

Shaking-Head

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Irish

Intermediate
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There was once a king of a province in Erin who had an only son. The king was very careful of this son, and sent him to school for good instruction.

The other three kings of provinces in Erin had three sons at the same school; and the three sent word by this one to his father, that if he didn't put his son to death they would put both father and son to death themselves.

When the young man came home with this word to his father and mother, they were grieved when they heard it. But the king's son said that he would go out into the world to seek his fortune, and settle the trouble in that way. So away he went, taking with him only five pounds in money for his support.

The young man travelled on till he came to a grave-yard, where he saw four men fighting over a coffin. Then he went up to the four, and saw that two of them were trying to put the coffin down into a grave, and the other two preventing them and keeping the coffin above ground. When the king's son came near the men, he asked: "Why do you fight in such a place as this, and why do you keep the coffin above ground?"

Two of the men answered, and said: "The body of our brother is in this coffin, and these two men won't let us bury it."

The other two then said: "We have a debt of five pounds on the dead man, and we won't let his body be buried till the debt is paid." The king's son said: "Do you let these men bury their brother, and I will pay what you ask."

Then the two let the brothers of the dead man bury him. The king's son paid the five pounds, and went away empty-handed, and, except the clothes on his back, he had no more than on the day he was born. After he had gone on his way awhile and the grave-yard was out of sight he turned and saw a sprightly red-haired man (fear ruadh) hurrying after him. When he came up, the stranger asked: "Don't you want a serving man?"

"I do not," answered the king's son, "I have nothing to support myself with, let alone a serving man."

"Well, never mind that," said the red-haired man; "I'll be with you wherever you go, whether you have anything or not."

"What is your name?" asked the king's son.

"Shaking-head," answered the red man.

When they had gone on a piece of the way together the king's son stopped and asked: "Where shall we be to-night?"

"We shall be in a giant's castle where there will be small welcome for us," said Shaking-head.

When evening came they found themselves in front of a castle. In they went and saw no one inside, only a tall old hag. But they were not long in the place till they heard a loud, rushing noise outside, and a blow on the castle. The giant came; and the first words he let out of his mouth were: "I'm glad to have an Erinach on my supper-table to eat to-night." Then turning to the two he said: "What brought you here this evening; what do you want in my castle?"

"All the champions and heroes of Erin are going to take your property from you and destroy yourself; we have come to warn you, and there is nobody to save you from them but us," said Shaking-head.

When the giant heard these words he changed his treatment entirely. He gave the king's son and Shaking-head a hearty welcome and a kindly greeting. When he understood the news they brought, he washed them with the tears of his eyes, dried them with kisses, and gave them a good supper and a soft bed that night.

Next morning the giant was up at an early hour, and he went to the bedside of each man and told him to rise and have breakfast. Shaking-head asked his reward of the giant for telling him of the champions of Erin and

the danger he was in.

“Well,” said the giant, “there’s a pot of gold over there under my bed; take as much out of it as ever you wish, and welcome.”

“It isn’t gold I want for my service,” said Shaking-head; “you have a gift which suits me better.”

“What gift is that?” asked the giant.

“The light black steed in your stable.”

“That’s a gift I won’t give you,” said the giant, “for when any one comes to trouble or attack me, all I have to do is to throw my leg over that steed, and away he carries me out of sight of every enemy.”

“Well,” said Shaking-head, “if you don’t give me that steed I’ll bring all the kingdom of Erin against you, and you’ll be destroyed with all you have.”

The giant stopped a moment, and said: “I believe you’d do that thing, so you may take the steed.” Then Shaking-head took the steed of the giant, gave him to the king’s son, and away they went.

At sunset Shaking-head said: “We are near the castle of another giant, the next brother to the one who entertained us last night. He hasn’t much welcome for us either; but he will treat us well when he is threatened.”

The second giant was going to eat the king’s son for supper, but when Shaking-head told him about the forces of Erin he changed his manner and entertained them well.

Next morning after breakfast, Shaking-head said: “You must give me a present for my services in warning you.”

“There is a pot of gold under my bed,” said the giant; “take all you want of it.”

“I don’t want your gold,” said Shaking-head, “but you have a gift which suits me well.”

“What is that?” asked the giant.

“The two-handed black sword that never fails a blow.”

“You won’t get that gift from me,” said the giant; “and I can’t spare it; for if a whole army were to come against me, as soon as I’d have my two hands on the hilt of that sword, I’d let no man near me without sweeping the head off him.”

“Well,” said Shaking-head, “I have been keeping back your enemies this long time; but I’ll let them at you now, and I’ll raise up more. I’ll put the whole kingdom of Erin against you.”

The giant stopped a moment, and said: “I believe you’d do that if it served you.” So he took the sword off his belt and handed it to his guest. Shaking-head gave it to the king’s son, who mounted his steed, and they both went away.

When they had gone some distance from the giant’s castle Shaking-head said to the king’s son, “Where shall we be to-night?—you have more knowledge than I.” “Indeed then I have not,” said the king’s son; “I have no knowledge at all of where we are going; it is you who have the knowledge.”

“Well,” said Shaking-head, “we’ll be at the third and youngest giant’s castle to-night, and at first he’ll treat us far worse and more harshly, but still we’ll take this night’s lodging of him, and a good gift in the morning.”

Soon after sunset they came to the castle where they met the worst reception and the harshest they had found on the road. The giant was going to eat them both for supper; but when Shaking-head told him of the champions of Erin, he became as kind as his two brothers, and gave good entertainment to both.

Next morning after breakfast, Shaking-head asked for a present in return for his services.

“Do you see the pot of gold in the corner there under my bed?—take all you want and welcome,” said the giant.

“It’s not gold I want,” said Shaking-head, “but the cloak of darkness.”

“Oh,” said the giant, “you’ll not get that cloak of me, for I want it myself. If any man were to come against me, all I’d have to do would be to put that cloak on my shoulders, and no one in the world could see me, or know where I’d be.”

“Well,” said Shaking-head, “it’s long enough that I am keeping your enemies away; and if you don’t give me that cloak now I’ll raise all the kingdom of Erin and still more forces to destroy you, and it’s not long you’ll last after they come.”

The giant thought a moment, and then said: “I believe you’d do what you say. There’s the black cloak hanging on the wall before you; take it.”

Shaking-head took the cloak, and the two went away together, the king’s son riding on the light black steed, and having the double-handed sword at his back. When out of sight of the giant, Shaking-head put on the cloak, and wasn’t to be seen, and no other man could have been seen in his place. Then the king’s son looked around, and began to call and search for his man,—he was lonely without him and grieved not to see him. Shaking-head, glad to see the affection of the king’s son, took off the cloak and was at his side again.

“Where are we going now?” asked the king’s son.

“We are going on a long journey to (Ri Chuil an Or) King Behind the Gold, to ask his daughter of him.”

The two travelled on, till they came to the castle of King Behind the Gold. Then Shaking-head said: “Go in you, and ask his daughter of the king, and I’ll stay here outside with the cloak on me.” So he went in and spoke to the king, and the answer he got was this:—

“I am willing to give you my daughter, but you won’t get her unless you do what she will ask of you. And I must tell you now that three hundred kings’ sons, lacking one, have come to ask for my daughter, and in the garden behind my castle are three hundred iron spikes, and every spike of them but one is covered with the head of a king’s son who couldn’t do what my daughter wanted of him, and I’m greatly in dread that your own head will be put on the one spike that is left uncovered.”

“Well,” said the king’s son, “I’ll do my best to keep my head where it is at present.”

“Stay here in my castle,” said the king, “and you’ll have good entertainment till we know can you do what will be asked of you.” At night when the king’s son was going to bed, the princess gave him a thimble, and said: “Have this for me in the morning.”

He put the thimble on his finger; and she thought it could be easily taken away, if he would sleep. So she came to him in the night, with a drink, and said: "I give you this in hopes I'll gain more drink by you." He swallowed the liquor, and the princess went away with the empty cup. Then the king's son put the thimble in his mouth between his cheek and his teeth for safe keeping, and was soon asleep.

When the princess came to her own chamber, she struck her maid with a slat an draoichta (a rod of enchantment) and turned her into a rat; then she made such music of fifes and trumpets to sound throughout the castle, that every soul in it fell asleep. That minute, she sent the rat to where the king's son was sleeping, and the rat put her tail into the nostrils of the young man, tickled his nose so that he sneezed and blew the thimble out of his mouth. The rat caught it and ran away to the princess, who struck her with the rod of enchantment and turned her into a maid again.

Then the princess and the maid set out for the eastern world, taking the thimble with them. Shaking-head, who was watching with his cloak on, unseen by all, had seen everything, and now followed at their heels. In the eastern world, at the sea-side was a rock. The princess tapped it with her finger, and the rock opened; there was a great house inside, and in the house a giant. The princess greeted him and gave him the thimble, saying: "You're to keep this so no man can get it."

"Oh," said the giant, taking the thimble and throwing it aside, "you need have no fear; no man can find me in this place."

Shaking-head caught the thimble from the ground and put it in his pocket. When she had finished conversation with the giant, the princess kissed him, and hurried away. Shaking-head followed her step for step, till they came at break of day to the castle of King Behind the Gold. Shaking-head went to the king's son and asked: "Was anything given you to keep last night?"

"Yes, before I came to this chamber the princess gave me her thimble, and told me to have it for her in the morning."

"Have you it now?" asked Shaking-head.

"It is not in my mouth where I put it last night, it is not in the bed; I'm afraid my head is lost," said the king's

son.

“Well, look at this,” said Shaking-head, taking the thimble out of his pocket and giving it to him. “The whole kingdom is moving to-day to see your death. All the people have heard that you are here asking for the princess, and they think your head’ll be put on the last spike in the garden, with the heads of the other kings’ sons. Rise up now, mount your light black steed, ride to the summer-house of the princess and her father, and give her the thimble.”

The king’s son did as Shaking-head told him. When he gave up the thimble, the king said, “You have won one third of my daughter.” But the princess was bitterly angry and vexed to the heart, that any man on earth should know that she had dealings with the giant; she cared more for that than anything else.

When the second day had passed, and the king’s son was going to bed, the princess gave him a comb to keep, and said: “If you don’t have this for me in the morning, your head will be put on the spike that’s left in my father’s garden.”

The king’s son took the comb with him, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and tied it to his head.

In the night the princess came with a draught which she gave him, and soon he was asleep. Going back to her own chamber, she struck the maid with her rod of enchantment, and made a great yellow cat of her. Then she caused such music of fifes and trumpets to sound throughout the castle that every soul was in a deep sleep before the music was over, and that moment she sent the cat to the chamber of the king’s son. The cat worked the handkerchief off his head, took out the comb and ran with it to the princess, who turned her into a maid again.

The two set out for the eastern world straightway; but as they did, Shaking-head followed them in his cloak of darkness, till they came to the house of the giant in the great rock at the end of the road, at the sea. The princess gave the giant the comb, and said: “The thimble that I gave you to keep last night was taken from you, for the king’s son in Erin brought it back to me this morning, and has done one third of the work of winning me, and I didn’t expect you’d serve me in this way.”

When the giant heard this, he was raging, and threw the comb into the sea behind him. Then with Druidic spells he raised thunder and lightning and wind. The sea was roaring with storm and rain; but the comb had

not touched the water when Shaking-head caught it.

When her talk was over the princess gave the giant a kiss, and home she went with the maid; but Shaking-head followed them step by step.

In the morning Shaking-head went to the king's son, roused him, and asked: "What was your task last night?"

"The princess gave me a comb to have for her this morning," answered the king's son.

"Where is it now?" asked Shaking-head.

"Here on my head," said the king's son, putting up his hand to get it; but the comb was gone. "I'm done for now," said the king's son; "my head will be on the last spike to-day unless I have the comb for the princess."

"Here it is for you," said Shaking-head, taking the comb out of his pocket. "And now," said he, "the whole kingdom is coming to this castle to-day to see your head put on the last spike in the garden of King Behind the Gold, for all men think the same will happen to you that has happened to every king's son before you. Go up on your steed and ride to the summer-house where the king and his daughter are sitting, and give her the comb."

The king's son did as Shaking-head bade him. When he saw the comb the king said, "Now you have my daughter two-thirds won." But her face went from the princess entirely, she was so vexed that any man should know of her dealings with the giant.

The third night when he was going to bed the princess said to the king's son, "If you will not have at my father's castle to-morrow morning the head I will kiss to-night, you'll die to-morrow, and your own head will be put on the last spike in my father's garden." Later in the night she came to the bedside of the king's son with a draught, which he drank, and before she was back in her chamber, he slept. Then she made such music all over the castle that not a soul was awake when the music had ceased. That moment she hurried away with her maid to the eastern world; but Shaking-head followed her in his cloak of darkness. This time he carried with him the two-handed sword that never failed a blow.

When she came to the rock in the eastern world and entered the house of the giant, the princess said, “You let my two gifts go with the son of the king in Erin, and he’ll have me won to-morrow if he’ll have your head at my father’s castle in the morning.”

“Never fear,” said the giant, “there is nothing in the world to take the head off me but the double-handed sword of darkness that never fails a blow, and that sword belongs to my brother in the western world.”

The princess gave the giant a kiss at parting; and as she hurried away with her maid the giant turned to look at her. His head was covered with an iron cap; but as he looked he laid bare a thin strip of his neck. Shaking-head was there near him, and said in his mind: “Your brother’s sword has never been so close to your neck before;” and with one blow he swept the head off him. Then began the greatest struggle that Shaking-head ever had, to keep the head from the body of the giant. The head fought to put itself on again, and never stopped till the body was dead; then it fell to the ground. Shaking-head seized, but couldn’t stir the head,—couldn’t move it from its place. Then he searched all around it and found a (bar an suan) pin of slumber near the ear. When he took the pin away he had no trouble in carrying the head; and he made no delay but came to the castle at daybreak, and threw the head to a herd of pigs that belonged to the king. Then he went to the king’s son, and asked:

“What happened to you last night?”

“The princess came to me, and said that if I wouldn’t bring to her father’s castle this morning the head she was to kiss last night, my own head would be on the last spike to-day.”

“Come out with me now to the pigs,” said Shaking-head.

The two went out, and Shaking-head said: “Go in among the pigs, and take the head with you to the king; and a strange head it is to put before a king.”

So the king’s son went on his steed to the summer-house, and gave the head to the king and his daughter, and turning to the princess, said:

“This is the head you kissed last night, and it’s not a nice looking head either.”

“You have my daughter won now entirely,” said the king, “and she is yours. And do you take that head to the

great dark hole that is out there on one side of my castle grounds, and throw it down.”

The king’s son mounted his steed, and rode off with the head till he came to the hole going deep into the earth. When he let down the head it went to the bottom with such a roaring and such a noise that every mare and cow and every beast in the whole kingdom cast its young, such was the terror that was caused by the noise of the head in going to the bottom of the hole.

When the head was put away the king’s son went back to the castle, and married the daughter of King Behind the Gold. The wedding lasted nine days and nights, and the last night was better than the first.

When the wedding was over Shaking-head went to the king, and said: “You have provided no fortune for your daughter, and it is but right that you should remember her.”

“I have plenty of gold and silver to give her,” said the king.

“It isn’t gold and silver that your son-in-law wants, but men to stand against his enemies, when they come on him.”

“I have more treasures than men,” said King Behind the Gold; “but I won’t see my daughter conquered for want of an army.”

They were satisfied with the king’s word, and next day took the road to Erin, and kept on their way till they came opposite the grave-yard. Then Shaking-head said to the king’s son: “You are no good, you have never told me a story since the first day I saw you.”

“I have but one story to tell you, except what happened since we met.”

“Well, tell me what happened before we met.”

“I was passing this place before I saw you,” said the king’s son, “and four men were fighting over a coffin. I spoke to them, and two of them said they were burying the body of their brother which was in the coffin, and the others said the dead man owed them five pounds, and they wouldn’t let the coffin into the ground until they got the money. I paid five pounds and the body was buried.”

“It was my body was in the coffin,” said Shaking-head, “and I came back into this world to do you a good turn;

and now I am going, and you'll never see me again unless trouble is on you."

Shaking-head disappeared, and the king's son went home. He wasn't with his father long till the other three kings' sons heard he had come back to Erin with the daughter of King Behind the Gold. They sent word, saying: "We'll take the head off you now, and put an end to your father and yourself."

The king's son went out to walk alone, and as he was lamenting the fate he had brought on his father, who should come along to meet him but Shaking-head.

"What trouble is on you now?" asked he.

"Oh, three kings' sons are coming with their fleets and armies to destroy my father and myself, and what can we do with our one fleet and one army?"

"Well," said Shaking-head, "I'll settle that for you without delay." Then he sent a message straight to King Behind the Gold, who gave a fleet and an army, and they came to Erin so quickly that they were at the castle before the forces of the three kings' sons. And when the three came the battle began on sea and land at both sides of the castle.

The three fleets of the three kings' sons were sunk, their armies destroyed, and the three heads taken off themselves. When the battle was over and the country safe the king resigned the castle and power to his son, and the son of a king in a province became king over all the land of Erin.

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