



Pinkel the Thief

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

Scandinavian

Intermediate
5 min read

Long, long ago there lived a widow who had three sons. The two eldest were grown up, and though they were known to be idle fellows, some of the neighbours had given them work to do on account of the respect in which their mother was held. But at the time this story begins they had both been so careless and idle that their masters declared they would keep them no longer.

So home they went to their mother and youngest brother, of whom they thought little, because he made himself useful about the house, and looked after the hens, and milked the cow. 'Pinkel,' they called him in scorn, and by-and-by 'Pinkel' became his name throughout the village.

The two young men thought it was much nicer to live at home and be idle than to be obliged to do a quantity of disagreeable things they did not like, and they would have stayed by the fire till the end of their lives had not the widow lost patience with them and said that since they would not look for work at home they must seek it elsewhere, for she would not have them under her roof any longer. But she repented bitterly of her words when Pinkel told her that he too was old enough to go out into the world, and that when he had made a fortune he would send for his mother to keep house for him.

The widow wept many tears at parting from her youngest son, but as she saw that his heart was set upon going with his brothers, she did not try to keep him. So the young men started off one morning in high spirits, never doubting that work such as they might be willing to do would be had for the asking, as soon as their little store

of money was spent.

But a very few days of wandering opened their eyes. Nobody seemed to want them, or, if they did, the young men declared that they were not able to undertake all that the farmers or millers or woodcutters required of them. The youngest brother, who was wiser, would gladly have done some of the work that the others refused, but he was small and slight, and no one thought of offering him any. Therefore they went from one place to another, living only on the fruit and nuts they could find in the woods, and getting hungrier every day.

One night, after they had been walking for many hours and were very tired, they came to a large lake with an island in the middle of it. From the island streamed a strong light, by which they could see everything almost as clearly as if the sun had been shining, and they perceived that, lying half hidden in the rushes, was a boat.

‘Let us take it and row over to the island, where there must be a house,’ said the eldest brother; ‘and perhaps they will give us food and shelter.’ And they all got in and rowed across in the direction of the light. As they drew near the island they saw that it came from a golden lantern hanging over the door of a hut, while sweet tinkling music proceeded from some bells attached to the golden horns of a goat which was feeding near the cottage. The young men’s hearts rejoiced as they thought that at last they would be able to rest their weary limbs, and they entered the hut, but were amazed to see an ugly old woman inside, wrapped in a cloak of gold which lighted up the whole house. They looked at each other uneasily as she came forward with her daughter, as they knew by the cloak that this was a famous witch.

‘What do you want?’ asked she, at the same time signing to her daughter to stir the large pot on the fire.

‘We are tired and hungry, and would fain have shelter for the night,’ answered the eldest brother.

‘You cannot get it here,’ said the witch, ‘but you will find both food and shelter in the palace on the other side of the lake. Take your boat and go; but leave this boy with me—I can find work for him, though something tells me he is quick and cunning, and will do me ill.’

‘What harm can a poor boy like me do a great Troll like you?’ answered Pinkel. ‘Let me go, I pray you, with my brothers. I will promise never to hurt you.’ And at last the witch let him go, and he followed his brothers to the boat.

The way was further than they thought, and it was morning before they reached the palace.

Now, at last, their luck seemed to have turned, for while the two eldest were given places in the king's stables, Pinkel was taken as page to the little prince. He was a clever and amusing boy, who saw everything that passed under his eyes, and the king noticed this, and often employed him in his own service, which made his brothers very jealous.

Things went on this way for some time, and Pinkel every day rose in the royal favour. At length the envy of his brothers became so great that they could bear it no longer, and consulted together how best they might ruin his credit with the king. They did not wish to kill him—though, perhaps, they would not have been sorry if they had heard he was dead—but merely wished to remind him that he was after all only a child, not half so old and wise as they.

Their opportunity soon came. It happened to be the king's custom to visit his stables once a week, so that he might see that his horses were being properly cared for. The next time he entered the stables the two brothers managed to be in the way, and when the king praised the beautiful satin skins of the horses under their charge, and remarked how different was their condition when his grooms had first come across the lake, the young men at once began to speak of the wonderful light which sprang from the lantern over the hut. The king, who had a passion for collection all the rarest things he could find, fell into the trap directly, and inquired where he could get this marvellous lantern.

'Send Pinkel for it, Sire,' said they. 'It belongs to an old witch, who no doubt came by it in some evil way. But Pinkel has a smooth tongue, and he can get the better of any woman, old or young.'

'Then bid him go this very night,' cried the king; 'and if he brings me the lantern I will make him one of the chief men about my person.'

Pinkel was much pleased at the thought of his adventure, and without more ado he borrowed a little boat which lay moored to the shore, and rowed over to the island at once. It was late by the time he arrived, and almost dark, but he knew by the savoury smell that reached him that the witch was cooking her supper. So he climbed softly on to the roof, and, peering, watched till the old woman's back was turned, when he quickly drew a handful of salt from his pocket and threw it into the pot. Scarcely had he done this when the witch called her daughter and bade her lift the pot off the fire and put the stew into a dish, as it had been cooking quite long enough and she was hungry. But no sooner had she tasted it than she put her spoon down, and declared that her daughter must have been meddling with it, for it was impossible to eat anything that was all

made of salt.

‘Go down to the spring in the valley, and get some fresh water, that I may prepare a fresh supper,’ cried she, ‘for I feel half- starved.’

‘But, mother,’ answered the girl, ‘how can I find the well in this darkness? For you know that the lantern’s rays shed no light down there.’

‘Well, then, take the lantern with you,’ answered the witch, ‘for supper I must have, and there is no water that is nearer.’

So the girl took her pail in one hand and the golden lantern in the other, and hastened away to the well, followed by Pinkel, who took care to keep out of the way of the rays. When at last she stooped to fill her pail at the well Pinkel pushed her into it, and snatching up the lantern hurried back to his boat and rowed off from the shore.

He was already a long distance from the island when the witch, who wondered what had become of her daughter, went to the door to look for her. Close around the hut was thick darkness, but what was that bobbing light that streamed across the water? The witch’s heart sank as all at once it flashed upon her what had happened.

‘Is that you, Pinkel?’ cried she; and the youth answered:

‘Yes, dear mother, it is I!’

‘And are you not a knave for robbing me?’ said she.

‘Truly, dear mother, I am,’ replied Pinkel, rowing faster than ever, for he was half afraid that the witch might come after him. But she had no power on the water, and turned angrily into the hut, muttering to herself all the while:

‘Take care! take care! A second time you will not escape so easily!’

The sun had not yet risen when Pinkel returned to the palace, and, entering the king's chamber, he held up the lantern so that its rays might fall upon the bed. In an instant the king awoke, and seeing the golden lantern shedding its light upon him, he sprang up, and embraced Pinkel with joy.

'O cunning one,' cried he, 'what treasure hast thou brought me!' And calling for his attendants he ordered that rooms next his own should be prepared for Pinkel, and that the youth might enter his presence at any hour. And besides this, he was to have a seat on the council.

It may easily be guessed that all this made the brothers more envious than they were before; and they cast about in their minds afresh how best they might destroy him. At length they remembered the goat with golden horns and the bells, and they rejoiced; 'For,' said they, 'THIS time the old woman will be on the watch, and let him be as clever as he likes, the bells on the horns are sure to warn her.' So when, as before, the king came down to the stables and praised the cleverness of their brother, the young men told him of that other marvel possessed by the witch, the goat with the golden horns.

From this moment the king never closed his eyes at night for longing after this wonderful creature. He understood something of the danger that there might be in trying to steal it, now that the witch's suspicions were aroused, and he spent hours in making plans for outwitting her. But somehow he never could think of anything that would do, and at last, as the brothers had foreseen, he sent for Pinkel.

'I hear,' he said, 'that the old witch on the island has a goat with golden horns from which hang bells that tinkle the sweetest music. That goat I must have! But, tell me, how am I to get it? I would give the third part of my kingdom to anyone who would bring it to me.'

'I will fetch it myself,' answered Pinkel.

This time it was easier for Pinkel to approach the island unseen, as there was no golden lantern to throw its beams over the water. But, on the other hand, the goat slept inside the hut, and would therefore have to be taken from under the very eyes of the old woman. How was he to do it? All the way across the lake he thought and thought, till at length a plan came into his head which seemed as if it might do, though he knew it would be very difficult to carry out.

The first thing he did when he reached the shore was to look about for a piece of wood, and when he had found it he hid himself close to the hut, till it grew quite dark and near the hour when the witch and her daughter

went to bed. Then he crept up and fixed the wood under the door, which opened outwards, in such a manner that the more you tried to shut it the more firmly it stuck. And this was what happened when the girl went as usual to bolt the door and make all fast for the night.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the witch, as her daughter kept tugging at the handle.

‘There is something the matter with the door; it won’t shut,’ answered she.

‘Well, leave it alone; there is nobody to hurt us,’ said the witch, who was very sleepy; and the girl did as she was bid, and went to bed. Very soon they both might have been heard snoring, and Pinkel knew that his time was come. Slipping off his shoes he stole into the hut on tiptoe, and taking from his pocket some food of which the goat was particularly fond, he laid it under his nose. Then, while the animal was eating it, he stuffed each golden bell with wool which he had also brought with him, stopping every minute to listen, lest the witch should awaken, and he should find himself changed into some dreadful bird or beast. But the snoring still continued, and he went on with his work as quickly as he could. When the last bell was done he drew another handful of food out of his pocket, and held it out to the goat, which instantly rose to its feet and followed Pinkel, who backed slowly to the door, and directly he got outside he seized the goat in his arms and ran down to the place where he had moored his boat.

As soon as he had reached the middle of the lake, Pinkel took the wool out of the bells, which began to tinkle loudly. Their sound awoke the witch, who cried out as before:

‘Is that you, Pinkel?’

‘Yes, dear mother, it is I,’ said Pinkel.

‘Have you stolen my golden goat?’ asked she.

‘Yes, dear mother, I have,’ answered Pinkel.

‘Are you not a knave, Pinkel?’

‘Yes, dear mother, I am,’ he replied. And the old witch shouted in a rage:

‘Ah! beware how you come hither again, for next time you shall not escape me!’

But Pinkel laughed and rowed on.

The king was so delighted with the goat that he always kept it by his side, night and day; and, as he had promised, Pinkel was made ruler over the third part of the kingdom. As may be supposed, the brothers were more furious than ever, and grew quite thin with rage.

‘How can we get rid of him?’ said one to the other. And at length they remembered the golden cloak.

‘He will need to be clever if he is to steal that!’ they cried, with a chuckle. And when next the king came to see his horses they began to speak of Pinkel and his marvellous cunning, and how he had contrived to steal the lantern and the goat, which nobody else would have been able to do.

‘But as he was there, it is a pity he could not have brought away the golden cloak,’ added they.

‘The golden cloak! what is that?’ asked the king. And the young men described its beauties in such glowing words that the king declared he should never know a day’s happiness till he had wrapped the cloak round his own shoulders.

‘And,’ added he, ‘the man who brings it to me shall wed my daughter, and shall inherit my throne.’

‘None can get it save Pinkel,’ said they; for they did not imagine that the witch, after two warnings, could allow their brother to escape a third time. So Pinkel was sent for, and with a glad heart he set out.

He passed many hours inventing first one plan and then another, till he had a scheme ready which he thought might prove successful.

Thrusting a large bag inside his coat, he pushed off from the shore, taking care this time to reach the island in daylight. Having made his boat fast to a tree, he walked up to the hut, hanging his head, and putting on a face that was both sorrowful and ashamed.

‘Is that you, Pinkel?’ asked the witch when she saw him, her eyes gleaming savagely.

‘Yes, dear mother, it is I,’ answered Pinkel.

'So you have dared, after all you have done, to put yourself in my power!' cried she. 'Well, you sha'n't escape me THIS time!' And she took down a large knife and began to sharpen it.'

'Oh! dear mother, spare me!' shrieked Pinkel, falling on his knees, and looking wildly about him.

'Spare you, indeed, you thief! Where are my lantern and my goat? No! not! there is only one fate for robbers!' And she brandished the knife in the air so that it glittered in the firelight.

'Then, if I must die,' said Pinkel, who, by this time, was getting really rather frightened, 'let me at least choose the manner of my death. I am very hungry, for I have had nothing to eat all day. Put some poison, if you like, into the porridge, but at least let me have a good meal before I die.'

'That is not a bad idea,' answered the woman; 'as long as you do die, it is all one to me.' And ladling out a large bowl of porridge, she stirred some poisonous herbs into it, and set about work that had to be done. Then Pinkel hastily poured all the contents of the bowl into his bag, and made a great noise with his spoon, as if he was scraping up the last morsel.

'Poisoned or not, the porridge is excellent. I have eaten it, every scrap; do give me some more,' said Pinkel, turning towards her.

'Well, you have a fine appetite, young man,' answered the witch; 'however, it is the last time you will ever eat it, so I will give you another bowlful.' And rubbing in the poisonous herbs, she poured him out half of what remained, and then went to the window to call her cat.

In an instant Pinkel again emptied the porridge into the bag, and the next minute he rolled on the floor, twisting himself about as if in agony, uttering loud groans the while. Suddenly he grew silent and lay still.

'Ah! I thought a second dose of that poison would be too much for you,' said the witch looking at him. 'I warned you what would happen if you came back. I wish that all thieves were as dead as you! But why does not my lazy girl bring the wood I sent her for, it will soon be too dark for her to find her way? I suppose I must go and search for her. What a trouble girls are!' And she went to the door to watch if there were any signs of her daughter. But nothing could be seen of her, and heavy rain was falling.

'It is no night for my cloak,' she muttered; 'it would be covered with mud by the time I got back.' So she took it off her shoulders and hung it carefully up in a cupboard in the room. After that she put on her clogs and started

to seek her daughter. Directly the last sound of the clogs had ceased, Pinkel jumped up and took down the cloak, and rowed off as fast as he could.

He had not gone far when a puff of wind unfolded the cloak, and its brightness shed gleams across the water. The witch, who was just entering the forest, turned round at that moment and saw the golden rays. She forgot all about her daughter, and ran down to the shore, screaming with rage at being outwitted a third time.

‘Is that you, Pinkel?’ cried she.

‘Yes, dear mother, it is I.’

‘Have you taken my gold cloak?’

‘Yes, dear mother, I have.’

‘Are you not a great knave?’

‘Yes, truly dear mother, I am.’

And so indeed he was!

But, all the same, he carried the cloak to the king’s palace, and in return he received the hand of the king’s daughter in marriage. People said that it was the bride who ought to have worn the cloak at her wedding feast; but the king was so pleased with it that he would not part from it; and to the end of his life was never seen without it. After his death, Pinkel became king; and let up hope that he gave up his bad and thievish ways, and ruled his subjects well. As for his brothers, he did not punish them, but left them in the stables, where they grumbled all day long.

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