



Princess Goldie

A LONG TIME AGO, in the ancient land of Bohemia, there lived an old woman. One day she knocked on the palace gates and asked to see the king. She looked so aged and frail, yet so wise that the guards let her in. When the old woman was alone with the king, she uncovered the basket she was carrying. Inside it was a snake.

‘Let your cook prepare the snake for your table,’ she said. ‘Once you have eaten it, you will understand all that is said by birds of the air, beasts of the land and fish of the sea.’

The king was delighted that he would know something that nobody else knew, and without wasting time he ordered his servant, Georgie, to prepare the ‘fish’ for his dinner.

'Don't you dare taste that fish yourself,' he added, 'or you shall pay for it with your life!'

Georgie thought it all very strange.

'I've never seen such a fish in all my life,' he muttered to himself. 'It looks exactly like a snake! And what sort of cook would I be if I did not taste the dish I was preparing?'

When the fish was cooked, Georgie put the tiniest little bit in his mouth just to taste it. At that very moment he heard a buzzing noise close to his ear:

'Give us some too! Give us some too!'

Georgie looked round to see who was talking to him, but all he could see were a few flies buzzing about the kitchen.

Then he heard a wheezy voice shouting in the street, 'Where shall we go? Where shall we go?'

And a shriller voice answering, 'To the miller's barley field, to the miller's barley field!'

Georgie stuck his head out of the window and saw a gander with a flock of geese.

'So!' he thought, 'it's that kind of a fish!' He guessed rightly what it was all about, and quickly popped another little piece into his mouth before carrying the snake to the king.

After dinner the king said to Georgie, 'Saddle my horse, I want to go riding. Saddle yours too and come with me.'

The king rode in front and Georgie followed. As they were crossing a green meadow, Georgie's horse reared slightly and neighed, 'Oh, la la, brother, I feel so lighthearted I could jump over mountains!'

'It's alright for you,' the other horse neighed back, 'I'd like to jump too, but I have an old man on my back. If I were to leap, he'd fall off like a sack and break his neck.'

'So what? Let him!' Georgie's horse replied. 'Then you can carry a young man instead of the old boy!'

Georgie couldn't help but laugh at this conversation, quietly of course, so the king would not hear. But the king had also understood what the horses had said. He looked round and noticed the grin on Georgie's face. 'What are you grinning about?' he said.

'Oh, nothing important, Your Majesty,' Georgie lied. 'It was just a passing thought.'

Nevertheless the king was now suspicious of him, and he did not trust the horses either, so he headed back home.

When they reached the palace, the king asked Georgie to pour him out a glass of wine and to fill it right to the brim. 'You'll pay with your head,' he warned, 'if you pour a drop too little or a drop too much!'

Georgie lifted the flagon of wine and started to pour. Just then two little birds flew in through the window. The first had three golden hairs in its beak and it was being chased by the other.

'Hand them over!' the second bird chirped crossly. 'They're mine!'

'No, I won't!' cheeped the first. 'They belong to me! I picked them off the ground!'

'But I saw them fall when Goldie was combing her hair. Give me a couple at least.'

'No, not a single one!' insisted the first bird. 'They're mine, and that's that.'

The bird in pursuit then seized the free end of the golden hairs in its beak, and they both tugged and pulled and fluttered about till each was left with one, while the third hair dropped to the floor with a tinkling sound. All this caught Georgie's attention and he spilled a drop of the wine.

'You've forfeited your life to me!' the king cried, 'but I shall be merciful if you find the golden-haired maiden and bring her to me to be my bride.'

What could Georgie do? To save his life, he just had to find Goldie, but he had no idea where to look for her. With a sigh he saddled his horse and set off.

Presently, as he was approaching a dark forest, he noticed a small bush burning at the side of the path. There were sparks falling on an anthill and ants were rushing about, trying to escape, carrying little white eggs on their backs.

'Oh, help us, help us!' they pleaded. 'We are being burnt alive, and our young ones are still in the egg!'

Georgie leapt from his horse, cut down the bush and stamped out the fire.

'Thank you, thank you!' cried the ants. 'If you ever need us, think of us and we shall be there to help you!'

Georgie rode on through the forest till he came to a tall fir tree with a raven's nest in its crown. On the ground below sat two baby ravens, squealing pitifully.

'Our mother and father have flown away and we are all alone! How can we find food for ourselves, poor fledglings that we are, when we can't even fly yet! Oh, help us, please, help us! Find us something to eat, or we shall die of hunger!'

Georgie only hesitated a moment. He jumped off his horse and killed it with his sword, so the young ravens would have ample food.

'Thank you, Georgie,' they cawed happily, 'if you ever need us, think of us and we'll be there to help you!'

Now Georgie had to continue on foot. He walked on for a long time, and when at last he left the forest behind him, he came to a great wide sea. Two fishermen were quarrelling on the shore. They had caught a huge golden fish in their net, and each wanted it for himself.

‘The net is mine, so the fish is mine too!’ one said.

‘What good is your net without my boat and my help!’ said the other.

‘The next time we catch such a fish, it can be yours!’

‘Certainly not! I’ll have this one, you can wait for the next!’

‘I’ll settle your quarrel,’ Georgie said. ‘Sell the fish to me, I’ll pay you handsomely and you can split the money between you.’ He pulled out his purse with the money the king had given him for the journey, and handed it over. He did not keep a single coin for himself.

The fishermen were delighted to get such a high price for their catch, and Georgie let the fish go back into the sea. It splashed merrily and dived down, but its head reappeared once more before it swam away. ‘Thank you, Georgie, thank you!’ the fish cried. ‘If you need me, think of me and I’ll be there!’

‘Where are you going?’ the fishermen asked.

‘I am searching for Goldie, the golden-haired maiden, but I have no idea where to find her. My master, the old king, wants her for his bride.’

‘We can help you,’ the fishermen said. ‘Goldie is a princess, and she is the daughter of the king who lives in the crystal palace on the island over there. Every morning, as the sun rises, she combs her golden hair, and its glow spreads across the sky and the sea. As you have settled our quarrel, we’ll row you across to the island. Be sure you choose the right princess. The king has twelve daughters, but only one with golden hair!’

When Georgie reached the island, he went straight to the king in the crystal palace and asked for his golden-haired daughter as a bride for his own king and master.

‘I’ll give her to you,’ the king agreed, ‘but first you must earn the princess. I shall set you three tasks, and you must accomplish one each day. Now rest till tomorrow.’

The next morning the king said to Georgie, ‘My daughter had a necklace of precious pearls. The string broke and the pearls have scattered in the long grass in our meadow. Now go and find them, every single one!’

Georgie walked to the meadow, which was very big. He knelt down in the long grass and began to look for the pearls. Though he searched from morning till noon, not one pearl did he find.

‘Oh, if only my ants were here, they would help me,’ he sighed.

