The Beastly Baron of Beaux Bottom

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A Cautionary Tale

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Digit Publications

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Digit Publications

ISBN 978-1-7393579-1-7

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by Pureprint Group Ltd, Uckfield, TN22 1PH
Typesetting by the author

Produced in United Kingdom

www.digitpublications.com

For all my first readers,

Tom and Hugh

Ellie, William and Henry Steer

Elliot and Phoebe Miller

Finn, Charlie and James Workman

CHAPTER ONE
The Baron's Breakfast

Once upon a time there was a town called Beaux Bottom.

It was called Beaux because that was an old word for "beautiful", and it was a very pretty town, with well-maintained houses and a lovely old castle. It was called Bottom because the town lay in the fertile valleys at the bottom of a large mountain range.

The barons of Beaux Bottom had lived in the castle for centuries, mostly well loved by the townsfolk.

The current baron, however, was not one of those.

The Beastly Baron of Beaux Bottom, as he was known, spent a good deal of his time shouting at people and being generally rather unpleasant.

It didn't help that the baron knew very well what people called him behind his back, and he particularly disliked names where all the words started with the same letter.

His mother, who had long since given up hoping that he would grow into anything remotely resembling her dead husband, tried in her own way to help him.

“Why don’t you join your army when they next go out on training?” she said to him at breakfast, for the fourth time that week. “The fresh air and exercise will do you good.”

She actually wanted to say, “No one’s going to want to marry a big oaf like you,” but thought that might not be … helpful.

The baron threw his napkin down into his scrambled eggs, regretting it immediately, as they were jolly good eggs and he hadn’t finished them.

“Now look what you’ve made me do!” he shouted across the table, getting up and storming out of the room.

“Try not to…” his mother started to say.

The door closed behind the baron with a loud bang, making the doorknob fall onto the floor.

“…slam the door, as the doorknob falls off, although you’ve promised to get it fixed for ages,” she finished quietly to herself.

The baron went straight up to his room and paced around angrily.

“I know what she thinks,” he said, talking loudly to himself. “She thinks I’m too fat. She’s always trying to get me married off and she thinks no one will want to marry me because my tummy’s too big and I shout too much.”

He stopped talking and thought about this for a minute as he continued to pace up and down.

"And whose fault is that?" he asked his reflection as he stopped pacing and stood in front of the mirror. "The cooks make such delicious food – it's impossible not to eat it." He gave a small harrumph of satisfaction now that he knew there was a good reason to eat as much as he did. "And I wouldn't shout if people stopped asking me to do things all the time."

Everything suddenly started to make more sense.

"Yes," he continued. "They all come begging me to sort out their problems. 'Please, Baron, the drainage systems need repairing to stop the fields from flooding. A wall has collapsed, Baron, and my sheep keep running off. Do this, Baron. Do that, Baron.' And I tell them, I say that I promise to sort everything out. But what do they do? They keep pestering me. 'When are the drainage systems going to be fixed, Baron? You promised that the wall would be mended, Baron?' Well, I can't very well do everything all at once, can I? I'm not a magician. It's no wonder I shout at them and tell them to go away."

He stopped talking and looked at himself in the mirror, turning this way and that to try and see as much of himself as he could.

“They don’t make mirrors big enough!” he grumbled. He stood sideways looking at his tummy, which bulged and made his nightshirt balloon out in front of him. “It’s not that big anyway,” he said, holding his tummy in both hands and bouncing it up and down a little. “But still—” he let his tummy fall back down again “—maybe it could do with being just a tiny bit smaller.” He sat down on the edge of his large bed and sighed.

From outside came the sound of horses moving around and men talking to each other. The baron went over to the window and gazed down into the courtyard.

Major Mountjoy was getting the regiment ready for one of their training exercises, checking uniforms and equipment and talking and laughing with his men.

The baron felt himself getting a little jealous, watching how easily the major got on with the other soldiers and how well liked he was.

But of course, he’s a dashing soldier and doesn’t have everyone pestering him all the time, he thought to himself. *What’s so special about running around on a horse and waving a sword about anyway? I’m sure I could do that just as well.*

He sighed again. Perhaps he should take his mother’s advice after all.



He opened the window. “Major Mountjoy!” he shouted down. The major spun around and looked up at the baron’s round face gazing down at him. “Baron! What can I do for you, sir?” he said cheerily.

“I was thinking…” The baron paused as if unsure of what he was going to say. “I will be joining you on your exercises today,” he continued, sounding slightly flustered.

The major’s smile faltered just a little before he managed to bring it back under control. “Of course, Baron,” he said. “You would be most welcome. We will wait for you.”

The baron grunted and closed the window. “Well, that’s that,” he said, sighing again. “I can’t back down now.” He strode over to the door and opened it. “Baxter!” he bellowed before shutting the door and pacing around his room again.

Down the corridor, a door opened and closed. The sound of brisk footsteps grew steadily louder until they stopped outside the baron’s door. There was a knock.

“Come in,” the baron said, turning to face the door.

A man in a plain brown jacket and britches entered the room. He was old with short grey hair and had a long, thin face and deep-set eyes that looked at the baron with nervous expectation.

“At your service, Baron,” he said.

“I’m going on exercises with Major Mountjoy. What should I wear?”

Baxter considered this for a few moments.

“Well?” the baron asked a little sharply when there wasn’t an immediate response. “Should I wear a uniform?”

Baxter looked towards the door behind the baron that led into the dressing room, his eyes moving slightly as he imagined going through the contents of all of the wardrobes. He stopped his mental searching and looked back at the baron uncomfortably.

“I don’t think you have requested a uniform to be made for you recently, sir.”

“Are you saying there are no uniforms in the castle?”

“There are your old ones, sir, and your father’s, but…” Baxter trailed off, trying not to look directly at the baron. He had long ago learnt not to say anything that might upset the baron in any way.

“Yes, yes. They won’t fit me. I know,” the baron said irritably.

“May I suggest your green and yellow striped jacket, sir?” Baxter continued, trying to sound as reasonable as possible. “That is made of suitable material. You could



wear your thick red britches with them, which will protect you while riding."

The baron thought about this for a moment. "Very well," he said. "They will do I suppose, although they don't seem very dashing or military."

Baxter remembered the baron's father. *Now, there was a dashing man*, he thought. He started to sigh at the memory before catching himself.

"You could take your staff of office," Baxter said hastily. "Your father never went anywhere without that."

The baron looked surprised, but then smiled. "Yes. Very well, I'll take the staff. See to it."

While Baxter went to get everything ready, the baron walked back to the window and looked out at the soldiers standing around waiting for him to come out. He began to wonder if this might not have been one of his better decisions.

Half an hour later, the baron walked out into the courtyard in his green and yellow striped tunic and red britches, holding the long Beaux Bottom staff of office in his right hand.

The soldiers stood to attention when he appeared and remained at attention while he mounted his horse and placed the staff in a holder on the saddle.

The major drew his horse up next the baron's and signalled for everyone to move forward out of the castle gates.



Chapter Two

the Wild Western Woods

Nothing was said as they and the hundred or so men marched west out of the town, away from the tall mountains behind the town and through the fields and meadows beyond.

They continued on for a further few miles, eventually stopping in a large, open space of sloping ground between two woods.

The baron looked around him at the unfamiliar territory. He had no interest in the countryside at all, and had only ever been this far out a few times as a young boy, reluctantly accompanying his father on similar excursions, which he'd always detested.

While the baron watched with ever-diminishing enthusiasm, the major divided his men into two groups, giving each of his two lieutenants a sealed envelope of instructions. Then, while one of the divisions marched up the hill to hide themselves in the wood, the major walked back to the baron, who he couldn't help noticing looked a little bored, sitting there on his horse.



The major stroked the head of his own horse as it stood chewing the grass. “It’s a nice day to be out,” he said pleasantly, as the horse turned its attention away from the grass and started to nibble the major’s hair.

“Is it?” the baron replied, beginning to wonder if he shouldn’t just go back to the castle for something to eat before lunch.

“You might not be able to see much from here, but you’re welcome to ride up into the woods when the action starts if you want to.”

The baron was sure that he would want to do no such thing. “I can see everything I need to from here,” he grumbled.

“If you don’t mind me asking, sir?” the major said after a small pause, when it became obvious that the baron wasn’t going to say anything further. “Why did you decide to come and watch us today?”



“My mother thinks I need some fresh air and exercise.”

“Sounds like good advice, sir.” The major paused, choosing his next words carefully. “Do you think she meant watching us exercise?”

“Well, it’s a start isn’t it?” asked the baron rather gruffly.

The major looked around. “If you did want to stretch your legs a bit, you could always go for a walk in the Wild Western Woods,” he said, pointing to the line of trees that began a short distance behind them.

The baron turned and looked sceptically towards the woods. “I’ve heard of them. Wild are they?”

“And also in the west.”

The baron looked back at the major with narrowed eyes. “Are you trying to be amusing, Major?” he said sharply.

“Er…no, not really,” the major replied.

“’Cos it doesn’t work on me.”

The major scratched his head and wondered where this conversation was going. “Sorry, Baron. What doesn’t work on you?”

“Humour. Funny stuff and nonsense. I’ve never understood it and don’t see any reason for it.”

"Right, sir. I'll bear that in mind."

"Good. Now, these woods. Why would you recommend a walk in them if they're wild?"

"Oh, they haven't been wild for a long time, Baron."

"No?" The baron sounded sceptical. He might not have a sense of humour, but he was always on the lookout for people trying to trick him.

"So why are they called 'Wild', then?" he asked. "Why aren't they called the 'Peaceful Western Woods' or the 'Nice for a Walk Western Woods'?"

"That's quite funny, sir." The major chuckled, before catching sight of the baron looking at him like thunder. He quickly added, "Not that you were trying to be funny in any way, Baron."

The baron relaxed and continued. "So, why aren't they 'wild' anymore?"

"Because the Warty Witch lives there now."

There was a pause.

"The Warty Witch?" The baron's voice was beginning to sound a bit strained.

"Yes, sir," the major said more hesitantly, struggling to work out what he might have said wrong this time.

"There's a Warty Witch in the Wild Western Woods?"

A touch of menace was entering the baron's tone.

“Are you trying to be funny again?” he fumed at the major, his face turning an odd shade of red.

The major suddenly remembered the baron’s dislike for names starting with the same letter. He held out his hands in an attempt to reassure him. “No, Baron, I’m not being funny. There really is a Warty Witch in the Wild Western Woods. Although, to tell you the truth, she’s not actually a witch and she’s not really very warty, but she pays her rent and her taxes like all of your subjects and she has also made the woods…er…less wild.”

“Why would she do that?” The baron was suspicious of anyone doing useful things for no reason.

“I think she just wanted to make it a nicer place to live in,” the major said, trying to sound as reasonable as possible, without giving away the fact that he had absolutely no idea why she had done this.

The baron didn’t say anything for a few moments and the major watched tensely as the baron’s face slowly returned to its normal colour.

Eventually, the baron seemed to reach a decision. “Right,” he said, “if I need some exercise, I’ll take a walk in the woods. I’ll be back in time for lunch. Make sure everything’s ready for me.”



Without waiting for an answer, the baron got off his horse and taking the staff of office from his saddle, he strolled towards the woods. The major watched the baron walk away, then shook his head slowly before getting back on his horse and riding off to join his men.

The baron soon spotted a path that led into the wood and stopped at the tree line to peer inside. *It certainly doesn't look wild*, he thought. In fact, it was rather light and airy, with small flowers growing along the edge of the path.

He strode in and followed the path as it wound gently through the trees. After he had walked for a while he noticed an odd noise. He was starting to get quite annoyed at whatever was disturbing the peace and quiet, when he realised that the sound was coming from him. He was humming to himself while walking along.

"Stuff and nonsense," he muttered, shaking himself to stop making such an unnecessary sound.

The baron was finding the walk very pleasant and thought that he might pay more attention to his mother's advice in future. He was, however, getting a little tired and thirsty, so he stopped by a small stream that was running gently beside the path and knelt down to scoop up some water to drink.

He thought that he must have been walking for an hour at least, which was longer than he remembered ever walking before. Deciding it was definitely time to turn around, he looked back up the path the way he had come. He knew he'd taken a few turnings along the way and was trying to remember where they had been.

He started to wonder if he would be able to find his way out. The thought of being lost in the wood sent shivers down his spine.

Damn and blast! he thought. *Why did I take my mother's advice?*

He pulled himself together. *It can't be that difficult to find my way out of a few trees*, he told himself. *There can't be that many paths – after all, it's not a very big wood.*

Feeling a lot surer of himself, he walked back along the path until he came to the first junction. He looked first one way, then the next to see which one looked more familiar. *Definitely…right*, he thought, striding confidently that way.

After walking along a bit further than he thought he needed to, the baron began to think that maybe it should've been…definitely left.

He came across another path leading off to the right, which he didn't recognise at all. He certainly didn't

remember seeing a sign before, but there was one here, in front of the path.



No entry, except on business! He wondered what that meant. *What business?* No one told the Baron of Beaux Bottom where he could and couldn't go on his own land. He stared down the path. It felt like it was in the right direction, and he thought he could see it getting brighter further down.

"That's it! That must be the way out," he said, giving a short laugh of triumph. He bet it was a shortcut out of the woods and whoever put the sign there just wanted to make everyone go around the long way.

He headed off down the path, fully expecting to emerge into the open in a matter of minutes.

But the light wasn't coming from the fields beyond the woods. The light was coming from a pretty clearing full of dappled sunshine. There was a clear pool in the middle with a rustic bench alongside it.

The baron was in no mood to appreciate the beauty of the space and swore loudly (which did nothing to change the situation and only managed to frighten some birds out of the trees). He walked wearily over to the bench and sat down in a dejected heap, feeling very sorry for himself.

He would normally be having a mid-morning something now. Not much, just a few pieces of Cook's special Madeira cake and maybe one or two pastries, and thinking about cakes and cream, the baron fell fast asleep.

