



A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

FROM THE GERMAN OF J. WENZIG.



HERE was once a land as black as night, for it had never seen the sun. The inhabitants would have fled, leaving the land to owls and bats, had not the King possessed a horse with a sun on its forehead. To enable his subjects to dwell in this dark and dreary region, the King caused his horse to be led daily through the country, for wherever this wonderful horse went, the land on all sides was bathed in light; but when it had passed, thick darkness hurried back to resume its sway.

One day the Sun Horse disappeared, and darkness deeper than night covered the land. Discontent and terror spread among the people; want pressed them sore, for they could work at nothing, earn nothing; and soon dreadful disorder arose. The King grew alarmed, and to avert the threatened danger set forth with his army to seek the Sun Horse.

Arrived at the borders of his kingdom, the King entered vast forests, the growth of thousands of years. Journeying through

these forests with his army, the King came at length to a miserable hut. He entered, and saw a middle-aged man seated at a table, reading from a large book that lay open before him. When the King bowed, he rose and courteously returned the salutation. He was tall of stature, his features were thoughtful, and his glance piercing; indeed, his whole appearance proclaimed him a seer, and no ordinary man.

"I was reading of you," said he. "You seek the Sun Horse. Do not trouble further, you cannot regain it. Rely on me, I will find it for you. Return home with your army. You are needed there; only leave me one of your warriors as servant."

"So be it, oh Unknown," replied the monarch. "Richly will I reward you if you restore my Sun Horse."

"I require no reward," rejoined the Seer. "Now leave me to make preparations for my journey."

So the King departed with his army, leaving only one warrior behind. The Seer returned to his book, and read far into the night.

Next morning he departed with his servant. The way was long; they travelled through six countries, and still had further to go. Passing through the seventh country, they came to a stately palace; here they halted. Three valiant brothers ruled this land, and had as wives three sisters, whose mother was a wicked witch, named Striga. Then the Seer addressed his servant:—

“Remain here, whilst I enter the palace and ascertain if the Kings are at home; they stole the horse. The youngest rides it.”

Saying this, he changed himself into a green bird, flew to the window of the eldest Queen, and fluttered and knocked with his beak against the glass, until she let him in. His great beauty and sweet, caressing ways delighted her, and she rejoiced like a child.

“What a pity my husband is absent. This beauteous bird would have pleased him. Still he returns to-night; he has only ridden forth to review a third part of the land.”

Thus spake the Queen, caressing the gentle bird.

Suddenly, old Striga entered the

room, and, perceiving the bird, cried: “Strangle the accursed bird; he will cover you with blood!”

“Cover me with blood? Nonsense! See how innocent, how loving he is,” replied the Queen.

But Striga cried: “Deceptive innocence! Give him here instantly, that I may strangle him!”

She sprang forward, but the bird prudently changed into a man, and was out of the room and out of sight in a moment.

Taking again the form of a green bird, he flew to the window of the second Queen, and knocked until she opened it. Directly she let him in, he perched on her snow-white hand, and from thence flew to her shoulder, where he rested, looking confidently into her eyes.

“Alas!” she cried, “alas! that my husband is from home. He would have delighted in you, beauteous bird. However, he will return

to-morrow evening; he has but gone to review two-thirds of the kingdom.”

At this moment Striga entered, crying: “Strangle that accursed thing—strangle it this moment; it will cover you with blood!”

“That is impossible, mother,” replied the Queen. “He is so gentle.”

“The gentleness is feigned!” screamed Striga, trying to seize the bird. But the Seer, as before, changed himself into a man, and disappeared.

After a time, the Seer flew as a green bird to the window of the youngest Queen. On her opening it, he perched on her white hand, and caressed her so prettily that she felt quite a

childish delight in playing with him.

“It is a thousand pities that my lord is absent,” cried the young Queen in her joy. “This sweet little bird would have pleased him as much as it does me. Still, he is sure to return the evening after next, when he has reviewed the whole land.”

But even as she spoke old Striga rushed excitedly into the room.

“Strangle that accursed bird!” she cried, whilst still in the doorway. “Strangle it, I say; it will cover you with blood!”



“STRANGLE IT THIS MOMENT!”

"Cover me with blood, mother? Impossible! Look. See how innocent, how beautiful it is," replied the Queen. But Striga stretched forth her withered hands, exclaiming:—

"Delusive innocence! Give it me this moment, that I may strangle it!"

But ere she could seize him the Seer changed into a man and vanished.

Having gained the required information, the Seer returned to his servant, whom he ordered to purchase provisions for three days and then follow him to the forest. His servant having joined him, the two proceeded to the bridge over which the three Kings must pass. Here they waited.

Towards evening the sound of horse's feet was heard on the bridge. The eldest King was returning. In crossing, his horse stumbled over a beam.

"To the gallows with the good-for-nothing who made this bridge!" exclaimed the enraged King.

Then the Seer sprang forth, and threw himself on the King, crying:—

"How dare you curse an innocent man!"

They drew their swords, but the King was no match for the Seer, and after a short struggle he fell lifeless to the ground. The Seer bound the King on his horse, and sent the animal home with its dead master.

Then concealing himself beneath the bridge he waited the coming of the second King. He came the next evening, and seeing the blood-stains on the bridge, exclaimed:—

"Someone has been slain here! What scoundrel has dared usurp my kingly office?"

"How dare you thus revile me?" cried the Seer, throwing himself on the King, his drawn sword in his hand. "You are a child of death."

The King defended himself bravely, but in vain; after a short struggle he fell by the

sword of his mighty antagonist. The Seer bound the corpse on the horse and sent the animal home; then, again concealing himself, he awaited the arrival of the third brother.

The third evening, at sunset, the youngest King approached the bridge, riding the Sun Horse. He rode fast, for he was late. Noticing the red blood on the ground he halted, exclaiming:—

"Some wretch has presumed to snatch a victim from my kingly arm!"

Scarcely had he spoken, when the Seer rushed at him with drawn sword.

"Good!" said the King, and drawing his sword he defended himself manfully.

They fought long and furiously, until at length their swords broke. Then the Seer spoke:—



"THE SEER RUSHED AT HIM WITH DRAWN SWORD."

"With swords we can strive no longer. Now listen to me. We will become wheels, and roll down yonder mountain. The wheel that breaks is vanquished."

"Agreed. I will be a waggon-wheel. Be you any other wheel you like," said the King.

"Not so," replied the cunning Seer. "You can be any wheel you like, but I will be the waggon-wheel."

The King consenting, they ascended the mountain. There they changed into wheels. But as they rolled down the steep incline the waggon-wheel crashed against the other wheel, and broke it. The waggon-wheel then became the Seer, and cried, joyfully: "You are lost! The victory is mine!"

"Not so fast, my friend!" said the King, and he stood in his own shape before the Seer. "You have only broken my finger. Now I have a suggestion. We will be flames, and the flame that consumes the other is the victor. I will be a red flame, you can be a white one."

"No, no," replied the Seer; "you can be a white flame, I will be a red flame."

The King again consenting, they placed themselves on the road to the bridge and began to burn each other pitilessly, but without result. Then a white-haired old beggar passed by. Seeing him, the white flame cried:—

"Old man, bring water, and pour it on the red flame. I will give you a penny for your trouble."

But the red flame said: "I will give you a ducat if you pour water on this white flame."

The beggar naturally preferred the ducat to the penny; he brought water and poured it on the white flame. Thus the King died. The red flame now became the Seer; he mounted the Sun Horse and, after thanking the beggar for his help, rode away, followed by his servant.

Deep was the sorrow in the palace at the death of the royal brothers. The walls were hung with black, and loud wailing resounded through the building. Striga moved restlessly from room to room. Suddenly she stopped, stamped her foot on the ground, shook her fist, and rolled her glittering eye; then, mounting a broomstick, she seized her three daughters under her arm, and, hey, presto! they were in the air.

The Seer and his servant travelled fast, for they feared Striga's revenge. They passed through gloomy forests, crossed barren heaths, and had already accomplished a good part of their journey. But, alas! their provisions were exhausted. Hunger tormented them, and they could find nothing with which to still its pangs.

At length they came to a tree laden with apples of rosy hue, whose weight bore the wide-spreading branches to the ground.

"Heaven be praised!" exclaimed the servant, hastening to the tree.

"Stay!" cried the Seer. "Pluck not the fruit!" Then drawing his sword he smote the tree, and forth gushed a stream of red blood. "It would have been death to have eaten those apples," said he; "that tree was the eldest Queen. Her mother placed her there to hurry us out of the world!"

Though vexed at the disappointment, the servant was glad his life had been saved, and he followed the Seer in the hope of soon finding other refreshment.

It was not long ere a stream of clear fresh water crossed their path.

"Well," said the servant, "if there is nothing solid to be had, we can at least drink, and cheat our hunger."

"Drink not!" exclaimed the Seer, dismounting, and smiting the stream with his sword. Immediately the sparkling water was darkened by blood-red waves. "That was the second Queen," said the Seer, "placed there by her mother for our destruction."

The servant thanked him for the timely warning, and, in spite of thirst and hunger, followed him without a murmur whither he would.

Presently they came to a bush covered with beautiful red roses that filled the air with their fragrance.

"What beautiful roses!" exclaimed the servant. "I will pluck some, and refresh myself with their sweet perfume."

"Gather not the roses!" said the Seer, thrusting his sword deep into the stem of the tree. Immediately a stream of blood issued from the wound. "That was the youngest Queen," continued the Seer; "her mother planted her there, hoping to destroy us through the beauty of the roses."

After journeying for some time, the Seer said:—

"Our worst danger is over, for we have passed Striga's dominions. Still, great caution is necessary, for she will surely seek the aid of other powers." And even as he spoke, a boy came along carrying a thorny stick. Creeping beneath the Sun Horse, he pricked it with his stick. The next moment the Seer lay on the ground, and the boy, who had mounted the animal, was galloping away swift as an arrow. "Did I not say so?" exclaimed the Seer.

"What boy was that?" asked the servant. "Who could have suspected such a trick? Let us try to overtake him."

"Nay," replied the Seer, "I will overtake him alone. You must return to the borders



"SMITING THE STREAM."

of your own country. I shall be there to meet you."

Taking the form of an ordinary traveller, the Seer hastened after the little magician, and soon came up with him.

"Whence came you, my friend?" said the Magician, looking round.

"From the far distance."

"And whither go you?"

"I seek service."

"You seek service? Can you tend horses?"

"Very well, indeed."

"Then come with me and tend this horse. I will pay you well."

And thus the Seer became the Magician's servant.

Arrived at the Magician's home, the Seer tended the Sun Horse so carefully that his master was well satisfied; but it vexed the Seer that, owing to the Magician's art, he could find no opportunity of escaping with it.

One day the Magician called his servant.

"Listen!" said he. "In the midst of

yonder sea is an enormous poplar; on the top of this poplar is a castle; in this castle dwells a princess. This princess I desire for my wife. Many efforts have been made to gain possession of her, but in vain. Bring her to me, and I will reward you handsomely; fail, and it will be the worse for you."

"The lord commands, the servant must perform, or at least try," replied the Seer.

Procuring a boat, he filled it with ribbons and stuffs of divers colours, and sailed, disguised as a merchant, to the castle on the summit of the poplar.

Arrived at the tree, he hung out the most beautiful of his wares, so that they could be seen from the castle. They soon attracted the attention of the Princess.

"Go down to yonder boat," said she, addressing her handmaiden, "and see if you cannot purchase some of those beautiful ribbons and stuffs."

The maid obeyed.

"I sell nothing," said the merchant, "unless the Princess comes herself to choose."

The maiden repeated the merchant's words. The Princess came, turned over the beautiful merchandise, and chose and bargained, never noticing that the boat had been pushed off, and was sailing towards the shore. It was only when, her business ended, she turned to leave the boat, that she discovered what had happened.

"I know where we are going," said she. "You are taking me to the wicked Magician. Now may Heaven have mercy on me!"

When the Seer found the Princess did not wish to marry the Magician, he conversed with her softly, and said that if she would ascertain wherein the Magician's strength lay, and confide the secret to him, he would help her to obtain her liberty.

When the Seer returned with the Princess the Magician was delighted, and when she appeared to return his love, he was beside

himself with joy. He would have given her everything, done anything to please her. What wonder, then, that he confided to her the secret of his great strength.

"In yonder forest," said he, "stands a great tree. Beneath this tree a stag feeds, in this stag is a duck, in the duck a golden egg, and in this egg is my strength, for there, my love, is my heart."

The Princess at once repeated this secret to the Seer.

Then the Seer took bow and arrow, hastened to the forest, and found the tree with the stag feeding beneath. He shot an arrow, and the stag fell to the earth. Springing forward he took the duck out of the stag, and the egg out of the duck. He broke the egg, and the Magician's strength was gone for ever; it had passed to the Seer, leaving the once mighty Magician weak and helpless as a child. Then, having freed

the Princess, the Seer mounted the Sun Horse and hastened with it to the King to whom it belonged.

He had to travel over a great part of the world ere he reached the borders of the dark kingdom and met the servant he had sent on before him. As he crossed the borders the rays from the Sun Horse shone forth, illuminating the land that had so long been veiled in impenetrable gloom, and rejoicing the hearts of the distressed inhabitants. Everything lived again; the fields laughed in their spring dress, and the people hastened from all parts to thank their kind benefactor. The King knew not how to reward him, but offered him the half of his kingdom. But the Seer refused.

"I desire no reward," said he, "least of all do I desire the half of your kingdom. Be you King and reign, as is meet. I will return to my solitary hut."

