

THE BOY WHO COULD KEEP A SECRET

FROM THE CRIMSON FAIRY BOOK, EDITED BY ANDREW LANG

Once upon a time there lived a poor widow who had one little boy. At first sight you would not have thought that he was different from a thousand other little boys; but then you noticed that by his side hung the scabbard of a sword, and as the boy grew bigger the scabbard grew bigger too. The sword which belonged to the scabbard was found by the little boy sticking out of the ground in the garden, and every day he pulled it up to see if it would go into the scabbard. But though it was plainly becoming longer and longer, it was some time before the two would fit.

However, there came a day at last when it slipped in quite easily. The child was so delighted that he could hardly believe his eyes, so he tried it seven times, and each time it slipped in more easily than before. But pleased though the boy was, he determined not to tell anyone about it, particularly not his mother, who never could keep anything from her neighbours.

Still, in spite of his resolutions, he could not hide altogether that something had happened, and when he went in to breakfast his mother asked him what was the matter.



‘Oh, mother, I had such a nice dream last night,’ said he; ‘but I can’t tell it to anybody.’

‘You can tell it to me,’ she answered. ‘It must have been a nice dream, or you wouldn’t look so happy.’

‘No, mother; I can’t tell it to anybody,’ returned the boy, ‘till it comes true.’

‘I want to know what it was, and know it I will,’ cried she, ‘and I will beat you till you tell me.’

But it was no use, neither words nor blows would get the secret out of the boy; and when her arm was quite tired and she had to leave off, the child, sore and aching, ran into the garden and knelt weeping beside his little sword. It was working round and round in its hole all by it-

self, and if anyone except the boy had tried to catch hold of it, he would have been badly cut. But the moment he stretched out his hand it stopped and slid quietly into the scabbard.

For a long time the child sat sobbing, and the noise was heard by the king as he was driving by. ‘Go and see who it is that is crying so,’ said he to one of his servants, and the man went. In a few minutes he returned saying: ‘Your Majesty, it is a little boy who is kneeling

there sobbing because his mother has beaten him.'

'Bring him to me at once,' commanded the monarch, 'and tell him that it is the king who sends for him, and that he has never cried in all his life and cannot bear anyone else to do so.' On receiving this message the boy dried his tears and went with the servant to the royal carriage. 'Will you be my son?' asked the king.

'Yes, if my mother will let me,' answered the boy. And the king bade the servant go back to the mother and say that if she would give her boy to him, he should live in the palace and marry his prettiest daughter as soon as he was a man.

The widow's anger now turned into joy, and she came running to the splendid coach and kissed the king's hand. 'I hope you will be more obedient to his Majesty than you were to me,' she said; and the boy shrank away half-frightened. But when she had gone back to her cottage, he asked the king if he might fetch something that he had left in the garden, and when he was given permission, he pulled up his little sword, which he slid into the scabbard.

Then he climbed into the coach and was driven away.

After they had gone some distance the king said: 'Why were you crying so bitterly in the garden just now?'

'Because my mother had been beating me,' replied the boy.

'And what did she do that for?' asked the king again.

'Because I would not tell her my dream.'

'And why wouldn't you tell it to her?'

'Because I will never tell it to anyone till it comes true,' answered the boy.

'And won't you tell it to me either?' asked the king in surprise.

'No, not even to you, your Majesty,' replied he.

'Oh, I am sure you will when we get home,' said the king smiling, and he talked to him about other things till they came to the palace.

'I have brought you such a nice present,' he said to his daughters, and as the boy was very pretty they were delighted to have him and gave him all their best toys.

'You must not spoil him,' observed the king one day, when he had been watching them playing together. He has a secret which he won't tell to anyone.'

'He will tell me,' answered the eldest princess; but the boy only shook his head.

'He will tell me,' said the second girl.

'Not I,' replied the boy.

'He will tell me,' cried the youngest, who was the prettiest too.

'I will tell nobody till it comes true,' said the boy, as he had said before; 'and I will beat anybody who asks me.'

The king was very sorry when he heard this, for he loved the boy dearly; but he thought it would never do to keep anyone near him who would not do as he was bid. So

he commanded his servants to take him away and not to let him enter the palace again until he had come to his right senses.

The sword clanked loudly as the boy was led away, but the child said nothing, though he was very unhappy at being treated so badly when he had done nothing. However, the servants were very kind to him, and their children brought him fruit and all sorts of nice things, and he soon grew merry again, and lived amongst them for many years till his seventeenth birthday.

Meanwhile the two eldest princesses had become women, and had married two powerful kings who ruled over great countries across the sea. The youngest one was old enough to be married too, but she was very particular, and turned up her nose at all the young princes who had sought her hand.

One day she was sitting in the palace feeling rather dull and lonely, and suddenly she began to wonder what the servants were doing, and whether it was not more amusing down in their quarters. The king was at his council and the queen was ill in bed, so there was no one to stop the princess, and she hastily ran across the gardens to the houses where the servants lived. Outside she noticed a youth who was handsomer than any prince she had ever seen, and in a moment she knew him to be the little boy she had once played with.

‘Tell me your secret and I will marry you,’ she said to him; but the boy only gave her the beating he had promised her long ago, when she asked him the same question. The girl was

very angry, besides being hurt, and ran home to complain to her father.

‘If he had a thousand souls, I would kill them all,’ swore the king.

That very day a gallows was built outside the town, and all the people crowded round to see the execution of the young man who had dared to beat the king’s daughter. The prisoner, with his hands tied behind his back, was brought out by the hangman, and amidst dead silence his sentence was being read by the judge when suddenly the sword clanked against his side. Instantly a great noise was heard and a golden coach rumbled over the stones, with a white flag waving out of the window. It stopped underneath the gallows, and from it stepped the king of the Magyars, who begged that the life of the boy might be spared.

‘Sir, he has beaten my daughter, who only asked him to tell her his secret. I cannot pardon that,’ answered the princess’s father.

‘Give him to me, I’m sure he will tell me the secret; or, if not, I have a daughter who is like the Morning Star, and he is sure to tell it to her.’

The sword clanked for the third time, and the king said angrily: ‘Well, if you want him so much you can have him; only never let me see his face again.’ And he made a sign to the hangman. The bandage was removed from the young man’s eyes, and the cords from his wrists, and he took his seat in the golden coach beside the king of the Magyars.

Then the coachman whipped up his horses, and they set out for Buda.

The king talked very pleasantly for a few miles, and when he thought that his new companion was quite at ease with him, he asked him what was the secret which had brought him into such trouble. 'That I cannot tell you,' answered the youth, 'until it comes true.'

'You will tell my daughter,' said the king, smiling.

'I will tell nobody,' replied the youth, and as he spoke the sword clanked loudly. The king said no more, but trusted to his daughter's beauty to get the secret from him.

The journey to Buda was long, and it was several days before they arrived there. The beautiful princess happened to be picking roses in the garden, when her father's coach drove up.

'Oh, what a handsome youth! Have you brought him from fairyland?' cried she, when they all stood upon the marble steps in front of the castle.

'I have brought him from the gallows,' answered the king; rather vexed at his daughter's words, as never before had she consented to speak to any man.

'I don't care where you brought him from,' said the spoilt girl. 'I will marry him and nobody else, and we will live together till we die.'

'You will tell another tale,' replied the king, 'when you ask him his secret. After all he is no better than a servant.'

'That is nothing to me,' said the princess, 'for I love him. He will tell his secret to me, and will find a place in the middle of my heart.'

But the king shook his head, and gave orders that the lad was to be lodged in the summer-house.

One day, about a week later, the princess put on her finest dress, and went to pay him a visit. She looked so beautiful that, at the sight of her, the book dropped from his hand, and he stood up speechless. 'Tell me,' she said, coaxingly, 'what is this wonderful secret? Just whisper it in my ear, and I will give you a kiss.'

'My angel,' he answered, 'be wise, and ask no questions, if you wish to get safely back to your father's palace; I have kept my secret all these years, and do not mean to tell it now.'

However, the girl would not listen, and went on pressing him, till at last he slapped her face so hard that her nose bled. She shrieked with pain and rage, and ran screaming back to the palace, where her father was waiting to hear if she had succeeded. 'I will starve you to death, you son of a dragon,' cried he, when he saw her dress streaming with blood; and he ordered all the masons and bricklayers in the town to come before him.

'Build me a tower as fast as you can,' he said, 'and see that there is room for a stool and a small table, and for nothing else.' The men set to work, and in two hours the tower was built,

and they proceeded to the palace to inform the king that his commands were fulfilled. On the way they met the princess, who began to talk to one of the masons, and when the rest were out of hearing she asked if he could manage to make a hole in the tower, which nobody could see, large enough for a bottle of wine and some food to pass through.

‘To be sure I can,’ said the mason, turning back, and in a few minutes the hole was bored.

At sunset a large crowd assembled to watch the youth being led to the tower, and after his misdeeds had been proclaimed he was solemnly walled up. But every morning the princess passed him in food through the hole, and every third day the king sent his secretary to climb up a ladder and look down through a little window to see if he was dead. But the secretary always brought back the report that he was fat and rosy.

‘There is some magic about this,’ said the king.

This state of affairs lasted some time, till one day a messenger arrived from the Sultan bearing a letter for the king, and also three canes. ‘My master bids me say,’ said the messenger, bowing low, ‘that if you cannot tell him which of these three canes grows nearest the root, which in the middle, and which at the top, he will declare war against you.’

The king was very much frightened when he heard this, and though he took the canes and examined them closely, he could see no difference between them. He looked so sad

that his daughter noticed it, and inquired the reason.

‘Alas! My daughter,’ he answered, ‘how can I help being sad? The Sultan has sent me three canes, and says that if I cannot tell him which of them grows near the root, which in the middle, and which at the top, he will make war upon me. And you know that his army is far greater than mine.’

‘Oh, do not despair, my father,’ said she. ‘We shall be sure to find out the answer’; and she ran away to the tower, and told the young man what had occurred.

‘Go to bed as usual,’ replied he, ‘and when you wake, tell your father that you have dreamed that the canes must be placed in warm water. After a little while one will sink to the bottom; that is the one that grows nearest the root. The one which neither sinks nor comes to the surface is the cane that is cut from the middle; and the one that floats is from the top.’

So, the next morning, the princess told her father of her dream, and by her advice he cut notches in each of the canes when he took them out of the water, so that he might make no mistake when he handed them back to the messenger. The Sultan could not imagine how he had found out, but he did not declare war.

The following year the Sultan again wanted to pick a quarrel with the king of the Magyars, so he sent another messenger to him with three foals, begging him to say which of the animals was born in the morning, which at noon, and which in the evening. If an an-

swer was not ready in three days, war would be declared at once. The king's heart sank when he read the letter. He could not expect his daughter to be lucky enough to dream rightly a second time, and as a plague had been raging through the country, and had carried off many of his soldiers, his army was even weaker than before. At this thought his face became so gloomy that his daughter noticed it, and inquired what was the matter.

'I have had another letter from the Sultan,' replied the king, 'and he says that if I cannot tell him which of three foals was born in the morning, which at noon, and which in the evening, he will declare war at once.'

'Oh, don't be cast down,' said she, 'something is sure to happen'; and she ran down to the tower to consult the youth.

'Go home, idol of my heart, and when night comes, pretend to scream out in your sleep, so that your father hears you. Then tell him that you have dreamt that he was just being carried off by the Turks because he could not answer the question about the foals, when the lad whom he had shut up in the tower ran up and told them which was foaled in the morning, which at noon, and which in the evening.'

So the princess did exactly as the youth had bidden her; and no sooner had she spoken than the king ordered the tower to be pulled down, and the prisoner brought before him.

'I did not think that you could have lived so long without food,' said he, 'and as you have had plenty of time to repent your wicked

conduct, I will grant you pardon, on condition that you help me in a sore strait. Read this letter from the Sultan; you will see that if I fail to answer his question about the foals, a dreadful war will be the result.'

The youth took the letter and read it through. 'Yes, I can help you,' replied he; 'but first you must bring me three troughs, all exactly alike. Into one you must put oats, into another wheat, and into the third barley. The foal which eats the oats is that which was foaled in the morning; the foal which eats the wheat is that which was foaled at noon; and the foal which eats the barley is that which was foaled at night.' The king followed the youth's directions, and, marking the foals, sent them back to Turkey, and there was no war that year.

Now the Sultan was very angry that both his plots to get possession of Hungary had been such total failures, and he sent for his aunt, who was a witch, to consult her as to what he should do next.

'It is not the king who has answered your questions,' observed the aunt, when he had told his story. 'He is far too stupid ever to have done that! The person who has found out the puzzle is the son of a poor woman, who, if he lives, will become King of Hungary. Therefore, if you want the crown yourself, you must get him here and kill him.'

After this conversation another letter was written to the Court of Hungary, saying that if the youth, now in the palace, was not sent to Turkey within three days, a large army would cross the border. The king's heart was

sorrowful as he read, for he was grateful to the lad for what he had done to help him; but the boy only laughed, and bade the king fear nothing, but to search the town instantly for two youths just like each other, and he would paint himself a mask that was just like them. And the sword at his side clanked loudly.

After a long search twin brothers were found, so exactly resembling each other that even their own mother could not tell the difference. The youth painted a mask that was the precise copy of them, and when he had put it on, no one would have known one boy from the other. They set out at once for the Sultan's palace, and when they reached it, they were taken straight into his presence. He made a sign for them to come near; they all bowed low in greeting. He asked them about their journey; they answered his questions all together, and in the same words. If one sat down to supper, the others sat down at the same instant. When one got up, the others got up too, as if there had been only one body between them. The Sultan could not detect any difference between them, and he told his aunt that he would not be so cruel as to kill all three.

'Well, you will see a difference to-morrow,' replied the witch, 'for one will have a cut on his sleeve. That is the youth you must kill.' And one hour before midnight, when witches are invisible, she glided into the room where all three lads were sleeping in the same bed. She took out a pair of scissors and cut a small piece out of the boy's coat-sleeve which was hanging on the wall, and then crept si-

lently from the room. But in the morning the youth saw the slit, and he marked the sleeves of his two companions in the same way, and all three went down to breakfast with the Sultan. The old witch was standing in the window and pretended not to see them; but all witches have eyes in the backs of their heads, and she knew at once that not one sleeve but three were cut, and they were all as alike as before. After breakfast, the Sultan, who was getting tired of the whole affair and wanted to be alone to invent some other plan, told them they might return home. So, bowing low with one accord, they went.

The princess welcomed the boy back joyfully, but the poor youth was not allowed to rest long in peace, for one day a fresh letter arrived from the Sultan, saying that he had discovered that the young man was a very dangerous person, and that he must be sent to Turkey at once, and alone. The girl burst into tears when the boy told her what was in the letter which her father had bade her to carry to him. 'Do not weep, love of my heart,' said the boy, 'all will be well. I will start at sunrise to-morrow.'

So next morning at sunrise the youth set forth, and in a few days he reached the Sultan's palace. The old witch was waiting for him at the gate, and whispered as he passed: 'This is the last time you will ever enter it.' But the sword clanked, and the lad did not even look at her. As he crossed the threshold fifteen armed Turks barred his way, with the Sultan at their head. Instantly the sword

darted forth and cut off the heads of everyone but the Sultan, and then went quietly back to its scabbard. The witch, who was looking on, saw that as long as the youth had possession of the sword, all her schemes would be in vain, and tried to steal the sword in the night, but it only jumped out of its scabbard and sliced off her nose, which was of iron. And in the morning, when the Sultan brought a great army to capture the lad and deprive him of his sword, they were all cut to pieces, while he remained without a scratch.

Meanwhile the princess was in despair because the days slipped by, and the young man did not return, and she never rested until her father let her lead some troops against the Sultan. She rode proudly before them, dressed in uniform; but they had not left the town more than a mile behind them, when they met the lad and his little sword. When he told them what he had done they shouted for joy, and carried him back in triumph to the palace; and the king declared that as the youth had shown himself worthy to become his son-in-law, he should marry the princess and succeed to the throne at once, as he himself was getting old, and the cares of government were too much for him. But the young man said he must first go and see his mother, and the king sent him in state, with a troop of soldiers as his body-guard.

The old woman was quite frightened at seeing such an array draw up before her little house, and still more surprised when a handsome young man, whom she did not know,

dismounted and kissed her hand, saying: 'Now, dear mother, you shall hear my secret at last! I dreamed that I should become King of Hungary, and my dream has come true. When I was a child, and you begged me to tell you, I had to keep silence, or the Magyar king would have killed me. And if you had not beaten me nothing would have happened that has happened, and I should not now be King of Hungary.'