



Youth Without Age and Life Without Death

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Once upon a time something happened whose like never occurred before—if it had not happened it would not be told—since the flea had one foot shod with ninety-nine pounds of iron and jumped into the skies to get us fairy tales.

There was once a mighty emperor and empress. Both were young and handsome, and as they desired the blessing of children they did every thing that was necessary to secure it, that is they went to the witches and philosophers and asked them to read the stars to find out whether they would have children or not. But it was all in vain. Finally the emperor heard that a very wise old man lived in a neighboring village, and sent for him. The messengers returned with the answer: “Let him who needs me come to me.” So the emperor and empress set out for the wise man’s house, taking with them several of their courtiers, attendants, and soldiers. When the old man saw them in the distance, he rose, went to meet them, and said at once:

“Welcome! But what do you want to know, oh, emperor! your wish will bring you sorrow.”

“I am not here to question you about that,” replied the emperor, “but to learn whether you have any plants you

can give us that will bestow the blessing of children.”

“I have,” the old man answered, “but you will possess only *one* child. He will be a handsome, lovable boy, yet you will not be able to keep him long.”

After the emperor and empress had obtained the herbs they joyfully returned to the palace. The whole empire, the courtiers, and all the attendants rejoiced too. But when the hour of its birth came, the child began to scream in a way no magic arts could silence. The emperor commenced to promise it all the good things the world contained, but it was impossible to quiet it.

“Hush, father’s pet,” said the emperor, “I will give you this or that kingdom; hush, my son, I will give you this or that princess for your wife.” At last, when he saw the child would not stop, he added: “Hush, my boy, I will give you youth without age and life without death.”

Then the prince stopped crying; the courtiers beat drums and blew trumpets, and there were great rejoicings throughout the empire for a whole week.

The older the boy grew, the more thoughtful and reflective he became. He went to the schools and the philosophers and gained every kind of learning, so that the emperor died of joy and came to life again. The whole realm was proud of having a prince so wise and learned, a second King Solomon. But one day, when the lad had just reached his fifteenth year and the emperor sat at a banquet with the nobles and grandees of the country, the handsome prince rose, saying: “Father, the time has come, you must now give me what you promised at my birth!”

When the emperor heard this he grew very sorrowful and answered: “Why, my son, how can I give you an impossible thing? If I promised it to you then, it was only to hush you.”

“If you can’t give it to me, father, I shall be obliged to wander through the whole world till I find what was promised to me, and for which I was born.”

Then all the nobles and the emperor fell at his feet and besought him not to quit the country, because, as the courtiers said, his father was growing old, and they would place him on the throne and give him the most beautiful princess under the sun for his wife. But it was impossible to shake his resolution, he remained as

firm as a rock. After his father had seen and duly considered all these things, he gave his consent and prepared to supply the prince with provisions and whatever else he might need for his journey.

The young hero went to the imperial stables, where the finest steeds in the whole realm were standing, to choose one of them; but when he laid his hand on the horse's tail he knocked it down, and so they all fell, one after another. At last, just as he was going out, he let his eyes wander around the building once more and saw in one corner a sick, weak horse, covered with sores. He went up to it, and when he grasped it by the tail, the animal turned its head, saying:

“What do you command, my master? I thank God that He has permitted a hero's hand to touch me once more.”

And, planting its feet firmly, it remained standing. The young prince told it what he intended to do, and the horse replied:

“To obtain your wish, you must ask your father for the sword, lance, bow, quiver of arrows, and garments he wore when a youth; but you must take care of me with your own hands for six weeks and give me oats boiled in milk.”

When the prince begged the emperor for the articles the horse had advised, the monarch called the major-domo of the palace and ordered him to open all the chests of clothing, that his son might choose what he pleased. The young hero, after rummaging them three whole days, at last found in the very bottom of an old trunk the weapons and garments his father had worn in his youth, but the arms were covered with rust. He set to work to clean them with his own hands and in six weeks, during the time he was taking care of the horse, he succeeded in making the weapons as bright and shining as a mirror. When the horse heard from the handsome prince that the clothes and arms were cleaned and ready, it shook itself once. All the sores instantly fell off and there it stood, a strong, well-formed animal, with four wings. When the hero saw this, he said:

“We'll go in three days!”

“May you have a long life, master. From to-day I shall be at your service,” the horse answered.

On the morning of the third day there was great mourning throughout the whole court and empire. The handsome prince, clad like a hero, holding his sword in his hand and riding the horse he had chosen, took leave

of the emperor, the empress, the great nobles and lesser grandees, the army, and all the attendants, who, with tears in their eyes, implored him to give up the journey and not risk his life; but setting spurs to his steed, he dashed through the gate like the wind, followed by the carts loaded with provisions and money, and the two hundred horsemen the emperor had commanded to accompany him.

After reaching the boundaries of his father's country and arriving at the wilderness, the prince distributed all his property among the escort, bade them farewell, and sent them back, keeping for himself only as much food as the horse could carry. Then he turned toward the east and rode for three days and three nights, till he came to a wide plain where lay a great many human bones.

When he stopped here to rest, the horse said: "You must know, master, that we are on the land of a Woodpecker Fairy who is so wicked that nobody can enter her domain without being murdered. She was once a woman, but the curse of her parents, whom she angered by her disobedience, turned her into a woodpecker. She is with her children now, but you will meet her to-morrow in yonder forest; she will come to kill you. She is terribly big, but don't be frightened; hold the bow ready to pierce her with an arrow, and keep your sword and lance in hand, so that you can use them in case of need."

Then they went to rest, taking turns in watching.

At dawn the next morning they prepared to pass through the forest; the prince saddled and bridled the horse, drew the girths tighter than usual, and mounted. Suddenly he heard a tremendous crashing. "Make ready, master," said the horse, "the Woodpecker Fairy is coming." As she approached, she moved so fast that she tore the trees down; but the horse leaped upward like the wind, so that it was almost over her, and the prince shot off one of her feet with an arrow. Just as he was about to discharge the second arrow, she cried:

"Stop, my young hero, I'll do you no harm." And seeing that he did not believe her, she gave him the promise written with her own blood.

"Your horse can not be killed, my young hero," she added, "it is enchanted; if it hadn't been for that, I would have roasted and eaten you. Know that until to-day no mortal man has ventured to cross my boundaries as far as this; a few bold wights who dared to make the trial, reached the plain where you saw so many bones."

They now went to the fairy's house, where she entertained them as guests. But while sitting at the table

enjoying the banquet, the Woodpecker Fairy moaned with pain, so the prince pulled the foot he had shot off out of the traveling bag where he had put it, fastened it on, and it instantly healed. The hostess, in her joy, kept open house for three days, and begged the emperor's son to choose one of her daughters, all three of whom were beautiful as fairies, for his wife. He would not do that, but told her what he was seeking, and she replied:

“With your horse and your heroic courage, I believe you will succeed.”

After three days had passed, the prince prepared to continue his journey and departed. He rode on, and on, and on; the road seemed to grow longer and longer, but when he had finally crossed the frontiers of the Woodpecker Fairy's kingdom, he entered a beautiful meadow, one side of which was covered with blooming plants, but the other was scorched.

The prince asked why the grass was singed, and the horse answered:

“We are now in the domain of the Scorpion Witch; she is the Woodpecker Fairy's sister, but they are both so wicked that they can't live together. Their parents' curse has fallen upon them, and so, as you see, they have become monsters; their enmity goes beyond all bounds; they are always trying to get possession of each other's lands. When this one is very angry she spits fire and pitch; she must have had some quarrel with her sister, and, to drive her out of her kingdom, has burned the grass on which she was standing. She is even worse than her sister, and has three heads. We will rest awhile now, and be ready at the first peep of dawn to-morrow.”

The next day they prepared themselves just as they did when they expected to meet the Woodpecker fairy, and set out. Soon they heard a howling and rustling unlike any thing ever known before.

“Make ready, master, the Scorpion Witch is coming.”

The Scorpion Witch, with one jaw in the sky and the other on the earth, approached like the wind, spitting fire as she came, but the horse darted upward as swiftly as an arrow, and then rushed over her a little on one side. The hero shot an arrow and one of her heads fell, but when he was going to strike off another, the Scorpion Witch entreated him to forgive her, she would do him no harm, and to convince him of this she gave him her promise, written in her own blood.

Like the Woodpecker Fairy, she entertained the prince, who returned her head, which grew on again, and at

the end of three days he resumed his travels.

When the hero and his horse had reached the boundaries of the Scorpion Witch's kingdom they hurried on without resting till they came to a field covered with flowers, where reigned perpetual spring. Every blossom was remarkably beautiful and filled with a sweet, intoxicating fragrance; a gentle breeze fanned them all. They remained here to rest, but the horse said:

"We have arrived so far successfully, master, but we still have one great peril to undergo and, if the Lord helps us to conquer it, we shall really be valiant heroes. A short distance further on is the palace where dwell Youth without Age and Life without Death. It is surrounded by a high, dense forest, where roam all the wild animals in the world, watching it day and night. They are very numerous, and it is almost beyond the bounds of possibility to get through the wood by fighting them; we must try, if we can, to jump over them."

After resting about two days they prepared to continue their journey, and the horse, holding its breath, said:

"Buckle my girth as tight as you can, and when you have mounted hold fast to my mane and press your feet close to my neck, that you may not hinder me." The prince mounted, and in a moment they were close to the forest.

"Master," said the horse, "this is the time that the wild beasts are fed; they are all collected together, now we'll jump over."

"Forward," replied the handsome prince, "and may the Lord have mercy on us."

They flew upward and saw the palace, which glittered so that it would have been easier to look at the sun. They passed over the forest, and, just as they were descending at the palace steps, one of the horse's hoofs lightly touched the top of a tree, which put the whole woods in motion. The wild animals began to howl till it was enough to make one's hair bristle. They hastily alighted, and if the mistress of the palace had not been outside feeding her chickens (for that is what she called the wild beasts), they would certainly have been killed. She spared their lives out of pure pleasure, for she had never before seen a human being. Restraining the savage beasts, she soothed them, and sent them back to their haunts. She was a tall, slender, lovely fairy, quite too beautiful. When the young hero saw her, he stood still as though turned to stone. But as she gazed at him she pitied him and said:

"Welcome, my handsome prince. What do you seek here?"

"We seek Youth without Age and Life without Death."

Then he dismounted from his horse and entered the palace, where he found two other ladies, both of the same age, the elder sisters of the first one. He began to thank the fairy for having delivered him from danger, but she and her sisters, to show their joy, had a handsome banquet served in golden dishes. They gave the horse liberty to graze wherever it chose, and afterward made it acquainted with all the wild beasts, so that it might rove about the forest in peace. The ladies entreated the prince to stay with them, saying that it was so tiresome to be alone. He did not wait to be asked a second time, but accepted the offer with the satisfaction of a man who has found precisely what he sought.

By degrees they became accustomed to live together; the prince told them his story and related what he had suffered before meeting them, and after some time he married the youngest sister. At their wedding permission was granted to him to go wherever he liked in the neighborhood; they only begged him not to enter one valley, which they pointed out, otherwise some misfortune would befall him; it was called, they said, the Valley of Lamentation.

The prince spent a very long time at the palace without being aware of it, for he always remained just as young as he was when he arrived. He wandered about the woods without ever having a headache. He amused himself in the golden palace, lived in peace and quiet with his wife and her sisters, enjoyed the beauty of the flowers,

and the sweet, pure air. He often went hunting; but one day, while pursuing a hare, he shot two arrows at it without hitting the animal. Angrily chasing it he discharged a third arrow, which struck it, but in his haste the luckless man had not noticed that he had passed through the Valley of Lamentation while following the game.

He picked it up and turned toward home, but was suddenly seized with a longing for his father and mother. He did not venture to speak of this wish to his wife, yet by his grief and restlessness both she and her sisters instantly perceived his condition.

“Oh! luckless prince, you have passed through the Valley of Lamentation,” they said in terror.

“I did so, my dear ones, without meaning to be so imprudent, but now the longing to see my parents is killing me! Yet I can not forsake you. I have already spent several days with you and have no cause to complain. So I’ll go and see my parents once more, and then come back to you, never to leave you again.”

“Do not quit us, beloved prince! Your parents died two or three hundred years ago, and if you go, we fear you yourself will never return; stay with us, for a presentiment of evil tells us that you will perish!”

All the entreaties of the three ladies, as well as those of the horse, were unable to quiet the young hero’s longing for his parents, which was fairly consuming him alive.

At last the horse said: “If you don’t listen to me, master, whatever happens to you will be your own fault. I’ll tell you something, and if you accept my condition, I’ll take you back.”

“I’ll accept it with many thanks,” replied the prince; “let me hear it.”

“As soon as you reach your father’s palace you will dismount, but I am to return alone in case you stay even an hour.”

“Be it so,” the prince agreed.

They made their preparations for the journey, the prince embraced the ladies and after having bade them farewell he rode away, but they sobbed and wept bitterly when he left them.

They reached the country which had once been the kingdom of the Scorpion Witch, but found cities there; the woods had become fields; the prince questioned one person and another about the Scorpion Witch and her

house, but they answered that their grandfathers had heard from their great, great grandfathers that such silly tales had once been told.

“How is that possible!” replied the prince, “I came through this region myself only a short time ago,” and he told them all he knew.

The people laughed at him as if he were a lunatic or a person talking in his sleep, and the prince angrily rode on without noticing that his hair and beard were growing white.

When he reached the realm of the Woodpecker Fairy, the same questions and answers were exchanged. The prince could not understand how these places had altered so much in a few days, and again rode angrily on. He now had a white beard that reached to his waist, and he felt as if his feet were beginning to tremble.

Quitting this country he arrived in his father’s empire. Here he found new people, new towns, and every thing so much changed that he could not recognize it. At last he came to the palace where he was born. When he dismounted, the horse kissed his hand, and said:

“I wish you good health, master, I’m going back to the place from which I came. If you want to go too, mount quickly, and we’ll be off.”

“Farewell, I too hope to return soon.”

The horse darted away with the speed of an arrow.

When the prince saw the ruined palace and the weeds growing around it, he sighed deeply and with tears in his eyes tried to remember how magnificent these places had once been. He walked around the building two or three times, tried to recollect how every room, every corner had looked, found the stable where he had discovered the horse, and then went down into the cellar, whose entrance was choked up with fallen rubbish.

He groped hither and thither, holding up his eyelids with his hands, and scarcely able to totter along, while his snowy beard now fell to his knees, but found nothing except a dilapidated old chest, which he opened. It seemed empty, but as he raised the lid a voice from the bottom said: “Welcome, if you had kept me waiting much longer, I too should have gone to decay.”

Then his death, which had become completely shriveled in the chest, seized him; but the prince fell lifeless on the ground and instantly crumbled into dust.

Into the saddle then I sprung, The tale to tell to old and young.

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