



Tom Ward

Tom was the greatest treasure hunter in his village. From the tail feather of a snowy owl, to the cracked shell of a particularly yellow snail, his room was bursting with his prizes. Every day he would go out to the woods, or to the small creek not far from his home, to search for wondrous new things to add to his collection.

Today was no exception. It was a beautiful summer afternoon, and the sun was only just starting to slip from the sky as Tom grabbed his bag and headed



outside. It took exactly four-hundred-and-thirty-two steps before he reached the creek, tingling in anticipation for the curiosities waiting to be discovered in the glistening shallows.

Upon arrival, Tom's eager eyes immediately spotted a spectacular sight. There, shining brightly through the clear waters, was a pebble. But it was no ordinary pebble. At one moment it shone green like an emerald – the next, a blue brighter than any sapphire. Without a moment's hesitation, Tom snatched up the stone, turning it

in his hand to marvel at his discovery. Truly he was the greatest treasure hunter that ever lived.

Tom stared at the pebble for a long time before finally stowing it away in his bag. That was when a second flash of light caught his attention. At first, he thought was just the reflection of the sun on the water. But it wasn't coming from the creek at all. On the other side of the creek, at the edge of the woods that bordered the village, Tom could



just make out some kind of object, gleaming beneath a fallen tree.

At once, Tom raced through the water, mindless of how wet he became, until he reached the spot where the gleaming object lay. He picked it up and studied it, unsure of what he was looking at. It seemed cold to the touch, and reflected light like glass. "Oh," he said at last. "It's a shell!" Yet it was like no shell he had ever seen before. Whatever

creature it had come from must have been magnificent. Tom held it up to the sky, a huge smile on his face as he admired his second prize of the day. Then he dropped it into his bag, along with the glowing stone.

With two incredible treasures, Tom was on a roll. Why stop now? he thought to himself, and headed deeper into the woods, alert and ready for whatever he might find.

The woods were ancient – older even than Tom’s great, great grandfather. Tom always felt at home whenever he stepped foot beneath the leafy canopy. He loved how the bluebells and daffodils swayed, as if they were dancing to the sounds of the rustling leaves above. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of a lizard, scurrying between the roots of old trees – or a bird, taking flight from its nest. In fact, Tom was so caught up by the sight of a glossy black beetle, he failed to notice when a little mushroom on the forest floor behind him began to move.

“What are you staring at, boy?” came a dry, dusty

voice.

Tom looked around, startled. “Who’s there?” he called out. But there was nobody to be seen.

“I’m right here, you dolt!” came the voice again. “Down here.”

Tom looked down and let out a large gasp. It was a mushroom. A small, battered-looking mushroom was talking to him. “You can talk?” he said, rather sheepishly.

“You think that just because I’m a mushroom I can’t talk? Well, I have news for you. We can talk, and we do talk – but only when we choose to do so.”

“Oh,” said Tom, lost for words. This was new. Never in all his days of treasure hunting had ever come across such an odd little creature. “I’m sorry if I was rude, Mister Mushroom. I’m a treasure hunter, you see – and you distracted me – and I’ve... I’ve never met such a well-spoken mushroom before.”



“Bah,” said the mushroom, clearly unimpressed. “Maybe you would have met me sooner if I had. If I were able to move around like you do, with your two good legs. But no, I am rooted here, where the sun shines in my face all day and the rain drops on my head all night!”

Tom wasn’t sure what to say, but apparently the mushroom had a lot more words on the matter. “My

name is Ulysses,” said the mushroom. “And I have a mission for you, boy.

That sparked Tom’s curiosity. “A mission?” he said, raising one eyebrow.

“What kind of mission?”

The mushroom smiled and nodded his cap. “You’re a treasure hunter, yes? Well, boy, there is a magic crystal in a cave, deep in the heart of the forest. If you find it and



bring it back to me, I can use its powers to free myself from the dirt, so I may walk and run and jump, just as you do. I can’t get it, but you certainly could.”

Tom considered for a moment. He looked at the old mushroom, and noted the damage the wind and the rain, and countless insects had caused to its bright red cap. Tom’s heart surged with pity. Still, he was a treasure hunter... “What would I get out of it?” asked Tom. “A cave sounds dark... and scary. I may be a treasure hunter, but... But there are some places I never go.”

“An adventurer like you? Afraid? Hah!” mocked the mushroom. “I am out here every day and every night, and yet here I am, miserable but alive. All I ask is that you go into the cave, take the crystal, then return. Once I have used the magic of the crystal, then you can keep it for yourself. Now, imagine what a prize that would be!”

Tom smiled, a big, broad grin. That was exactly what he wanted to hear. “Where is this cave, then?”

The mushroom stretched, then said: “Just follow the creek to its source. There you will find the cave, and inside you will find the crystal. But be quick. I might have been stuck here for years, but that doesn’t mean I want to wait any longer!”

Tom nodded, then turned on his heel and was off. He felt like a hero from the fairy tales his mother had told him



as a boy. He quickly found his way back to the creek and strode confidently along its banks. After a while of walking, he noticed how brightly the sun was still shining, even though he had been in the woods for quite some time.

The further along the creek the boy walked, the brighter everything seemed to get. Soon, even the water seemed to shimmer with rainbow light – greens, oranges,

pink and purples – all swirling across the water’s surface. He noticed too that the sounds of birds, beasts and insects along the banks had fallen quiet, as if fast asleep. It was all so very odd, but also, strangely peaceful.

Even when Tom looked at the woods, where the trees now appeared to be watching him through knotted eyes, he felt safe and calm. He waved at the trees, and they waved back; their branches swaying gently to and fro. Tom was so distracted by the rainbow waters and the waving trees, he was surprised when the cave mouth opened up in front of him like a hungry maw.



became almost impossible to see anything that wasn't directly in front of his face. Then, seemingly all at once, there was nothing
!but darkness.

Tom felt his chest tighten. He could hear his heart hammering in his ears. What was I thinking? he said to himself, spinning around in a panic. Why hadn't I just stopped after my first two prizes? I could have been home by now, surrounded by my treasures. Tom wanted to run, to flee, back to the sky and the light. But just as his foot came up to take that first step out, a glimmer of light emerged in the darkness.

Tom lowered his foot to the ground
“Is that...?” he whispered aloud. Timidly, he moved towards the light. Closer and closer he came to it, until at last he realized what it was. A tiny, glowing bug danced



Tom stared at it, eyes wide,
and for the first time that day felt a pang of fear. All the brightness of the world around him seemed to disappear completely inside that dark mouth. Tom gulped. He really didn't want to go in there. But he had to! Ulysses was right. Tom was the brave hero – the greatest treasure hunter alive – and he was the only one who could help. He clenched his fists, gritted his teeth, and with a few hesitant steps, entered the cave.

Inside the cave, Tom let out a shaky breath and looked around. Surprisingly, it wasn't as dark as it had looked from the outside. Some weak rays of light illuminated the entrance just enough for him to make out his surroundings. Slowly but surely, he pressed on, moving deeper into the cave.

Further and further Tom went, feeling as though the cave would go on forever. Soon it

across the cave ceiling. There was one at first, but then another, and another – each a tiny star in the dark. The more Tom walked, the more of them seemed to appear, until soon he was surrounded by them.



Tom’s mouth fell open in awe. He had never seen such a thing before. His eyes searched the constellation of bugs on the cave walls, the floor, the ceiling – and that was when he saw it. There, hanging from the tip of a stalactite was the most beautiful gem Tom had ever seen. Tom strode through the bugs, confident once more at being the greatest treasure hunter in the world. In a flash, his hand whipped out to claim the crystal for himself. It was

strangely warm to the touch, and looked as clear as water.

As Tom considered his new trophy, the bugs around him suddenly fled. All at once, the cave was flooded with darkness, and with it returned Tom’s fear. Tom could almost feel the darkness pressing against him, pushing the air from his lungs. He began breathing faster, looking around him in search of an exit. But instead, he found something else.

Tom screamed and stumbled over his own feet as he leaped backwards, away from a huge face that appeared from out of the dark. A large mouth with sharp, white teeth like gleaming pearls, and two glowing green eyes floated before him.

“Now, now,” it said to him, almost playfully. “Who do we have here?”

Tom managed to catch his breath. At least whatever this thing was, it hasn’t tried to eat him. Yet.



Meekly, he answered: “I... I’m Tom.” He paused. “Wh... who are you?”

The mouth widened, and Tom realized the creature was trying to smile. “I am Darkness”, it replied, its voice echoing around the cave. “But do not be afraid. I may seem scary, but I am as harmless as the bugs that live here.” As if summoned by those words, the glowing bugs returned, bringing their light with them. Yet even with the bugs lighting the cave, Tom couldn’t make out what Darkness looked like.

“But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t respect me,”



Darkness continued. “I’ve been watching you, Tom. I know you are a hunter of trophies and treasures. It’s true, there are many wondrous things in the world. But that doesn’t mean you have a right to take them all for yourself. Now, I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

The shadows cast by the light of the bugs shifted on the walls. They moved towards Tom, peeling away from the walls to form a large black paw that opened out expectantly in front of him.

“My crystal, please,” asked Darkness, without any anger or threat in its voice.

Tom hesitated. Darkness didn’t move.

Finally, Tom spoke. “You are right. I took many things from the world and kept them to myself. But this crystal isn’t for me. This is for Ulysses, the old mushroom. He needs it to be able to walk. I promise, I won’t keep it.”

Darkness paused. “Prove it. Prove to me that you understand that you are capable of giving up something

you have taken. Prove to me that you won't keep hold of the crystal the moment you leave the cave, never to be seen by any other man or beast again."

This time, Tom did not waver. He reached into his bag and pulled out the glowing pebble and the glass snail shell. With a last, longing look, he handed them over to Darkness. The moment Darkness took them, they vanished into shadow, and Darkness' grin grew even wider.

"So it is possible after all. Then go, bring the crystal to the old mushroom. But be careful, Tom. Remember, some things are not meant to be kept by only one boy – even one as brave and adventurous as you. Some things are for the world to enjoy, as much as you." With that, Darkness closed its eyes and vanished.

Tom hurried from cave into the fading light of day. He raced along the creek, listening to the sounds of chirping crickets and tweeting birds. But when Tom reached the spot where Ulysses had been, he discovered the mushroom

had vanished. He turned around, searching the forest floor. But the mushroom was nowhere to be found. Had the magic already happened? And now, Ulysses was free, to walk and run where he wished?

Suddenly, Tom felt very sleepy. It had been a long and exhausting adventure. Now, more than any treasure he had ever craved, all he wanted a bed to curl up in. But before he left the forest, he remembered the words of Darkness, and placed the crystal on the floor, where Ulysses had been. After all, it wasn't Tom's treasure. It never had been.