

THE STORY OF THE YARA

FROM THE BROWN FAIRY BOOK, EDITED BY ANDREW LANG

Down in the south, where the sun shines so hotly that everything and everybody sleeps all day, and even the great forests seem silent, except early in the morning and late in the evening—down in this country there once lived a young man and a maiden. The girl had been born in the town, and had scarcely ever left it; but the young man was a native of another country, and had only come to the city near the great river because he could find no work to do where he was.

A few months after his arrival, when the days were cooler, and the people did not sleep so much as usual, a great feast was held a little way out of the town, and to this feast everyone flocked from thirty miles and more. Some walked and some rode, some came in beautiful golden coaches; but all had on splendid dresses of red or blue, while wreaths of flowers rested on their hair.

It was the first time that the youth had been present on such an occasion, and he stood silently aside watching the graceful dances and the pretty games played by the young people. And as he watched, he

noticed one girl, dressed in white with scarlet pomegranates in her hair, who seemed to him lovelier than all the rest.

When the feast was over, and the young man returned home, his manner was so strange that it drew the attention of all his friends.

Through his work next day the youth continued to see the girl's face, throwing the ball to her companions, or threading her way between them as she danced. At night sleep fled from him, and after tossing for hours on his bed, he would get up and plunge into a deep pool that lay a little way in the forest.

This state of things went on for some weeks, then at last chance favoured him. One evening, as he was passing near the house where she lived, he saw her standing with her back to the wall, trying to beat off with her fan the attacks of a savage dog that was leaping at her throat. Alonzo, for such

was his name, sprang forward, and with one blow of his fist stretched the creature dead upon the road. He then helped the frightened and half-fainting girl into the large cool



verandah where her parents were sitting, and from that hour he was a welcome guest in the house, and it was not long before he was the promised husband of Julia.

Every day, when his work was done, he used to go up to the house, half hidden among flowering plants and brilliant creepers, where humming-birds darted from bush to bush, and parrots of all colours, red and green and grey, shrieked in chorus. There he would find the maiden waiting for him, and they would spend an hour or two under the stars, which looked so large and bright that you felt as if you could almost touch them.

‘What did you do last night after you went home?’ suddenly asked the girl one evening.

‘Just the same as I always do,’ answered he. ‘It was too hot to sleep, so it was no use going to bed, and I walked straight to the forest and bathed in one of those deep dark pools at the edge of the river. I have been there constantly for several months, but last night a strange thing happened. I was taking my last plunge, when I heard—sometimes from one side, and sometimes from another—the sound of a voice singing more sweetly than any nightingale, though I could not catch any words. I left the pool, and, dressing myself as fast as I could, I searched every bush and tree round the water, as I fancied that perhaps it was my friend who was playing a trick on me, but there was not a creature to be seen; and when I reached home I found my friend fast asleep.’

As Julia listened her face grew deadly white, and her whole body shivered as if with cold.

From her childhood she had heard stories of the terrible beings that lived in the forests and were hidden under the banks of the rivers, and could only be kept off by powerful charms. Could the voice which had bewitched Alonzo have come from one of these? Perhaps, who knows, it might be the voice of the dreaded Yara herself, who sought young men on the eve of their marriage as her prey.

For a moment the girl sat choked with fear, as these thoughts rushed through her; then she said: ‘Alonzo, will you promise something?’

‘What is that?’ asked he.

‘It is something that has to do with our future happiness.’

‘Oh! it is serious, then? Well, of course I promise. Now tell me!’

‘I want you to promise,’ she answered, lowering her voice to a whisper, ‘never to bathe in those pools again.’

‘But why not, queen of my soul; have I not gone there always, and nothing has harmed me, flower of my heart?’

‘No; but perhaps something will. If you will not promise I shall go mad with fright. Promise me.’

‘Why, what is the matter? You look so pale! Tell me why you are so frightened?’

‘Did you not hear the song?’ she asked, trembling.

‘Suppose I did, how could that hurt me? It was the loveliest song I ever heard!’

‘Yes, and after the song will come the apparition; and after that—after that—’

‘I don’t understand. Well—after that?’

‘After that—death.’

Alonzo stared at her. Had she really gone mad? Such talk was very unlike Julia; but before he could collect his senses the girl spoke again:

‘That is the reason why I implore you never to go there again; at any rate till after we are married.’

‘And what difference will our marriage make?’

‘Oh, there will be no danger then; you can go to bathe as often as you like!’

‘But tell me why you are so afraid?’

‘Because the voice you heard—I know you will laugh, but it is quite true—it was the voice of the Yara.’

At these words Alonzo burst into a shout of laughter; but it sounded so harsh and loud that Julia shrank away shuddering. It seemed as if he could not stop himself, and the more he laughed the paler the poor girl became, murmuring to herself as she watched him:

‘Oh, heaven! You have seen her! You have seen her! What shall I do?’

Faint as was her whisper, it reached the ears of Alonzo, who, though he still could not speak for laughing, shook his head.

‘You may not know it, but it is true. Nobody who has not seen the Yara laughs like that.’ And Julia flung herself on the ground weeping bitterly.

At this sight Alonzo became suddenly grave, and kneeling by her side, gently raised her up.

‘Do not cry so, my angel,’ he said, ‘I will promise anything you please. Only let me see you smile again.’

With a great effort Julia checked her sobs, and rose to her feet.

‘Thank you,’ she answered. ‘My heart grows lighter as you say that! I know you will try to keep your word and to stay away from the forest. But—the power of the Yara is very strong, and the sound of her voice is apt to make men forget everything else in the world. Oh, I have seen it, and more than one betrothed maiden lives alone, broken-hearted. If ever you should return to the pool where you first heard the voice, promise me that you will at least take this with you.’ And opening a curiously carved box, she took out a sea-shell shot with many colours, and sang a song softly into it. ‘The moment you hear the Yara’s voice,’ said she, ‘put this to your ear, and you will hear my song instead. Perhaps—I do not know for certain—but perhaps, I may be stronger than the Yara.’

It was late that night when Alonzo returned home. The moon was shining on the distant river, which looked cool and inviting, and the trees of the forest seemed to stretch out their arms and beckon him near. But the young man steadily turned his face in the other direction, and went home to bed.

The struggle had been hard, but Alonzo had his reward next day in the joy and relief with which Julia greeted him. He assured her that having overcome the temptation once, the danger was now over; but she, knowing

better than he did the magic of the Yara's face and voice, did not fail to make him repeat his promise when he went away.

For three nights Alonzo kept his word, not because he believed in the Yara, for he thought that the tales about her were all nonsense, but because he could not bear the tears with which he knew that Julia would greet him, if he confessed that he had returned to the forest. But, in spite of this, the song rang in his ears, and daily grew louder.

On the fourth night the attraction of the forest grew so strong that neither the thought of Julia nor the promises he had made her could hold him back. At eleven o'clock he plunged into the cool darkness of the trees, and took the path that led straight to the river. Yet, for the first time, he found that Julia's warnings, though he had laughed at her at the moment, had remained in his memory, and he glanced at the bushes with a certain sense of fear which was quite new to him.

When he reached the river he paused and looked round for a moment to make sure that the strange feeling of some one watching him was fancy, and he was really alone. But the moon shone brightly on every tree, and nothing was to be seen but his own shadow; nothing was to be heard but the sound of the rippling stream.

He threw off his clothes, and was just about to dive in headlong, when something—he did not know what—suddenly caused him to look round. At the same instant the moon passed from behind a cloud, and its rays fell

on a beautiful golden-haired woman standing half hidden by the ferns.

With one bound he caught up his mantle, and rushed headlong down the path he had come, fearing at each step to feel a hand laid on his shoulder. It was not till he had left the last trees behind him, and was standing in the open plain, that he dared to look round, and then he thought a figure in white was still standing there waving her arms to and fro. This was enough; he ran along the road harder than ever, and never paused till he was safe in his own room.

With the earliest rays of dawn he went back to the forest to see whether he could find any traces of the Yara, but though he searched every clump of bushes, and looked up every tree, everything was empty, and the only voices he heard were those of parrots, which are so ugly that they only drive people away.

'I think I must be mad,' he said to himself, 'and have dreamt all that folly'; and going back to the city he began his daily work. But either that was harder than usual, or he must be ill, for he could not fix his mind upon it, and everybody he came across during the day inquired if anything had happened to give him that white, frightened look.

'I must be feverish,' he said to himself; 'after all, it is rather dangerous to take a cold bath when one is feeling so hot.' Yet he knew, while he said it, that he was counting the hours for night to come, that he might return to the forest.

In the evening he went as usual to the creeper-covered house. But he had better have stayed away, as his face was so pale and his manner so strange, that the poor girl saw that something terrible had occurred. Alonzo, however, refused to answer any of her questions, and all she could get was a promise to hear everything the next day.

On pretense of a violent headache, he left Julia much earlier than usual and hurried quickly home. Taking down a pistol, he loaded it and put it in his belt, and a little before midnight he stole out on the tips of his toes, so as to disturb nobody. Once outside he hastened down the road which led to the forest.

He did not stop till he had reached the river pool, when holding the pistol in his hand, he looked about him. At every little noise—the falling of a leaf, the rustle of an animal in the bushes, the cry of a night-bird—he sprang up and cocked his pistol in the direction of the sound. But though the moon still shone he saw nothing, and by and by a kind of dreamy state seemed to steal over him as he leant against a tree.

How long he remained in this condition he could not have told, but suddenly he awoke with a start, on hearing his name uttered softly.

‘Who is that?’ he cried, standing upright instantly; but only an echo answered him. Then his eyes grew fascinated with the dark waters of the pool close to his feet, and he looked at it as if he could never look away.

He gazed steadily into the depths for some minutes, when he became aware that down in

the darkness was a bright spark, which got rapidly bigger and brighter. Again that feeling of awful fear took possession of him, and he tried to turn his eyes from the pool. But it was no use; something stronger than himself compelled him to keep them there.

At last the waters parted softly, and floating on the surface he saw the beautiful woman whom he had fled from only a few nights before. He turned to run, but his feet were glued to the spot.

She smiled at him and held out her arms, but as she did so there came over him the remembrance of Julia, as he had seen her a few hours earlier, and her warnings and fears for the very danger in which he now found himself.

Meanwhile the figure was always drawing nearer, nearer; but, with a violent effort, Alonzo shook off his stupor, and taking aim at her shoulder he pulled the trigger. The report awoke the sleeping echoes, and was repeated all through the forest, but the figure smiled still, and went on advancing. Again Alonzo fired, and a second time the bullet whistled through the air, and the figure advanced nearer. A moment more, and she would be at his side.

Then, his pistol being empty, he grasped the barrel with both hands, and stood ready to use it as a club should the Yara approach any closer. But now it seemed her turn to feel afraid, for she paused an instant while he pressed forward, still holding the pistol above his head, prepared to strike.

In his excitement he had forgotten the river, and it was not till the cold water touched his feet that he stood still by instinct. The Yara saw that he was wavering, and suffering herself to sway gently backwards and forwards on the surface of the river, she began to sing. The song floated through the trees, now far and now near; no one could tell whence it came, the whole air seemed full of it. Alonzo felt his senses going and his will failing. His arms dropped heavily to his side, but in falling struck against the sea shell, which, as he had promised Julia, he had always carried in his coat.

His dimmed mind was just clear enough to remember what she had said, and with trembling fingers, that were almost powerless to grasp, he drew it out. As he did so the song grew sweeter and more tender than before, but he shut his ears to it and bent his head over the shell. Out of its depths arose the voice of Julia singing to him as she had sung when she gave him the shell, and though the notes sounded faint at first, they swelled louder and louder till the mist which had gathered about him was blown away.

Then he raised his head, feeling that he had been through strange places, where he could never wander any more; and he held himself erect and strong, and looked about him. Nothing was to be seen but the shining of the river, and the dark shadows of the trees; nothing was to be heard but the hum of the insects, as they darted through the night.