this grand and noble sacrifice. So nobody stopped them when they went to the house of the advisor's family and burnt it to the ground with them inside. All had a good piss on the ashes before grumbling home. But once that had been gotten off their chest, they did the best they could for their emperor because they were proud to be good subjects, and the tax coffers soon swelled to bursting.

"Wow!" said the emperor once the kingdom's great reservoir had been thoroughly emptied and dried, and all the gold had been poured into the great pit. He swam in it like a fish. He burrowed in it like a gopher. And he threw it up in the air and let it hit him on the head.* Rover swam in the shining pool, which hurt one's eyes in the bright midday sun atop the Treasury Mountain, pissing in it as he went. The sun, some said, was brighter and stronger than it had been two or three emperors before. How could that be a bad thing, the emperor thought; who doesn't want a brighter tomorrow?

[†] Apologies to Carl Barks.

Some of the remaining old wise men left from his father's time knew what the emperor's own people, with him since he'd been a prince, did not. But the younger aides would not have listened. They came from special monasteries of learning, armed with a hundred reasons why it was better to know nothing and dare everything. They simply hadn't time for the facts—there was too much to do.

But the old wise men knew that old enemies from a time before even three emperors before were seen on the border, that here and there conversation had been heard suggesting they were planning some sort of sudden attack, though they did not know of *what* sort. And wherever it was, it was to be from the last direction in which they'd be prepared to look.

But after conferring among themselves, they agreed that the best thing to do with these sudden funds would be to strengthen their armies, and the border, now while it was still fairly simple and the threat was known and far off. They told the emperor as he swam.

"I wanna have the *biggest damn party ever*, for a *whole month*," the emperor, whose ears were clogged with coins, declared, to a hearty *Woof!* from Rover. "I wanna have a big ol' *barbecue*—heck, you could cook a whole damn *stampede* a' beef with *this* much—"

"Oh my god, I just can't *take* this anymore!" shouted the old general, who had won many past battles for the kingdom, and whose wisdom, courage and sacrifice had played a very large role in making the kingdom as strong, vast and wealthy as it had been for as long as anyone could remember. The very thought of squandered, wasted opportunities was hateful to him and, emboldened by his conscience as he had not felt for a very long time, he didn't care if the dog growled all day. Its feet were caught in the weight of the coins, and it was still far away, so the emperor would have plenty of time to have to listen. "My Lord Emperor, you *must* use this money *right away*, while it's still *here*, to secure our bord--" But the general did not hear the quiet scuffling backwards of the aides closest to him, or the sudden jingle, and so Rover was upon him by complete surprise. He bit hard and deep, and hurt his teeth crunching down on the zipper. The aide was left there to bleed to death. The high voice made the emperor laugh.

The butler draped a towel around the naked emperor as he rose from the pool. "I definitely can't have no party in *that* thing," he said, pointing at the castle, which was still

upside down. The aides suggested someplace secluded on the edge of the kingdom, far from the nattering and complaining of this manor, and out of sight of that sad embarrassment.

And it would be a grand barbecue indeed. The finest poets, scribes, troubadours and painters were called upon to enliven, and immortalize, the occasion, and tell all the peasants every detail as it happened, so that they could almost feel as though he was taking a vacation for all of them. There were many cookouts, hunting expeditions, and timber-cutting contests; much overflowing of beer and pancakes, and more money into the pockets of the emperor and his aides, and the thickest steaks for Rover. A good time was very much had by all.

But a scribe who looked askance at the young emperor had snuck in, and actually took notes—unheard of by the court scribes, who preferred the more professional and well-mannered approach, to simply transcribe what the emperor would like to have said. Some pretended they were there when they had not been, and the distance was only flattering to the emperor. But this scribe was different. He even asked the emperor questions, such as if he felt for the plight of so many who were now poor so this party could be given, and when the castle would be put upright again.

So surprised was the emperor at hearing sentences with this new punctuation that he accidentally answered. “I don’t know why I should care, but I think the people are happy to see we live in such a prosperous country that I *can* give this party. It’s more than a barbecue. It’s *strength*.” And though Rover could tear up the paper on which those words were later printed and read by everyone, and did, the scribe was nowhere near, only in the range of his own colleagues, who, unlike he, would have done anything to keep their important positions, no matter what trade they had been in.

So soon the scribes wrote, and the criers were again in the streets, shouting night and day that the scribe who had unfairly written down what the emperor had said bugged goats, so who should listen to him anyway? That he was a spy, that he was lying, every hour of the day and night without ceasing. The sleepless people’s ears became pained, and they hanged the scribe, setting the body afire as it started to swing. After the gagging and crackling was done, there was heard nothing but sweet silence. All went home, if they

still had them, to their cold and hard beds, if they still had them, and loaves of black bread, when available, and accepted and were happy that they had so grand an emperor, and hated any who would try to ruin this pride, which made everything else just a little bit less sharp.

Nevertheless, any doubt in him whatsoever bothered the emperor deeply. The same painters, scribes and troubadours who had attended the party were invited for a stop on the return journey at the birthday party of a local child Rover had sniffed out and brought back, trembling, in his teeth the previous day.

“Please, sir, it’s my birthday tomorrow,” the boy had whimpered.

The emperor always said children give you the best ideas. The people would know the mighty emperor, with so much trouble bearing down on the kingdom, had time to read a story to the children. And they would love him. Though the book was upside down, the children enjoyed themselves very much and laughed, and the emperor laughed with them. But halfway through, an advisor whispered in the emperor’s ear that the enemies of the kingdom had sent in spies who had stolen a great deal of gunpowder, and had set off large barrels full throughout the kingdom. They had killed themselves, and hundreds upon hundreds of his subjects, many of whom had fallen, screaming and burning, from very high windows. There had been great panic and devastation. Even the emergency stores of grain were destroyed. Merchant after merchant was either dead or running to set up shop in other kingdoms. Almost every building had burned to the ground or collapsed. The emperor wrinkled his brow.

“How’s my castle?”

“Um, it’s still upside-down, but—“

“It’s okay?”

“Yes, sir, but ~”

“Then go ‘way. I’m in the middle of a *story*.” Rover growled, and the advisor backed away. The emperor was proud of his strength in not allowing himself to be drawn into a fight that someone else had started. And where could he have been safer than here, with so many smiling children around him? He read them many stories more. The emperor knew, as the court painters feverishly sketched the scene, that this would show this and future

generations just what sort of confidence God had given this ruler. And the damage was already done anyway, so why stress such an important heart as his by panicking and rushing to and fro? And after all, someone as important as himself had to have staffs full of people competent and skilled enough to take care of all this before he could even get back. He could see them all standing right there behind him.

Two weeks later, he returned and stood atop the ruins of the home of an old man that he held at his side to keep his balance. The emperor declared that from now on, he would do exactly as he liked, for this was the only way to defeat those who had done this, who were now dead. For months afterward the criers were paid again to shout day and night to tell the people how good all this shouting was for them. But unlike all the other times, once the initial shock had worn off, people started eyeing the criers, as there was no one else left that was a good target for the rocks that used to make up their hearths. Things weren't working as they had before. But the emperor had no new, or indeed any, ideas, so something would have to be done about the grumbling.

"I must have a set of new clothes," he announced to his advisors. "The finest clothes available to man, as soon as possible."

The breeze from their collective nod was very refreshing. "W-what *sort* of clothes, my lord emperor? There are *many* kinds of fine clothes~"

"Clothes like my father," he replied, "grand clothes that show everyone how his glory lives on in me. How I carry on his majesty and grace, and the dignity of the kingdom. The people seem sad and troubled, and I will in this way give them hope. Besides, these old robes are starting to itch something fierce."

And so, tailors the emperor had known from when he'd been a prince were called. None of them had ever actually tailored a suit, but they liked to call themselves that, and anyway, he'd known their families so long, what else mattered? They brought no cloth, nor any needles and thread, nor measuring tape. This was fine with the emperor—he'd always thought all that was a bit girly anyway. They instead had him stand naked as, encircling him, each of them, in turn, for hours, told him of his magnificence, of his infallibility, of his beauty and natural, noble grace. And he agreed with them, standing there with head held high, that these, indeed, were the finest clothes any man could wear.

In a great parade, trumpeters and criers filled the street, telling everybody that, no matter what they saw, the emperor was not only clothed, but in raiment finer than anyone could even imagine. They were told that when the emperor passed them soon, they should sing and praise these, the finest clothes that ever man had worn.

When they had gone, the emperor marched through the street absolutely naked. There was a great trumpet fanfare that would have drowned out cries and songs of praise. But there were none. Everyone had been struck completely dumb.

“Good enough,” said the emperor, and marched on.

THE END.