



The Magic Book

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Danish

Intermediate

24 min read

There was once an old couple named Peder and Kirsten who had an only son called Hans. From the time he was a little boy he had been told that on his sixteenth birthday he must go out into the world and serve his apprenticeship. So, one fine summer morning, he started off to seek his fortune with nothing but the clothes he wore on his back.

For many hours he trudged on merrily, now and then stopping to drink from some clear spring or to pick some ripe fruit from a tree. The little wild creatures peeped at him from beneath the bushes, and he nodded and smiled, and wished them 'Good-morning.' After he had been walking for some time he met an old white-bearded man who was coming along the footpath. The boy would not step aside, and the man was determined not to do so either, so they ran against one another with a bump.

'It seems to me,' said the old fellow, 'that a boy should give way to an old man.'

'The path is for me as well as for you,' answered young Hans saucily, for he had never been taught politeness.

'Well, that's true enough,' answered the other mildly. 'And where are you going?'

'I am going into service,' said Hans.

'Then you can come and serve me,' replied the man.

Well, Hans could do that; but what would his wages be?

'Two pounds a year, and nothing to do but keep some rooms clean,' said the new-comer.

This seemed to Hans to be easy enough; so he agreed to enter the old man's service, and they set out together. On their way they crossed a deep valley and came to a mountain, where the man opened a trapdoor, and bidding Hans follow him, he crept in and began to go down a long flight of steps. When they got to the bottom Hans saw a large number of rooms lit by many lamps and full of beautiful things. While he was looking round the old man said to him:

'Now you know what you have to do. You must keep these rooms clean, and strew sand on the floor every day. Here is a table where you will always find food and drink, and there is your bed. You see there are a great many suits of clothes hanging on the wall, and you may wear any you please; but remember that you are never to open this locked door. If you do ill will befall you. Farewell, for I am going away again and cannot tell when I may return.

No sooner had the old man disappeared than Hans sat down to a good meal, and after that went to bed and slept until the morning. At first he could not remember what had happened to him, but by-and-by he jumped up and went into all the rooms, which he examined carefully.

'How foolish to bid me to put sand on the floors,' he thought, 'when there is nobody here by myself! I shall do nothing of the sort.' And so he shut the doors quickly, and only cleaned and set in order his own room. And after the first few days he felt that that was unnecessary too, because no one came there to see if the rooms were clean or not. At last he did no work at all, but just sat and wondered what was behind the locked door, till he determined to go and look for himself.

The key turned easily in the lock. Hans entered, half frightened at what he was doing, and the first thing he beheld was a heap of bones. That was not very cheerful; and he was just going out again when his eye fell on a shelf of books. Here was a good way of passing the time, he thought, for he was fond of reading, and he took one of the books from the shelf. It was all about magic, and told you how you could change yourself into

anything in the world you liked. Could anything be more exciting or more useful? So he put it in his pocket, and ran quickly away out of the mountain by a little door which had been left open.

When he got home his parents asked him what he had been doing and where he had got the fine clothes he wore.

'Oh, I earned them myself,' answered he.

'You never earned them in this short time,' said his father. 'Be off with you; I won't keep you here. I will have no thieves in my house!'

'Well I only came to help you,' replied the boy sulkily. 'Now I'll be off, as you wish; but to-morrow morning when you rise you will see a great dog at the door. Do not drive it away, but take it to the castle and sell it to the duke, and they will give you ten dollars for it; only you must bring the strap you lead it with, back to the house.'

Sure enough the next day the dog was standing at the door waiting to be let in. The old man was rather afraid of getting into trouble, but his wife urged him to sell the dog as the boy had bidden him, so he took it up to the castle and sold it to the duke for ten dollars. But he did not forget to take off the strap with which he had led the animal, and to carry it home. When he got there old Kirsten met him at the door.

'Well, Peder, and have you sold the dog?' asked she.

'Yes, Kirsten; and I have brought back ten dollars, as the boy told us,' answered Peder.

'Ay! but that's fine!' said his wife. 'Now you see what one gets by doing as one is bid; if it had not been for me you would have driven the dog away again, and we should have lost the money. After all, I always know what is best.'

'Nonsense!' said her husband; 'women always think they know best. I should have sold the dog just the same whatever you had told me. Put the money away in a safe place, and don't talk so much.'

The next day Hans came again; but though everything had turned out as he had foretold, he found that his father was still not quite satisfied.

'Be off with you!' said he, 'you'll get us into trouble.'

'I haven't helped you enough yet,' replied the boy. 'To-morrow there will come a great fat cow, as big as the house. Take it to the king's palace and you'll get as much as a thousand dollars for it. Only you must unfasten the halter you lead it with and bring it back, and don't return by the high road, but through the forest.'

The next day, when the couple rose, they saw an enormous head looking in at their bedroom window, and behind it was a cow which was nearly as big as their hut. Kirsten was wild with joy to think of the money the cow would bring them.

'But how are you going to put the rope over her head?' asked she.

'Wait and you'll see, mother,' answered her husband. Then Peder took the ladder that led up to the hayloft and set it against the cow's neck, and he climbed up and slipped the rope over her head. When he had made sure that the noose was fast they started for the palace, and met the king himself walking in his grounds.

'I heard that the princess was going to be married,' said Peder, 'so I've brought your majesty a cow which is bigger than any cow that was ever seen. Will your majesty deign to buy it?'

The king had, in truth, never seen so large a beast, and he willingly paid the thousand dollars, which was the price demanded; but Peder remembered to take off the halter before he left. After he was gone the king sent for the butcher and told him to kill the animal for the wedding feast. The butcher got ready his pole-axe; but just as he was going to strike, the cow changed itself into a dove and flew away, and the butcher stood staring after it as if he were turned to stone. However, as the dove could not be found, he was obliged to tell the king what had happened, and the king in his turn despatched messengers to capture the old man and bring him back. But Peder was safe in the woods, and could not be found. When at last he felt the danger was over, and he might go home, Kirsten nearly fainted with joy at the sight of all the money he brought with him.

'Now that we are rich people we must build a bigger house,' cried she; and was vexed to find that Peder only shook his head and said: 'No; if they did that people would talk, and say they had got their wealth by ill-doing.'

A few mornings later Hans came again.

'Be off before you get us into trouble,' said his father. 'So far the money has come right enough, but I don't trust it.'

'Don't worry over that, father,' said Hans. 'To-morrow you will find a horse outside by the gate. Ride it to market and you will get a thousand dollars for it. Only don't forget to loosen the bridle when you sell it.'

Well, in the morning there was the horse; Kirsten had never seen so fine an animal. 'Take care it doesn't hurt you, Peder,' said she.

'Nonsense, wife,' answered he crossly. 'When I was a lad I lived with horses, and could ride anything for twenty miles round.' But that was not quite the truth, for he had never mounted a horse in his life.

Still, the animal was quiet enough, so Peder got safely to market on its back. There he met a man who offered nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars for it, but Peder would take nothing less than a thousand. At last there came an old, grey-bearded man who looked at the horse and agreed to buy it; but the moment he touched it the horse began to kick and plunge. 'I must take the bridle off,' said Peder. 'It is not to be sold with the animal as is usually the case.'

'I'll give you a hundred dollars for the bridle,' said the old man, taking out his purse.

'No, I can't sell it,' replied Hans's father.

'Five hundred dollars!'

'No.'

'A thousand!'

At this splendid offer Peder's prudence gave way; it was a shame to let so much money go. So he agreed to accept it. But he could hardly hold the horse, it became so unmanageable. So he gave the animal in charge to the old man, and went home with his two thousand dollars.

Kirsten, of course, was delighted at this new piece of good fortune, and insisted that the new house should be built and land bought. This time Peder consented, and soon they had quite a fine farm.

Meanwhile the old man rode off on his new purchase, and when he came to a smithy he asked the smith to forge shoes for the horse. The smith proposed that they should first have a drink together, and the horse was tied up by the spring whilst they went indoors. The day was hot, and both men were thirsty, and, besides, they had much to say; and so the hours slipped by and found them still talking. Then the servant girl came out to fetch a pail of water, and, being a kind-hearted lass, she gave some to the horse to drink. What was her surprise when the animal said to her: 'Take off my bridle and you will save my life.'

'I dare not,' said she; 'your master will be so angry.'

'He cannot hurt you,' answered the horse, 'and you will save my life.'

At that she took off the bridle; but nearly fainted with astonishment when the horse turned into a dove and flew away just as the old man came out of the house. Directly he saw what had happened he changed himself into a hawk and flew after the dove. Over the woods and fields they went, and at length they reached a king's palace surrounded by beautiful gardens. The princess was walking with her attendants in the rose garden when the dove turned itself into a gold ring and fell at her feet.

'Why, here is a ring!' she cried, 'where could it have come from?' And picking it up she put it on her finger. As she did so the hill-man lost his power over Hans—for of course you understand that it was he who had been the dog, the cow, the horse and the dove.

'Well, that is really strange,' said the princess. 'It fits me as though it had been made for me!'

Just at that moment up came the king.

'Look at what I have found!' cried his daughter.

'Well, that is not worth much, my dear,' said he. 'Besides, you have rings enough, I should think.'

'Never mind, I like it,' replied the princess.

But as soon as she was alone, to her amazement, the ring suddenly left her finger and became a man. You can imagine how frightened she was, as, indeed, anybody would have been; but in an instant the man became a ring again, and then turned back to a man, and so it went on for some time until she began to get used to these sudden changes.

'I am sorry I frightened you,' said Hans, when he thought he could safely speak to the princess without making her scream. 'I took refuge with you because the old hill-man, whom I have offended, was trying to kill me, and here I am safe.'

'You had better stay here then,' said the princess. So Hans stayed, and he and she became good friends; though, of course, he only became a man when no one else was present.

This was all very well; but, one day, as they were talking together, the king happened to enter the room, and although Hans quickly changed himself into a ring again it was too late.

The king was terribly angry.

'So this is why you have refused to marry all the kings and princes who have sought your hand?' he cried.

And, without waiting for her to speak, he commanded that his daughter should be walled up in the summer-house and starved to death with her lover.

That evening the poor princess, still wearing her ring, was put into the summer-house with enough food to last for three days, and the door was bricked up. But at the end of a week or two the king thought it was time to give her a grand funeral, in spite of her bad behaviour, and he had the summer-house opened. He could hardly believe his eyes when he found that the princess was not there, nor Hans either. Instead, there lay at his feet a large hole, big enough for two people to pass through.



“The princess imprisoned in the summerhouse.” Illustration by H.J. Ford. Published in Andrew Lang’s Orange Fairy Book (1906), Longsman, Green and Co.

Now what had happened was this.

When the princess and Hans had given up hope, and cast themselves down on the ground to die, they fell down this hole, and right through the earth as well, and at last they tumbled into a castle built of pure gold at the other side of the world, and there they lived happily. But of this, of course, the king knew nothing.

‘Will anyone go down and see where the passage leads to?’ he asked, turning to his guards and courtiers. ‘I will reward splendidly the man who is brave enough to explore it.’

For a long time nobody answered. The hole was dark and deep, and if it had a bottom no one could see it. At length a soldier, who was a careless sort of fellow, offered himself for the service, and cautiously lowered himself into the darkness. But in a moment he, too, fell down, down, down. Was he going to fall for ever, he wondered! Oh, how thankful he was in the end to reach the castle, and to meet the princess and Hans, looking quite well and not at all as if they had been starved. They began to talk, and the soldier told them that the king was very sorry for the way he had treated his daughter, and wished day and night that he could have her back again.

Then they all took ship and sailed home, and when they came to the princess’s country, Hans disguised himself as the sovereign of a neighbouring kingdom, and went up to the palace alone. He was given a hearty welcome by the king, who prided himself on his hospitality, and a banquet was commanded in his honour. That evening, whilst they sat drinking their wine, Hans said to the king:

‘I have heard the fame of your majesty’s wisdom, and I have travelled from far to ask your counsel. A man in my country has buried his daughter alive because she loved a youth who was born a peasant. How shall I punish this unnatural father, for it is left to me to give judgment?’

The king, who was still truly grieved for his daughter’s loss, answered quickly:

'Burn him alive, and strew his ashes all over the kingdom.'

Hans looked at him steadily for a moment, and then threw off his disguise.

'You are the man,' said he; 'and I am he who loved your daughter, and became a gold ring on her finger. She is safe, and waiting not far from here; but you have pronounced judgment on yourself.'

Then the king fell on his knees and begged for mercy; and as he had in other respects been a good father, they forgave him. The wedding of Hans and the princess was celebrated with great festivities which lasted a month. As for the hill-man he intended to be present; but whilst he was walking along a street which led to the palace a loose stone fell on his head and killed him. So Hans and the princess lived in peace and happiness all their days, and when the old king died they reigned instead of him.

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