

The Princess and the Chest

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Translated from the Danish.

There were once a king and a queen who lived in a beautiful castle, and had a large, and fair, and rich, and happy land to rule over. From the very first they loved each other greatly, and lived very happily together, but they had no heir.

They had been married for seven years, but had neither son nor daughter, and that was a great grief to both of them. More than once it happened that when the king was in a bad temper, he let it out on the poor queen, and said that here they were now, getting old, and neither they nor the kingdom had an heir, and it was all her fault. This was hard to listen to, and she went and cried and vexed herself.

Finally, the king said to her one day, 'This can't be borne any longer. I go about childless, and it's your fault. I am going on a journey and shall be away for a year. If you have a child when I come back again, all will be well, and I shall love you beyond all measure, and never more say an angry word to you. But if the nest is just as empty when I come home, then I must part with you.'

After the king had set out on his journey, the queen went about in her loneliness, and sorrowed and vexed herself more than ever. At last her maid said to her one day, 'I think that some help could be found, if your majesty would seek it.' Then she told about a wise old woman in that country, who had helped many in troubles of the same kind, and could no doubt help the queen as well, if she would send for her. The queen did so, and the wise woman came, and to her she confided her sorrow, that she, was childless, and the king and his kingdom had no heir.

The wise woman knew help for this. 'Out in the king's garden,' said she, 'under the great oak that stands on the left hand, just as one goes out from the castle, is a little bush, rather brown than green, with hairy leaves and long spikes. On that bush there are just at this moment three buds. If your majesty goes out there alone, fasting, before sunrise, and takes the middle one of the three buds, and eats it, then in six months you will bring a princess into the world. As soon as she is born, she must have a nurse, whom I shall provide, and this nurse must live with the child in a secluded part of the palace; no other person must visit the child; neither the king nor the queen must see it until it is fourteen years old, for that would cause great sorrow and misfortune.'

The queen rewarded the old woman richly, and next morning, before the sun rose, she was down in the garden, found at once the little bush with the three buds, plucked the middle one and ate it. It was sweet to taste, but afterwards was as bitter as gall. Six months after this, she brought into the world a little girl. There was a nurse in readiness, whom the wise woman had provided, and preparations were made for her living with the child, quite alone, in a secluded wing of the castle, looking out on the pleasure-park. The queen did as the wise woman had told her; she gave up the child immediately, and the nurse took it and lived with it there.

When the king came home and heard that a daughter had been born to him, he was of course very pleased and happy, and wanted to see her at once.

The queen had then to tell him this much of the story, that it had been foretold that it would cause great sorrow and misfortune if either he or she got a sight of the child until it had completed its fourteenth year.

This was a long time to wait. The king longed so much to get a sight of his daughter, and the queen no less than he, but she knew that it was not like other children, for it could speak immediately after it was

born, and was as wise as older folk. This the nurse had told her, for with her the queen had a talk now and again, but there was no one who had ever seen the princess. The queen had also seen what the wise woman could do, so she insisted strongly that her warning should be obeyed. The king often lost his patience, and was determined to see his daughter, but the queen always put him off the idea, and so things went on, until the very day before the princess completed her fourteenth year.

The king and the queen were out in the garden then, and the king said, 'Now I can't and I won't wait any longer. I must see my daughter at once. A few hours, more or less, can't make any difference.'

The queen begged him to have patience till the morning. When they had waited so long, they could surely wait a single day more. But the king was quite unreasonable. 'No nonsense,' said he; 'she is just as much mine as yours, and I will see her,' and with that he went straight up to her room.

He burst the door open, and pushed aside the nurse, who tried to stop him, and there he saw his daughter. She was the loveliest young princess, red and white, like milk and blood, with clear blue eyes and golden hair, but right in the middle of her forehead there was a little tuft of brown hair.

The princess went to meet her father, fell on his neck and kissed him, but with that she said, 'O father, father! what have you done now? tomorrow I must die, and you must choose one of three things: either the land must be smitten with the black pestilence, or you must have a long and bloody war, or you must as soon as I am dead, lay me in a plain wooden chest, and set it in the church, and for a whole year place a sentinel beside it every night.'

The king was frightened indeed, and thought she was raving, but in order to please her, he said, 'Well, of these three things I shall choose

the last; if you die, I shall lay you at once in a plain wooden chest, and have it set in the church, and every night I shall place a sentinel beside it. But you shall not die, even if you are ill now.'

He immediately summoned all the best doctors in the country, and they came with all their prescriptions and their medicine bottles, but next day the princess was stiff and cold in death. All the doctors could certify to that and they all put their names to this and appended their seals, and then they had done all they could.

The king kept his promise. The princess's body was lain the same day in a plain wooden chest, and set in the chapel of the castle, and on that night and every night after it, a sentinel was posted in the church, to keep watch over the chest.

The first morning when they came to let the sentinel out, there was no sentinel there. They thought he had just got frightened and run away, and next evening a new one was posted in the church. In the morning he was also gone. So it went every night. When they came in the morning to let the sentinel out, there was no one there, and it was impossible to discover which way he had gone if he had run away. And what should they run away for, every one of them, so that nothing more was over heard or seen of them, from the hour that they were set on guard beside the princess's chest?

It became now a general belief that the princess's ghost walked, and ate up all those who were to guard her chest, and very soon there was no one left who would be placed on this duty, and the king's soldiers deserted the service, before their turn came to be her bodyguard. The king then promised a large reward to the soldier who would volunteer for the post. This did for some time, as there were found a few reckless fellows, who wished to earn this good payment. But they never got it, for in the morning, they too had disappeared like the rest.

So it had gone on for something like a whole year; every night a sentinel had been placed beside the chest, either by compulsion or of his own free will, but not a single one of the sentinels was to be seen, either on the following day or any time thereafter. And so it had also gone with one, on the night before a certain day, when a merry young smith came wandering to the town where the king's castle stood. It was the capital of the country, and people of every king came to it to get work. This smith, whose name was Christian, had come for that same purpose. There was no work for him in the place he belonged to, and he wanted now to seek a place in the capital.

There he entered an inn where he sat down in the public room, and got something to eat. Some under-officers were sitting there, who were out to try to get some one enlisted to stand sentry. They had to go in this way, day after day, and hitherto they had always succeeded in finding one or other reckless fellow. But on this day they had, as yet, found no one. It was too well known how all the sentinels disappeared, who were set on that post, and all that they had got hold of had refused with thanks. These sat down beside Christian, and ordered drinks, and drank along with him. Now Christian was a merry fellow who liked good company; he could both drink and sing, and talk and boast as well, when he got a little drop in his head. He told these under-officers that he was one of that kind of folk who never are afraid of anything. Then he was just the kind of man they liked, said they, and he might easily earn a good penny, before he was a day older, for the king paid a hundred dollars to anyone who would stand as sentinel in the church all night, beside his daughter's chest.

Christian was not afraid of that he wasn't afraid of anything, so they drank another bottle of wine on this, and Christian went with them up to the colonel, where he was put into uniform with musket, and all the rest, and was then shut up in the church, to stand as sentinel that night.

It was eight o'clock when he took up his post, and for the first hour he was quite proud of his courage; during the second hour he was well

pleased with the large reward that he would get, but in the third hour, when it was getting near eleven, the effects of the wine passed off, and he began to get uncomfortable, for he had heard about this post; that no one had ever escaped alive from it, so far as was known. But neither did anyone know what had become of all the sentinels. The thought of this ran in his head so much, after the wine was out of it, that he searched about everywhere for a way of escape, and finally, at eleven o'clock, he found a little postern in the steeple which was not locked, and out at this he crept, intending to run away.

At the same moment as he put his foot outside the church door, he saw standing before him a little man, who said, 'Good evening, Christian, where are you going?'

With that he felt as if he were rooted to the spot and could not move.

'Nowhere,' said he.

'Oh, yes,' said the little man, 'You were just about to run away, but you have taken upon you to stand sentinel in the church to-night, and there you must stay.'

Christian said, very humbly, that he dared not, and therefore wanted to get away, and begged to be let go.

'No,' said the little one, 'you must remain at your post, but I shall give you a piece of good advice; you shall go up into the pulpit, and remain standing there. You need never mind what you see or hear, it will not be able to do you any harm, if you remain in your place until you hear the lid of the chest slam down again behind the dead; then all danger is past, and you can go about the church, wherever you please.'

The little man then pushed him in at the door again, and locked it after him. Christian made haste to get up into the pulpit, and stood there, without noticing anything, until the clock struck twelve. Then the lid

of the princess's chest sprang up, and out of it there came something like the princess, dressed as you see in the picture. It shrieked and howled, 'Sentry, where are you? Sentry, where are you? If you don't come, you shall get the most cruel death anyone had ever got.'

It went all round the church, and when it finally caught sight of the smith, up in the pulpit, it came rushing thither and mounted the steps. But it could not get up the whole way, and for all that it stretched and strained, it could not touch Christian, who meanwhile stood and trembled up in the pulpit. When the clock struck one, the appearance had to go back into the chest again, and Christian heard the lid slam after it. After this there was dead silence in the church. He lay down where he was and fell asleep, and did not awake before it was bright daylight, and he heard steps outside, and the noise of the key being put into the lock. Then he came down from the pulpit, and stood with his musket in front of the princess's chest.

It was the colonel himself who came with the patrol, and he was not a little surprised when he found the recruit safe and sound. He wanted to have a report, but Christian would give him none, so he took him straight up to the king, and announced for the first time that here was the sentinel who had stood guard in the church over-night. The king immediately got out of bed, and laid the hundred dollars for him on the table, and then wanted to question him. 'Have you seen anything?' said he. 'Have you seen my daughter?' 'I have stood at my post,' said the young smith, 'and that is quite enough; I undertook nothing more.' He was not sure whether he dared tell what he had seen and heard, and besides he was also a little conceited because he had done what no other man had been able to do, or had had courage for. The king professed to be quite satisfied, and asked him whether he would engage himself to stand on guard again the following night. 'No, thank you,' said Christian, 'I will have no more of that!'

'As you please,' said the king, 'you have behaved like a brave fellow, and now you shall have your breakfast. You must be needing something to strengthen you after that turn.'

The king had breakfast laid for him, and sat down at the table with him in person; he kept constantly filling his glass for him and praising him, and drinking his health. Christian needed no pressing, but did full justice both to the food and drink, and not least to the latter. Finally he grew bold, and said that if the king would give him two hundred dollars for it, he was his man to stand sentry next night as well.

When this was arranged, Christian bade him 'Good-day,' and went down among the guards, and then out into the town along with other soldiers and under-officers. He had his pocket full of money, and treated them, and drank with them and boasted and made game of the good-for-nothings who were afraid to stand on guard, because they were frightened that the dead princess would eat them. See whether she had eaten him! So the day passed in mirth and glee, but when eight o'clock came, Christian was again shut up in the church, all alone.

Before he had been there two hours, he got tired of it, and thought only of getting away. He found a little door behind the altar which was not locked, and at ten o'clock he slipped out at it, and took to his heels and made for the beach. He had got half-way thither, when all at once the same little man stood in front of him and said, 'Good evening, Christian, where are you going?' 'I've leave to go where I please,' said the smith, but at the same time he noticed that he could not move a foot. 'No, you have undertaken to keep guard to-night as well,' said the little man, 'and you must attend to that.' He then took hold of him, and however unwilling he was, Christian had to go with him right back to the same little door that he had crept out at. When they got there, the little man said to him, 'Go in front of the altar now, and take in your hand the book that is lying there. There you shall stay

till you hear the lid of the chest slam down over the dead. In that way you will come to no harm.'

With that the little man shoved him in at the door, and locked it. Christian then immediately went in front of the altar, and took the book in his hand, and stood thus until the clock struck twelve, and the appearance sprang out of the chest. 'Sentry, where are you? Sentry, where are you?' it shrieked, and then rushed to the pulpit, and right up into it. But there was no one there that night. Then it howled and shrieked again,

My father has set no sentry in, War and Pest this night begin.

At the same moment, it noticed the smith standing in front of the altar, and came rushing towards him. 'Are you there?' it screamed; 'now I'll catch you.' But it could not come up over the step in front of the altar, and there it continued to howl, and scream, and threaten, until the clock struck one, when it had to go into the chest again, and Christian heard the lid slam above it. That night, however, it had not the same appearance as on the previous one; it was less ugly.

When all was quiet in the church, the smith lay down before the altar and slept calmly till the following morning, when the colonel came to fetch him. He was taken up to the king again, and things went on as the day before. He got his money, but would give no explanation whether he had seen the king's daughter, and he would not take the post again, he said. But after he had got a good breakfast, and tasted well of the king's wines, he undertook to go on guard again the third night, but he would not do it for less than the half of the kingdom, he said, for it was a dangerous post, and the king had to agree, and promise him this.

The remainder of the day went like the previous one. He played the boastful soldier, and the merry smith, and he had comrades and boon-companions in plenty. At eight o'clock he had to put on his uniform

again, and was shut up in the church. He had not been there for an hour before he had come to his senses, and thought, 'It's best to stop now, while the game is going well.' The third night, he was sure, would be the worst; he had been drunk when he promised it, and the half of the kingdom, the king could never have been in earnest about that! So he decided to leave, without waiting so long as on the previous nights. In that way he would escape the little man who had watched him before. All the doors and posterns were locked, but he finally thought of creeping up to a window, and opening that, and as the clock struck nine, he crept out there. It was fairly high in the wall, but he got to the ground with no bones broken, and started to run. He got down to the shore without meeting anyone, and there he got into a boat, and pushed off from land. He laughed immensely to himself at the thought of how cleverly he had managed and how he had cheated the little man. Just then he heard a voice from the shore, 'Good evening, Christian, where are you going?' He gave no answer. 'Tonight your legs will be too short,' he thought, and pulled at the oars. But he then felt something lay hold of the boat, and drag it straight in to shore, for all that he sat and struggled with the oars.

The man then laid hold of him, and said, 'You must remain at your post, as you have promised,' and whether he liked it or not, Christian had just to go back with him the whole way to the church.

He could never get in at that window again, Christian said; it was far too high up.

'You must go in there, and you shall go in there,' said the little man, and with that he lifted him up on to the window-sill. Then he said to him: 'Notice well now what you have to do. This evening you must stretch yourself out on the left-hand side of her chest. The lid opens to the right, and she comes out to the left. When she has got out of the chest and passed over you, you must get into it and lie there, and that in a hurry, without her seeing you. There you must remain lying until day dawns, and whether she threatens you or entreats you, you must

not come out of it, or give her any answer. Then she has no power over you, and both you and she are freed.'

The smith then had to go in at the window, just as he came out, and went and laid himself all his length on the left side of the princess's chest, close up to it, and there he lay stiff as a rock until the clock struck twelve. Then the lid sprang up to the right, and the princess came out, straight over him, and rushed round the church, howling and shrieking 'Sentry, where are you? Sentry, where are you?' She went towards the altar, and right up to it, but there was no one there; then she screamed again,

My father has set no sentry in, War and Pest will now begin.

Then she went round the whole church, both up and down, sighing and weeping,

My father has set no sentry in, War and Pest will now begin.

Then she went away again, and at the same moment the clock in the tower struck one.

Then the smith heard in the church a soft music, which grew louder and louder, and soon filled the whole building. He heard also a multitude of footsteps, as if the church was being filled with people. He heard the priest go through the service in front of the altar, and there was singing more beautiful than he had ever heard before. Then he also heard the priest offer up a prayer of thanksgiving because the land had been freed from war and pestilence, and from all misfortune, and the king's daughter delivered from the evil one. Many voices joined in, and a hymn of praise was sung; then he heard the priest again, and heard his own name and that of the princess, and thought that he was being wedded to her. The church was packed full, but he could see nothing. Then he heard again the many footsteps as ol' folk leaving the church, while the music sounded fainter and fainter, until

it altogether died away. When it was silent, the light of day began to break in through the windows.

The smith sprang up out of the chest and fell on his knees and thanked God. The church was empty, but up in front of the altar lay the princess, white and red, like a human being, but sobbing and crying, and shaking with cold in her white shroud. The smith took his sentry coat and wrapped it round her; then she dried her tears, and took his hand and thanked him, and said that he had now freed her from all the sorcery that had been in her from her birth, and which had come over her again when her father broke the command against seeing her until she had completed her fourteenth year.

She said further, that if he who had delivered her would take her in marriage, she would be his. If not, she would go into a nunnery, and he could marry no other as long as she lived, for he was wedded to her with the service of the dead, which he had heard.

She was now the most beautiful young princess that anyone could wish to see, and he was now lord of half the kingdom, which had been promised him for standing on guard the third night. So they agreed that they would have each other, and love each other all their days.

With the first sunbeam the watch came and opened the church, and not only was the colonel there, but the king in person, come to see what had happened to the sentinel. He found them both sitting hand in hand on the step in front of the altar, and immediately knew his daughter again, and took her in his arms, thanking God and her deliverer. He made no objections to what they had arranged, and so Christian the smith held his wedding with the princess, and got half the kingdom at once, and the whole of it when the king died.

As for the other sentries, with so many doors and windows open, no doubt they had run away, and gone into the Prussian service. And as

for what Christian said he saw, he had been drinking more wine than was good for him.