

The Comb and the Collar

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

English

Intermediate

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Once upon a time there was a king of Lombardy who, though he was uglier than any of his subjects, loved beauty in others, so he married a wife who was declared by everyone to be the handsomest of women; and, whispered some, the most ill-natured also. Certainly she could not endure the sight of a pretty person, and her ladies were all the plainest of their sex. Worse than all, she was desperately jealous of the king's son and daughter by his former wife.

Unfortunately, in spite of all her evil qualities, the king was her complete slave, and badly though she treated the boy, the lovely princess was made to suffer ten times as much. Not contented with giving the girl, for a governess, a woman whose temper was as bad as the queen's own, the cruel stepmother did everything she could think of to spoil the girl's beauty, and to force her to appear as ugly as she was herself; but, try as she might, when the hideous clothes and frightful brown paint had been removed, her loveliness shone out as bright as ever.

Now the king of Lombardy was cousin to the Archduke of Placenza, who had lately lost his reason, to the great grief of his son and daughter, Perarthrites and Ferrandina. The doctors having all failed to restore him to health, the prince and princess sent a messenger to consult a famous enchantress, called the Mother of Sheaths, because everyone who visited her brought with him a knife, which she thrust into one of the sheaths

with which her cavern was lined. However, they obtained little comfort from the witch, who bade them 'seek their father's wits in the place where he had lost them.' Against the wishes of the chief ministers, Perarthrites and Ferrandina rode off to the mysterious castle where the king had slept when his terrible fate had overtaken him, and, once inside the gates, nothing more was heard of them.

When three weeks had passed and still there was no news, the king's chief minister called a council to talk over the matter, and, at the end, it was decided that a company of distinguished persons should visit the Mother of Sheaths, and that the knives they must take with them should be of pure gold, richly set with precious stones. The witch was so pleased with the beauty of the gifts that she not only listened attentively to their story, but proceeded to a hole in the cavern, from which she drew out a little case containing a comb, and a steel collar, fastened by a gold key.

'Carry this comb and the collar to every court until you find a lady beautiful enough to unlock the collar, and a man good enough to draw the comb from its case. When you have discovered these, you can return whence you came.'

'But I do not see,' said the chamberlain, 'how that will help us to bring back our lost prince and princess.'

'It is all I can do for you,' answered the Mother of Sheaths; and she went into the back of the cavern, where they dared not follow her.

For the next few months the mad king's principal ministers wandered from one court to another, till at last they reached Lombardy, where they found that their story had already travelled before them. As soon as they appeared in the presence-chamber the king received them with open arms, for in his heart he had no doubt that his wife was the peerless beauty destined to unfasten the collar. And, indeed, if paint and hair-dye and magnificent dresses could have ensured her doing so, he would certainly have been right. But, blinded by his love for this wicked woman, he had really no idea that her charms were not her own.

At the appointed hour the queen entered the throne-room, having by her side the young princess, in the most grievous plight imaginable. Her dress was so contrived as to give the idea that she had a hump; her pink-and-white skin was thickly covered with yellow paint, and her black hair all hidden by a close-fitting brown cloth cap. Murmurs of indignation rose on all sides, and the ambassadors, who had frequently heard the princess

compared to the lovely Ferrandina, were dumb with astonishment. As for the king, he could hardly raise his eyes from the ground, so ashamed was he; and signing to his son to take his place, he withdrew from the scene.

Mounting the throne, the prince commanded the trial to begin at once, and the collar was handed to the princess's governess, who, being one of the ugliest women that ever was seen, naturally failed to turn the key. Seizing the chance of his being for a short time in power, the prince resolved to punish her cruelties towards his sister, and especially this last one, to which she had prompted the queen, and ordered her to be taken out and executed, which was done, with great good will, by the attendants. He then further commanded the ladies in waiting to attend his sister to her apartments, and bathe her and dress her in the queen's most splendid robes, as she had none of her own; and the queen, though gnashing her teeth with anger, for once dared not interfere. More quickly than could have been expected, the princess returned, looking so beautiful that if anyone had doubted before who would be able to unlock the collar they were instantly convinced. The prince glanced at her, but said nothing, and, signing to one of the ambassadors, he ordered him to make trial of the comb. One by one each man present did his best to remove it from its case, and one by one each was forced to own himself beaten. At length only the prince remained, but as he was the judge he must wait till the last.

After the men had finished, the ladies of the court had the collar presented to them according to rank, but none could even turn the key. Finally it was handed to the queen, who managed to open it a little way. Her heart beat with triumph, but immediately it closed again with a snap, and, she sank back, fainting from disappointment.

By this time there were only left the prince and his sister; and no sooner did he touch the case than it opened of itself, While the lock of the collar yielded directly the princess took hold of the key. Cries of delight rose from the courtiers and attendants; but these were interrupted by a whirlwind accompanied by thick darkness, and followed by an earthquake.

When all was calm again, and the sun shining, the prince and princess had disappeared.

Although the king's son and daughter were the only persons who had vanished in the storm, unluckily they had been carried off in opposite directions. The rapid motion through the air deprived the princess of her senses, which she nearly lost a second time, from fright, when she was set down alone in the middle of a thick forest. She ran wildly about it, calling to her brother to come to her aid; but her cries only attracted the attention of some hungry wolves, who sprung towards her with their jaws gaping and their red tongues hanging out.

Falling on her knees, she covered her face with one hand, unconsciously grasping the collar with the other, and awaited her doom. Already she could feel their hot breath on her cheek, and crouched lower and lower, when the eyes of the foremost wolf caught sight of the collar. With a howl that echoed through the forest he bounded away, followed by his companions.

As soon as the princess had recovered from the shock she rose and fled, without knowing whither, until she found herself in a broad road, and beheld, approaching her, a flock of sheep driven by two shepherds. She hastened towards them in order to implore their help, when suddenly the sheep caught sight of her collar and instantly scattered in all directions.

'I must have something about me which frightens all beasts,' she thought, and took great comfort there-from; and in good spirits she went her way, till she came to the gates of an old castle. She was just about to enter and beg for a night's shelter, when a snow white fox ran across the road, and stopped in front of her.

He was so pretty, and had such bright beseeching eyes, that the princess hastily tucked the collar under her dress, lest he too should flee at the sight of it. Very gently she drew near, hoping he might follow her into the castle, but he only set off in another direction, and, tired though she was, something forced the girl to follow him. Thankful indeed was she when he turned a corner and sat down before the door of a tiny palace, which was built on the bank of a river. When she came up he took the hem of her dress between his teeth and led her into a room where there was a table covered with milk and fruit. After she had eaten and drunk, she lay down upon a pile of cushions, with the fox at her feet, and fell asleep to dream of her lost brother.

If the princess was dreaming of her brother, he was no less thinking of her, on the wild seashore, whither the whirlwind had cast him. All was bleak and bare, except a green island which he could only see from the top of a high rock where he passed all his days, gazing on the waving palm trees and glittering waterfalls in the distance.

'Suppose she should be there?' he said to himself; and though there was no reason to expect that the princess should be in that place more than in any other, he could not get the notion out of his head.

A song, sung in the loveliest voice he had ever heard, roused the young man from his musings, and he instantly turned in the direction from which it had come. But though the singer seemed close to him he could see her

nowhere, and indeed, no sooner had he reached one spot than the voice sounded in another direction, and he followed it up and down, till he was suddenly stopped by the sight of a large fish's skin, which lay stretched on the sand between the sea and the rocks. The thing was so ugly, that he stepped aside in disgust, and at that instant something leapt into the sea behind his back. This caused him to look round. The fish's skin was no longer there, but in a cave in the rock behind it he discovered a bath of ebony lined with gold, which glittered in the sunlight.

Days passed without any adventures, and the prince had almost made up his mind to leave the shore, and to seek his sister inland, when once more he heard the voice that had so charmed him, and beheld the bloody skin lying on the sand, and the bath, now filled with water, in the grotto. Little sleep had he that night, and before the dawn he hid himself behind the rocks, determined not to move from the place till the fish should come back again.

He had not very long to wait, for with the first rays of the sun there appeared, out to sea, a shining white object which was blown by gentle breezes towards the shore. As it came nearer he beheld a maiden, of dazzling loveliness, seated in a shell where blues and pinks and greens all melted into each other. In her hand she held the rope with which the shell was guided.

The prince was so bewildered at her beauty that he forgot that he was in hiding, and, rushing out, sank on his knees on the sands, holding out his hands towards this wonderful vision. But as he did so the comb and its case fell out of his pocket, and at the sight the lady uttered a wild shriek, and, steering her shell round, vanished speedily in the direction of the island. Throwing off his clothes, the prince was preparing to swim after her, when he perceived beside him a snow white fox, looking the same way, and making frantic signs with his paws, till a small boat put out and set sail towards them, to the great joy of the little creature.

When the boat drew up to the beach, the fox waved his paw towards the prince's clothes, which he took to mean that he was to put them on again. This done, they both got in, and had just pushed off, when the prince suddenly recollected that the sight of the comb had frightened away the beautiful lady. In a transport of fury he raised his hand to fling it into the sea, but the fox sprang on him and held on so tightly to his arm that he could not lift it. At that moment a horseman on the shore let fly an arrow at the fox, with so true an aim that the little creature fell heavily into the well of the boat, and closed its eyes, like one who has received his death-blow. The

grief of the prince was sore. He instantly leaped to land, but the murderer was already far distant. When the young man turned round again, the boat and the fox were nowhere to be seen.

An approaching storm drove him into the grotto, which was lighted up by a multitude of tapers, each one being in the shape of a knife half out of its sheath. Over the bath was a tent-shaped covering of white, embroidered with sheaths, and from beneath it came a voice:

‘Prince, will you trust me whatever happens, knowing that my heart is yours, and as I feel that yours is mine? But, beware, for if you give the smallest sign of fear, when the tent is opened, you will lose me for ever.’

She did well to warn him; and even then he had much ado to keep the colour in his cheeks and his hand from trembling, for a crocodile’s head with snapping jaws advanced towards him. With a mighty effort he managed to remain still, and to gaze steadily at the horrible beast, and as he did so, the head bent backwards, and beneath it was seen the lovely countenance of the Lady of the Shell.

‘Quick! prince! quick! the time is flying, comb me at once or I shall vanish from your sight.’ At her words he took out the comb, but found to his surprise that it needed all his strength to draw it from its sheath. And, strange to say, that in proportion as the comb emerged from its sheath the lady’s head was freed from its horrible covering, and her body rose a little more out of the water. When her shoulders and arms were freed, she called to him:

‘Enough, so far you have obeyed my orders. Now burn my skin.’

‘Ah, that I can never do,’ cried he; but the lady cut him short.

‘Then we shall both rue it for ever,’ she said gravely; ‘for I can only be the wife of him who will burn my skin.’ And while he still stood hesitating, the curtains of the tent fell back on her, and the tapers fizzled out.

Bitterly repenting his slowness, he wandered towards the forest where a fire was burning, hardly knowing what he did; but on his way he almost fell over the skin, which was lying across his path.

‘Ah, fool that I was! This must be the skin she wished me to burn,’ said he. And seizing it in both hands he flung it into the fire, where it exploded with a terrific noise. At first he rushed off to some distance, not knowing what might next befall, but after a while found that his steps had led him back to the place of the fire.

The skin had gone and left no traces, but among the cinders he beheld something shining, which proved to be the magic collar. Ah ! then his sister, for whom he had so greatly longed, must be near at last ! And before he could turn his head or pick up the collar, her arms were round his neck, and everything else was forgotten.

'You shall tell your story first,' she said, when at length they could speak. And so he did; but his head was so full of the Lady of the Shell that he forgot to say anything about the fox. And it was well that he had forgotten, for when the princess had poured forth her own adventures, she ended up by speaking of all she owed to the little white fox.

'You cannot even guess the care he took of me in the little palace. But though nothing could exceed his kindness, I saw by his eyes that there was something he wanted me to give him, but I could not tell what. Alas ! the day came that I learnt it to my cost. I had hidden the collar in a thick bush, lest the fox should catch sight of it and be scared away as the other animals had been. But, one day, when we were in the garden, the sun happened to shine straight on it, and he sprang towards it with every sign of delight. He was about to seize it between his teeth when it closed with a loud noise. The fox fled away with a piercing scream, and though I have sought him far and wide, I have never seen him since. I was here when you flung the skin into the cinders, and no doubt, in my hurry to escape, the collar must have dropped from me. Ah, dear brother,' she continued with tears in her eyes, 'I can no longer live without my beloved fox; help me, I entreat you, to find him.'

So great was her grief that the prince dared not tell her what sad fate had overtaken the poor little animal, and trusted that time might soothe her. He assured her that he would go with her wherever she desired if she would grant him this one day to spend on the seashore; and with this the princess was forced to be content.

The prince was standing on the rock, looking out towards the lovely island, and straining his eyes to see the white sail once more, when frightful shrieks from the wood a little way off caused him to hasten with all his speed in that direction. He soon perceived a knight on horseback, with a bow slung to his back, struggling to lift a woman on to his saddle. The knight's surprise at the sight of a man in this desolate spot caused him to drop the woman's arm, and she rushed to take shelter behind her defender, who, to his amazement, then recognised his step-mother.

‘How did you come here?’ he asked coldly, more than half regretting that he had not left her to her fate; but she read what was in his heart, and fell on her knees before him.

‘Oh, forgive me my wickedness,’ she cried, ‘for indeed I have repented of it long ago, and come to the aid of your father who has been sorely smitten by that mad archduke from whom you have just saved me! There is no time to pursue him,’ she added, as the prince started at the sound of the vanishing hoofs; and as they pushed their way along the path she told him all that had happened since they had last met.

‘From the moment that the king knew of my cruelty to your sister,’ said she, ‘he vowed he would never see me again, and left the court in search of you both. I followed him secretly, but not being able to gain any tidings of him, consulted the Mother of Sheaths, who took me to rest in that island where the palm trees are waving. There she showed me a lovely princess who, under a spell, was forced daily to take the form of a crocodile, and when the dreaded moment arrived the skin appeared before her, and, shudder as she might, some unseen power impelled her to wrap herself in it and plunge into the sea. It is to this island I am leading you; but first we must find your sister, for on her presence hangs the life of the white fox — if, indeed, he is not dead already.’

‘The white fox!’ exclaimed the prince. ‘What do you know of him?’

‘Not much,’ answered the queen; ‘but, since I arrived on the island, he was always with us, and charmed us all. Yesterday we missed him, but in the evening a little boat drifted up on the sands, and in it lay the fox, covered with blood. While his wounds were being tended in the palace with all the care imaginable, I set out to consult a wizard, who told me that I must enter the skiff and seek for the prince and princess of Lombardy, and that if, in twenty-four hours, I could bring them into the presence of the fox, his life would be saved. On a rock along the beach I found your father with an arrow through his shoulder, from the bow of his cousin the mad archduke, who was drawing another from his quiver, destined for me, when I fled into the forest!’

‘My father so near!’ cried the prince. ‘We must return and seek him, and also look for my sister.’

They found her in the grotto, with her father's head in her lap, trying vainly to staunch his wounds. Between them they contrived to carry him to the boat, which sailed swiftly towards the island. On the way the prince gently broke to his sister the sad state of the white fox.

'Take me to him!' she said, as soon as the boat touched the island; and in silence the queen went down the path to the palace.

The white fox was lying on a soft mattress in front of a fire, his eyes closed, and a look on his face which told that death was not far distant. But he knew, somehow, that the princess was near him, and opened his eyes and wagged his tail feebly. The princess burst into sobs and tears, till a hand on her shoulder checked her.

'Why do you waste the few moments that are left you in this manner?' asked the governor of the island sternly. 'Place the collar you wear round his neck, and he will be cured at once. But you must act quickly.'

The princess seemed turned to stone as she listened.

'The collar!' she gasped. 'But I have not got it, I lost it in the forest!' And the thousand sheaths with which the walls were hung took up the cry:

'The collar is lost! The collar is lost!'

'What collar are you talking about?' asked the king, who was lying on another bed, with the physicians bending over him. 'Here is one that I picked up among some cinders, before that madman shot me — perhaps it may be the one you want, or, at all events, it may do as well.' And he signed to an attendant to take the collar from the pocket of his velvet jerkin.

The princess leapt forward with joy at the sight of the precious thing, and snatching it from the hand of the man she placed it round the neck of the fox. All present held their breath as they watched what was happening; and what did happen was that his legs grew longer and longer, and his nose grew shorter and shorter. The fox was gone, and in his stead there lay Perarthrites, in a coat of thick white fur.

But though the prince of Lombardy was rejoiced to see his friend and cousin again, his heart still bled for the beautiful lady who had vanished so mysteriously. His face was so troubled that the governor of the island

marked it, and asked what was the matter. 'Oh ! help me, if you can,' cried the prince. 'The thought of the sufferings that the enchanted nymph may be undergoing tortures me !'

'They are far worse than you can imagine,' gravely replied the governor; 'but if you still possess your comb, you may yet relieve her of them. Ah ! that is well,' he continued, as the prince quickly drew the comb from its case. 'Now follow me.'

Not only the prince, but every one else followed; and the governor led them down a long gallery to a heavy iron door, which flew open at its own accord. But what a sight met the prince's eyes ! The lady whom he had last beheld in peerless beauty was sitting in a chair wrapped in flames, which were twisting like hair about her head. Her face was swollen and red; her mouth was open as if gasping for breath. Only her arms and neck were as lovely as ever in their whiteness.

'This is your doing,' said the governor to the prince; 'you brought her to this when you burnt the crocodile's skin. Now try if, by combing, you can soothe her agony.'

At the first touch of the comb the flames became suddenly extinguished; at the second, the look of pain vanished from the face, and it shrank into its usual size; at the third, she rose from the chair, lovelier than she ever was before, and flung herself into the arms of her brother Perarthrites.

After this there was nothing more to be done but to marry the two couples as fast as possible. And when the wedding was over, Perarthrites and his bride returned to Placenza, and Ferrandina and her husband to Lombardy, and they all lived happily till they died.

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