

The Beauty of the Golden Keys

Once upon a time, there was a king with three sons; when they grew up, he told them each to choose a job, one that would please each one the most.

The oldest said, "I want to be a hunter; every day I will leave with my dogs in the morning, and I won't return until sunset."

"I will be a soldier," said the second son.

"And I a sailor," added the third.

The next day, the three of them left home. The oldest went hunting, and when he was in the forest, he saw an old lady who was uprooting a small green tree.

"What are you doing there, old witch? Leave my tree alone and get out of here fast."

"Don't speak to me so harshly, young man," responded the lady.

"Get out of here, or I will beat you," said the king's son.

The old woman left, muttering and grumbling, and the prince continued to hunt; he filled his game bag with rabbits and hares, and his father was happy to see that his son was good at his chosen profession.

The next day, the prince found the old lady in the same place where he had seen her the previous day.

"Get out of my forest," he yelled, "and I forbid you to ever return."

She left without a word: he continued to hunt and again filled his game bag with rabbits and hares.

The third day, he saw the old lady in the same spot.

"Ah, for once," he yelled, "I'm going to beat you."

He started hitting her so forcefully that she fell to the ground. She stood back up, then disappeared.

The young prince continued to hunt in the forest, and saw a hare in a clearing who was watching him.

"Here," he thought, "Here is a hare that is not shy."

He wanted to grab it, but the hare stood up and walked at the same pace as the hunter, running when he ran, and stopping when he stopped. The prince pursued the hare all day without catching him, and at nightfall, the hare disappeared into a cavern, and the young hunter followed. An old man appeared before the prince, with teeth as long as a hand.

The man told him, "It's not a hare or an old woman, it's me that you're going to have to deal with."

"Excuse me," responded the young prince, "Who are you?"

"I'm going to kill you," said the man with the long teeth.

But the prince begged the old man so earnestly that the man had a change of heart and told him, "I'm going to spare your life, but you must become my servant, and you must do everything I say."

The old man brought the prince to his stables where he had two horses: one was gray with a trough full of oats; the other, who was a white mare who only had sticks in her trough.

"You are in charge," the old man told the prince, "of making sure the gray horse gets plenty of food and drinks fresh water from the fountain; for the mare, let her starve and beat her hard with the switch. I'm leaving for six months, but be sure to obey me, or beware, because I have a bell that lets me know of everything that happens here."

The old man left; the next day, the prince overcame his fear and went to beat the white mare.

"Not so hard! Not so hard!" she told him.

"Do horses talk here?" asked the young man.

"Yes," responded the mare, "I talk, and it's lucky for you that I do; heed my words, or in three days, you will be like me. I was kidnapped like you, then changed into a mare."

"How can I save myself?"

"Give me some oats so that I may build up my strength, and in three days, I will take you away on my back."

He took good care of her, and after three days, she had regained her strength and was able to move quickly.

"Put a saddle on my back," she told him, "Take your brush, your curry comb, and your cork, and prepare to jump up on my back, because soon the bell will ring and the devil will prevent our departure."

When she had been saddled, the mare told the prince, "Spur, spur hard."

She ran like the wind, and repeated to the prince, "Spur, spur hard. Do you see anything coming?"

"No, nothing," he replied.

"Spur, spur hard. Do you not see anything behind us?"

"Yes, I see a large cloud with fire trailing behind it advancing toward us."

"Is it far?"

"No, it's gaining on us."

"Throw your brush behind you."

After the prince threw the brush, a forest sprung up that was so dense that the devil couldn't pass through it and instead had to go around. While this was happening, the mare continued to run like the wind, and repeated, "Spur, spur hard. Do you not see anything coming?"

"No."

"Spur, spur hard. Do you not see anything behind us?"

"No, nothing."

"Spur, spur hard, and look carefully."

"Ah, I see a black cloud that is coming, that is coming, that is catching up to us!"

"Quick, throw the curry comb!"

Soon, a mountain rose that was so high that the summit was hidden by clouds. The devil had to go around another obstacle, and during that time, the white mare ran like the wind and said, "Spur, spur hard. Do you not see anything?"

"No."

"Spur, spur hard. Do you not see anything coming?"

"Still nothing."

"Spur, spur hard, and look behind you."

"Ah! I see who is coming, who is coming, and who is catching up to us!"

"Throw your cork!"

And there rose behind them a mountain that was taller and steeper than the first; the devil had to go around it, and during that time, the white mare ran like the wind.

"Stay alert," she said to the prince, "We are going to reach a bridge, and when we have passed the middle of it, the devil will no longer have power over us."

They rushed over the bridge, and the devil seized the mare by the neck at the second when her hooves passed over the middle, but the prince cut off the section of mane that the devil was gripping with his knife.

The devil yelled, "Give me my horse! Give me my horse!"

"No, never!" the prince responded.

The devil stood yelling on the bridge for a long time, but he finally let them go.

"What will become of us now?" the prince asked the mare. "I would like to return to my land."

"No," responded the white mare. "We have to make a detour through Paris."

She started trotting, and the young prince found a diamond ring that lit up the night like the day.

During this time, Paris wasn't as big as it is now; when they arrived at the outskirts, the prince took the white mare to a pasture. She was plump and healthy enough to enjoy herself.

"You see that big house?" she asked him. "The king lives there; he needs a pasture for his sheep. He will hire you for his service, and every day, you will bring your flock here."

The young man presented himself at the castle, and, since one of the shepherds had left in the morning, the prince was hired to replace him. He drove the sheep to the pasture where the white mare grazed, and when she saw him, she danced and whinnied with joy. He brought his sheep in the evening; they were pretty and of good stock, so much so that the sheep of other shepherds looked plain and skinny. Every day, he returned to the place where his mare and his flock grazed while he watched over them, while other shepherds' flocks became skinnier and weaker.

"Ah!" said the king, "Here is a shepherd whose sheep are much healthier and prettier than the others."

The shepherds were jealous of the prince, and they looked for ways to get rid of him. He was forbidden from lighting torches in the stables at night; one night, the prince was admiring his diamond ribbon, which lit up like many lamps, and the light shone through the slats of the barn.

The other shepherds went to the king and told him, "Master, the new shepherd lit the torches, despite your orders."

The king went to see for himself, but the shepherd heard the noise and quickly shoved the diamond ribbon into his pocket. The king didn't see any light, and he accused the other shepherds of being liars.

The shepherds said, "For us to get rid of him, we are going to tell the king that the shepherd has the power to summon the Beauty of the Golden Keys."

They went to talk to the king, who then brought in the shepherd, and told him, "You have the power to find the Beauty of the Golden Keys: you must bring her here."

"I have never said that I did," responded the shepherd prince, "and I didn't even know that she existed."

"I don't care," said the king, "Bring her here, or death awaits you."

The shepherd started crying in the pasture where the white mare stayed. When first she saw the prince, she started to jump for joy, but she quickly perceived that he was unhappy.

"Why are you sad?" she asked him.

"The king ordered me to bring him the Beauty of the Golden Keys; I don't know where she is, and, if I don't find her, he swears that he will kill me."

"Is that all?" the mare responded. "It isn't worth getting worked up about such a small thing. You are going to tell the king to make you a boat that shines like the sun: you will embark with your crew, and you will sail to the west-northwest. You will arrive at the castle of the Beauty of the Golden Keys, which is

based at the foot of some mountains and guarded by four giants. The mountains shine like diamonds because they are covered in snow. There, you will see the Beauty of the Golden Keys, and you will invite her onto your boat.

The young prince went to ask the king for a boat that shone like the sun; when the vessel was finished, he embarked with his crew, and following the directions of the white mare, he sailed until he was in sight of the castle of the Beauty of the Golden Keys. The princess stood at her window, and she looked at the vessel.

"Hello, princess," said the young man.

"Hello, sire," responded the Beauty of the Golden Keys, who mistook the shepherd for a king.

"I have come to visit your castle. Would you let me in?"

"Yes," she responded.

When he had seen the entire castle, the princess gave him food and drink.

She asked him, "Well, have you ever seen beauty such as this in your land?"

"No," he responded, "but if you would like to come aboard my ship, you will agree that the beauty here has no parallel. I would like to see more of this beautiful land."

"I will go," said the princess, "I will be there in two hours."

He returned to the shore and commanded his crew to prepare the equipment and to lift the anchor, while the princess kept her eyes on the boat.

The Beauty of the Golden Keys arrived on the ship, the young man kept her engaged in conversation inside the vessel, and by the time she ventured back onto the deck, the land was already far away. When the princess realized that she had been kidnapped, she started screaming and pulling her hair.

"Ah, you bad man," she told the prince, "Why have you tricked me?"

"I came to look for you on the king's orders," he replied, "And if I didn't succeed, he would have killed me."

The angry princess threw her keys into the sea, and the boat continued on its route and arrived at the port. Upon their arrival, the vessel was welcomed back by a 21-cannon salute.

When the king saw the Beauty of the Golden Keys, he was very happy, and he wanted to marry her, but she couldn't take his groveling, and she always rebutted him when he proposed.

"I will not marry you," she told him, "unless you can retrieve the golden keys from my castle."

The king went to his shepherd and told him, "You brought this princess here; now you need to bring me the golden keys, or death awaits you."

The shepherd went to find his white mare; he hadn't seen her in a long time, and she had become sick from missing him, but he stroked her and she was suddenly cured. Since he once again had a sad demeanor, she asked him why he was sad.

"I brought the Beauty of the Golden Keys before the king," he responded; "and now he wants me to go look for her keys, which she threw in the sea."

"If that's all that's wrong," said the white mare, "you don't need to worry. Ask the king to make you a small boat of good quality; at the back, attach a long rock, and when you are flow to the place where the Beauty threw her keys, you must knock three times on the rock with your diamond ring. You will see a small man come out of the water who will threaten to devour you; do not be afraid, and hit him on the head with the ring until he throws the keys onto the ship."

The shepherd went to ask the king for a small but well-made boat, and he soon embarked to return to the place where the princess had thrown her keys in the sea.

When he reached his destination, he knocked on the rock three times with his ring; soon, he saw the little man, who opened his big mouth and yelled, "I'm going to eat you! I'm going to eat you!"

But the young man started hitting him in the head with the ring, saying:

"If you don't find me the golden keys that the princess threw into the sea, I will continue to beat you."

The little man plunged into the water, and he brought back the golden keys and threw them on the deck. Soon, the boat began moving again, and it didn't stop until it arrived at the port, where it was greeted with cannon fire.

When the king saw the keys, he was very happy, and when he gave them to the princess, he said, "Now are you going to marry me?"

"No," she responded. "If you want me to marry you, you must bring the one who found the keys and tell him to bring me my castle."

The king summoned the shepherd and told him, "You are going to go get the princess' castle and bring it here; if you don't do it, death awaits you."

The young man was very sad; he returned to the pasture where the white mare grazed, but she had become very thin and appeared close to death.

"I thought," she told him, "that you were going to let me die. That's very bad on your part, since I saved you when you were the devil's servant."

"Ah!" he responded, "I was so happy to be back that I forgot you. The king ordered me to go get the castle of the Beauty of the Golden Keys, but this time, I think I am going to die."

"No," she said, "Don't be afraid; you're going to ask the king to make you a boat, the biggest that one can make. Fill it with wine and delicious dishes, and you will return to the castle. You will see the giants that carry it on their heads, and after you give them the food and wine, tell them to come with you to your land."

The king had a boat made for his shepherd, the largest that was ever made; it was filled with wine and delicious dishes, and the shepherd set sail to the West-Northwest to the castle of the Beauty of the Golden Keys. When the young man arrived, the giants that held the castle on their heads were so hungry that they were going to beat, then eat each other. The shepherd carried out the wine and the food, and the giants feasted; they emptied wine barrels from their taps and ate one whole cow at a time.

"You are better than our master," they told him, "He would let us die of hunger."

"If you would like to come to my land," the shepherd responded, "I will give you as much food as you want. Is the castle you carry very heavy to you?"

"No, it doesn't weigh more than a feather."

"Would you like to bring it with you?"

"Yes, we would like to."

He loaded the giants who carried the castle on their heads onto the boat, and when he arrived, the shepherd unloaded them and drove them to the Beauty of the Golden Keys.

When the king saw the castle, he was very happy, and he told the princess, "Now, I think you are going to marry me."

"If you want me to marry you," she responded, "you must burn the one who retrieved my castle and my golden keys."

When the young man found out what the Beauty of the Golden Keys asked of the king, he went crying to his white mare.

"Ah!" he told her, "This time, I am doomed: the king wants to burn me so that he may marry the princess."

"Is that it?" she replied. "You are going to dress yourself from head to toe in cloth; here is a little bottle that you will empty on your clothes, and you will not burn; then, you will become invisible, you will leave the stake and you will talk to the king behind the crowd."

The young man did what the white mare had told him. The next day, over two hundred logs were brought to the palace, the shepherd was placed in the middle, and the logs were set aflame, but the shepherd did not burn; he walked through the flames and went into the crowd.

The king saw him and told him, "I thought you had burned! How are you not roasted?"

"I bought some canvas cloth, and the fire didn't touch me."

"If you would like to marry me," said the Beauty of the Golden Keys, "you have to do like the shepherd and be burned."

"That's easy," responded the king.

He made a canvas suit and stood in the middle of 300 logs; but when they were set ablaze, he was suffocated and burned.

The Beauty of the Golden Keys told the young man, "It's you that I want to marry. He was very happy, and he went to tell the white mare that the Beauty of the Golden Keys wanted to marry him.

"If you want to marry her," she told him, "you first must kill me and cut my heart in two."

"No," he responded.

"Yes, you have to do it; I want you to."

He killed the white mare, and when he had cut her heart in two, a woman as beautiful as the day emerged, and told him, "You could have been happy with me, but you are an ingrate; now you will be unhappy for the rest of your life."

She disappeared and never returned. He married the Beauty of the Golden Keys, but he was pitifully sad, and he died in misery.

Told in 1880 by Auguste Macé, from Saint-Cast, ship boy, age 15.
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Translated by Marjorie Stump.