

The Fish and the Ring

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Once upon a time there lived a Baron who was a great magician, and could tell by his arts and charms everything that was going to happen at any time.

Now this great lord had a little son born to him as heir to all his castles and lands. So, when the little lad was about four years old, wishing to know what his fortune would be, the Baron looked in his Book of Fate to see what it foretold.

And, lo and behold! it was written that this much-loved, much-prized heir to all the great lands and castles was to marry a low-born maiden. So the Baron was dismayed, and set to work by more arts and charms to discover if this maiden were already born, and if so, where she lived.

And he found out that she had just been born in a very poor house, where the poor parents were already burdened with five children.

So he called for his horse and rode away, and away, until he came to the poor man's house, and there he found the poor man sitting at his doorstep very sad and doleful.

"What is the matter, my friend?" asked he; and the poor man replied:

"May it please your honour, a little lass has just been born to our house; and we have five children already, and where the bread is to come from to fill the sixth mouth, we know not."

"If that be all your trouble," quoth the Baron readily, "mayhap I can help you: so don't be downhearted. I am just looking for such a little lass to companion my son, so, if you will, I will give you ten crowns for her."

Well! the man he nigh jumped for joy, since he was to get good money, and his daughter, so he thought, a good home. Therefore he brought out the child then and there, and the Baron, wrapping the babe in his cloak, rode away. But when he got to the river he flung the little thing into the swollen stream, and said to himself as he galloped back to his castle:

"There goes Fate!"

But, you see, he was just sore mistaken. For the little lass didn't sink. The stream was very swift, and her long clothes kept her up till she caught in a snag just opposite a fisherman, who was mending his nets.

Now the fisherman and his wife had no children, and they were just longing for a baby; so when the goodman saw the little lass he was overcome with joy, and took her home to his wife, who received her with open arms.

And there she grew up, the apple of their eyes, into the most beautiful maiden that ever was seen.

Now, when she was about fifteen years of age, it so happened that the Baron and his friends went a-hunting along the banks of the river and stopped to get a drink of water at the fisherman's hut. And who should bring the water out but, as they thought, the fisherman's daughter.

Now the young men of the party noticed her beauty, and one of them said to the Baron, "She should marry well; read us her fate, since you are so learned in the art."

Then the Baron, scarce looking at her, said carelessly: "I could guess her fate! Some wretched yokel or other. But, to please you, I will cast her horoscope by the stars; so tell me, girl, what day you were born?"

"That I cannot tell, sir," replied the girl, "for I was picked up in the river about fifteen years ago."

Then the Baron grew pale, for he guessed at once that she was the little lass he had flung into the stream, and that Fate had been stronger than he was. But he kept his own counsel and said nothing at the time. Afterwards, however, he thought out a plan, so he rode back and gave the girl a letter.

"See you!" he said. "I will make your fortune. Take this letter to my brother, who needs a good girl, and you will be settled for life."

Now the fisherman and his wife were growing old and needed help; so the girl said she would go, and took the letter.

And the Baron rode back to his castle saying to himself once more:

"There goes Fate!"

For what he had written in the letter was this:

"Dear Brother,

"Take the bearer and put her to death immediately."

But once again he was sore mistaken; since on the way to the town where his brother lived, the girl had to stop the night in a little inn. And it so happened that that very night a gang of thieves broke into the inn, and not content with carrying off all that the innkeeper possessed, they searched the pockets of the guests, and found the letter which the girl carried. And when they read it, they agreed that it was a mean trick and a shame. So their captain sat down and, taking pen and paper, wrote instead:

“Dear Brother,

“Take the bearer and marry her to my son without delay.”

Then, after putting the note into an envelope and sealing it up, they gave it to the girl and bade her go on her way. So when she arrived at the brother’s castle, though rather surprised, he gave orders for a wedding feast to be prepared. And the Baron’s son, who was staying with his uncle, seeing the girl’s great beauty, was nothing loth, so they were fast wedded.

Well! when the news was brought to the Baron, he was nigh beside himself; but he was determined not to be done by Fate. So he rode post-haste to his brother’s and pretended to be quite pleased. And then one day, when no one was nigh, he asked the young bride to come for a walk with him, and when they were close to some cliffs, seized hold of her, and was for throwing her over into the sea. But she begged hard for her life.

“It is not my fault,” she said. “I have done nothing. It is Fate. But if you will spare my life I promise that I will fight against Fate also. I will never see you or your son again until you desire it. That will be safer for you; since, see you, the sea may preserve me, as the river did.”

Well! the Baron agreed to this. So he took off his gold ring from his finger and flung it over the cliffs into the sea and said:

“Never dare to show me your face again till you can show me that ring likewise.”

And with that he let her go.

Well! the girl wandered on, and she wandered on, until she came to a nobleman’s castle; and there, as they needed a kitchen girl, she engaged as a scullion, since she had been used to such work in the fisherman’s hut.

Now one day, as she was cleaning a big fish, she looked out of the kitchen window, and who should she see driving up to dinner but the Baron and his young son, her husband. At first

she thought that, to keep her promise, she must run away; but afterwards she remembered they would not see her in the kitchen, so she went on with her cleaning of the big fish.

And, lo and behold! she saw something shine in its inside, and there, sure enough, was the Baron's ring! She was glad enough to see it, I can tell you; so she slipped it on to her thumb. But she went on with her work, and dressed the fish as nicely as ever she could, and served it up as pretty as may be, with parsley sauce and butter.

Well! when it came to table the guests liked it so well that they asked the host who cooked it. And he called to his servants, "Send up the cook who cooked that fine fish, that she may get her reward."

Well! when the girl heard she was wanted she made herself ready, and with the gold ring on her thumb, went boldly into the dining-hall. And all the guests when they saw her were struck dumb by her wonderful beauty. And the young husband started up gladly; but the Baron, recognising her, jumped up angrily and looked as if he would kill her. So, without one word, the girl held up her hand before his face, and the gold ring shone and glittered on it; and she went straight up to the Baron, and laid her hand with the ring on it before him on the table.

Then the Baron understood that Fate had been too strong for him; so he took her by the hand, and, placing her beside him, turned to the guests and said:

"This is my son's wife. Let us drink a toast in her honour."

And after dinner he took her and his son home to his castle, where they all lived as happy as could be for ever afterwards.

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