

The Prince and the Iron Wolf

Once upon a time there lived a king and a queen and they had one son, a young prince. The king loved to go hunting. Well, one day he went off to hunt in the forest and he came by chance upon a wolf, but not an ordinary one. It was an iron wolf, the like of which no one had ever seen before. The king and his huntsman caught it and brought home.

The king locked the wolf in a cellar and said to the queen, “Take this key from the cellar, my dear, and hide it in your pocket so that no one can let the wolf out by accident.” And he sent his servants among the neighbouring kingdoms, inviting all the kings and noblemen to a banquet, for he wanted to boast to them about his unusual prey—the iron wolf. The guests all arrived together and sat down at the tables and began the banquet.

Meanwhile, the young prince was playing in the courtyard, shooting a silver arrow with his silver bow. Suddenly he shot an arrow that hit a small window and fell into the cellar through a grating.

The prince ran up to the window, but how was he to reach the arrow? He glanced inside and there he saw sitting the iron wolf.

“Little wolf, little wolf!” said the prince. “Give me back my arrow!”

And the wolf replied, “Let me go free and I’ll return your arrow, and some day I’ll do you a good turn.”

“How can I let you go when you are locked up?”

“You just go to your mamma,” said the wolf, “and snuggle up to her, and take the key from her pocket. You unlock the door for me with that key, and then quietly return it to the same pocket. Only don’t tell anyone.”

So the prince ran off to his mother and did just as the wolf had advised him. He let out the wolf, got his arrow and put the key quietly back into the pocket.

When the guests had drunk and eaten their fill, the king said to them, “Now gentlemen, I’ll show you an animal such as you’ve never seen before.” He got the key from the queen and then led all the lords and the queens to the cellar. He opened the door, but there was no wolf!

The guests were surprised. They started to laugh and said amongst themselves quietly, “Maybe there never was such an animal here!”

The king became very angry and called his servants and asked them who had let out the wolf. The servants replied, “No one was in the courtyard except the prince!” The king called his son and began to question him. And the little boy related his story.

“Lock him in the cellar!” said the king angrily. “Let the guests leave and I will punish him severely because he disgraced me before all the lords and kings!”

Evening came and the guests started to leave. But the queen did not wait until the guests left, and quietly freed her son, saying to him, “Little son, hide yourself somewhere until your father gets over his anger.”

So he ran into the forest to hide, and the unfortunate little fellow was so frightened by his father’s threat that he did not know where to run. Soon night set in. It was dark in the forest, wild animals appeared and bushes grew in the way. The prince stopped and cried with bitter tears, “O little wolf, little wolf: because of you I’ll have to die!” No sooner had he spoken than in a flash the iron wolf appeared before him!

“Don’t be afraid, Prince. You freed me from prison, now I shall help you. Tell me, what do you want?”

“Lead me out of the forest!”

“Sit on my back,” said the wolf. “Shall I carry you home or away from home?”

“Carry me away from home,” said the prince, “because I am afraid of my father’s harsh punishment.” The prince sat on the wolf and was carried through the forest. The wolf ran and ran all night long and in the morning he came out of the forest onto a beaten road.

“Well,” he said, “I have led you out of the forest. Now, farewell. Whenever you have need of me I will stand you in good stead.” And he disappeared into the forest.

The prince walked onto the road, walking farther and farther, wherever his eyes alighted. Suddenly he saw some kind of gentleman riding a fine horse on the road. On seeing the boy he said, “Where are you going, boy?”

But the prince was afraid to tell him who he was and replied, “I am an orphan and am going to hire myself out to some good people.”

While the prince had been running through the forest his expensive coat had become torn to pieces in the bushes, he had lost his cap and broken his boots. Therefore it did not occur to the man that before him there stood a king’s son. “Well, hire yourself out to me,” he said.

The prince agreed. The gentleman sat him behind himself on the horse and rode off with him to his house in a foreign country.

Meanwhile, back in the king’s palace as the guests were dispersing the king got over his anger but didn’t feel like letting his son out of the cellar. “Let him spend a night on the stone floor and that will be punishment enough for him.”

In the morning he went to the cellar but the prince wasn’t there! The mother admitted that she had freed her son and told him to hide. So they started to search for him everywhere. They hunted

through the forest, but all was in vain. “Maybe some wild animals have devoured him,” they said, and wept. The king and queen grieved for their only son but after all, tears can’t cure misfortune! Meanwhile, the prince was living in a far off country and was working in a stable for the nobleman. Several years went by and he grew up and became a handsome youth, a real hero.

And in that kingdom there lived a king who had an only daughter of untold beauty. Many princes came to woo her but she didn’t care to wed any of them. She told her father she would marry the one who would jump on his horse, ride up to the little window in her attic room and remove a ring from her finger. So the king announced everywhere throughout the land that all who wished to take part in the contest should assemble—noblemen, princes, ordinary citizens. Even the nobleman whom the prince was serving got ready for the contest. But the prince went by himself into the stable and wept, saying to himself, “Well, if I could I, too, would try to jump, but I haven’t got a good horse. There is no way I could reach the princess.” He had scarcely uttered these words when in a flash the iron wolf stood before him.

“Don’t weep, Prince. You freed me from captivity, now I will help you.” The wolf started to shake and suddenly turned into such a handsome horse that its like had never before been seen in the world.

“Sit on my back, Prince,” he said. “We’re going to the king’s palace.”

They arrived at the palace. There were already gathered together a large number of noblemen, princes and ordinary youths. They began to attempt to jump up to the attic window. No matter who he was, none was able to reach it. The prince’s master jumped, but even he wasn’t successful.

The prince gave reins to his horse and he jumped to the little window and removed the ring from the princess's hand. He took the ring, kissed her hand and withdrew. He disappeared so quietly that no one even noticed where he had gone.

The king came out onto the balcony and asked, "Who made the jump?" And the nobleman for whom the prince worked rode out in front and said it was himself. The princess denied this, but her father said, "Be silent! He would never have said so if he hadn't made the jump." And he ordered her to prepare for the wedding. She had to marry the nobleman. The princess wept and argued, but there was nothing she could do against her father's orders.

Preparations for the wedding began. The day before the wedding the prince came out of the stable and stood and wept. Suddenly the wolf appeared before him and said, "Why are you weeping, Prince?"

"Why shouldn't I weep? It was I who made the jump up to the princess but my master is taking her by deception and tomorrow the wedding is destined to take place."

"Please don't cry," said the wolf. "The princess will be yours. Here is a drum for you. When they start to dance at the wedding, you stand in the centre of the courtyard in front of the palace and start to beat on it. Then you will see what will happen."

Night passed and daylight appeared. In the palace the wedding festivities began. The prince went to the palace, stood in the centre of the courtyard and banged on the drum. Suddenly there appeared an army of soldiers, and every soldier held in his hands not weapons but flowers! Noblemen and kings who had come to the wedding all ran out of the palace. What was the commotion all about? Even the princess rushed out and stood on the balcony. And all the soldiers went up to her and gave her flowers. Meanwhile, the prince stood in front and banged away on the drum.

The king was astounded, and asked, “Who is this?”

“Well, he’s my servant,” replied the nobleman. “An orphan of peasant origin.”

“No,” said the prince, “I am not a peasant, but a king’s son. This man is a swindler. It was I who jumped up to the princess, not he!” He extended his hand to the princess and on his hand a ring was shining. The princess glanced at him and recognized that he was truly the one who had taken the ring from her finger and had even kissed her hand.

“This, dear father, is my true bridegroom,” she said. Here the nobleman saw that it was no jesting matter, that his lie was exposed. So he made tracks from the courtyard. The princess gave her hand to the prince and led him to the palace where they finished the wedding festivities. They passed around the mead and ale, and I sat there and drank mead and wine. It ran down my whiskers but it didn’t reach my mouth.