

## The White Raven, or the King Who No Longer Knew Himself

Once upon a time there was a wise king, so beloved by his people, and so respected by all the neighboring kingdoms, that he was generally regarded as the greatest monarch alive. Under his rule, industry and fine arts flourished. The workers prospered and everyone was happy.

Now, it was well known that the king had a magic mirror that helped him rule so well. Every morning when he arose, the king would stand before the mirror. As he gazed at his reflection he could see his strengths and weaknesses; he could see his feet set firmly on the ground; he saw the problems he had to face and how to solve them; he saw the things that mattered and the things that were unimportant; he saw the decisions he had to take and how to take them. When he turned away from the mirror, the king felt confident that he would rule his kingdom justly, kindly and wisely.

But not everyone in the kingdom was happy. Deep in a cave in the darkest forest lived a wicked goblin that was eaten up with envy that the king was so adored by his subjects. As time went on, and the people grew happier, healthier and wealthier, the goblin's hatred grew wider and deeper.

One day, while the king was visiting his people in a distant part of the land, the wicked goblin crept into the palace, entered the king's bedroom, and put the magic mirror under a wicked spell. Laughing loudly, it said to itself, "Let's see how the king rules his kingdom, now!"

The next morning, the king awoke and went to the mirror as usual. But when he looked at the glass, something dreadful happened. He no longer recognized his reflection. Everything was distorted and confused. "Is this what I am really like?" the



king asked himself. "Is this my real self? Were all the other reflections false?" Day after day the mirror reflected someone who was a stranger to him. The king began to lose confidence in himself. He became very unhappy. He started to question the decisions he had made and changed his mind again and again, no longer sure that what he was doing was right. The king's confusion and doubt spread throughout the court. People began to wonder what had happened to their ruler. Now instead of being just, wise and benevolent he seemed weak, insecure and erratic. The discontent within the kingdom was music to the ears of the wicked goblin.

But after a while the king's subjects became used to their ruler's changed behavior. They said, "Things may not be as good as they were but they could be worse. Just look at the way other kingdoms are governed! Compared with them, we are not too badly off." This made the goblin very angry.

One day, when the king was in the throne room with his counselors, the goblin crept once more into the royal bedchamber, stole the magic mirror, and took it to the highest mountain in the land. At the summit, it held the mirror above its head, uttered a second spell, and threw it down the steepest cliff. When the mirror hit the ground it broke into millions of tiny pieces, which the wind picked up, blowing fragments of the cursed mirror into the eyes of every man, woman, and child in the kingdom.

From that moment on, all the king's subjects saw a distorted view of the world, as even the smallest splinters retained the power of the cursed mirror. With these chips of glass in their eyes, the king's people lost their sense of who they were. Like the king, they became strangers to themselves.

Faster than seemed possible, the kingdom that had been known for its wise, considerate, and just rule became a chaotic, unhappy place in which everyone had lost their grip on reality. The people no longer knew right from wrong. Where there had been harmony there was now discord, where happiness, sorrow. Gloating over the misery it had caused, the wicked goblin laughed and laughed until its belly shook.

Now a stranger to himself, the king's mood grew dark and somber and he withdrew more and more from his people. His despondency was contagious. Nobody laughed and people grew suspicious of their neighbors. They lost all sense of purpose and forgot how to do their work properly.

One night, the king had a terrifying dream. In his dream, he looked into the magic mirror and the sight of his own face filled him with dread. As he gazed in horror at his reflection, the mirror started to shake. It cracked into a million pieces that were carried by a strong wind into a dark cloud high up in the sky and from somewhere came the sound of malicious laughter. The king woke up, bathed in sweat, and summoned all his courtiers, crying, "Tell me the meaning of this terrible dream!" But none of his attendants could give him a satisfactory answer.

His courtiers' inability to help made the king even more despondent. With the horror of the dream still deeply etched in his mind, the king invited the wisest people in his kingdom to help him solve the riddle. But none of them could find the answer.

Finally, one of the courtiers told the king about a wise woman who lived in a land far, far away, and was known for her great knowledge. "Who knows?" the courtier said hesitantly. "She might be the one who could solve the riddle of your

dream." When the king heard these words, he sent his most capable knight to fetch the wise woman, saying, "Ride day and night, and do whatever it takes, but bring this woman to my court without delay."

When the wise woman arrived at the court, the king recounted his dream. The woman listened carefully, then said, "Sire, the dream shows that someone has put a terrible curse on your kingdom."

The king asked the wise woman, "What can I do to make the kingdom well again?" "What can I do to recapture what we once had?" The woman replied, "The only way to break this spell is to find the potion of truth. But this will be a very difficult quest. It is only found in a far-off land. Anyone who tries to obtain it will be faced with grave dangers. Many have tried, but all have failed."

While the wise woman was speaking, the king's two sons were listening carefully. Now they stepped forward and said, "Please, father, give us your blessing to search for this rare potion. We will be honored to serve you and save the kingdom."

The king was very touched by their words but feared to lose his sons on such a dangerous expedition. But they continued to beg him to let them go. Finally, the king consented, and said, "Go, and my blessings upon the two of you. Because your quest is so important to everyone in our kingdom, the one who brings back this magic potion will be anointed as my successor."

Without delay, the two princes saddled their horses and galloped away. They journeyed night and day, crossing lakes, valleys, mountains, and other wild places in search of the magic potion.

The further the brothers went from the kingdom, the more clear-sighted they became, as the spell of the evil goblin began to lose its power. One day, completely exhausted from a long day's riding, they arrived at a crossing where two roads met. One road was wide, straight, and clear, while the other was narrow and overgrown. At the crossing was a sign that read:

*Foolish traveler, beware!*

*Continue only if you dare.*

*Take the straight path: you might return.*

*The other's dangers you will learn.*

The older prince said hastily, "I'll take the straight path," and before his brother could say a word, he galloped away. The younger prince realized that his brother had taken advantage of him, but he had no choice and took the narrow, overgrown path.

As night fell, the older prince arrived at a superb castle. He was very thankful to have reached such a place, as he was truly exhausted. As he dismounted, people who lit his way with torches greeted him warmly. They took his horse, and guided him through the entrance, which was richly decorated with precious stones and beautiful paintings. The prince was enchanted by such a reception after the hardships of his journey. "Finally," he thought, "I will be able to rest." But alas for the prince—what he did not know was that the beautiful castle was an illusion. In reality, he was in the wicked goblin's lair.

The prince entered a sumptuous hall, full of the sound of music and delicious smells. The tables were laden with so much food and wine that they were on the verge of collapsing. The

prince fell on the food and drink hungrily. All around, beautiful women cast seductive glances at him and continued to fill his plate and glass.

The wicked goblin, disguised as a noble lord, welcomed him and gave him all the honors the prince could have wished for. Before long the prince had forgotten all about his quest for the magic potion. He felt very sleepy. "I never want to leave this wonderful place," he thought.

Meanwhile, the younger prince had taken the narrow, overgrown path and was on a very different journey. He traveled through snow-covered mountain passes, arid deserts, dangerous swamps, and treacherous rivers but, in spite of all the hardships, he pressed on. The promise he had made to his father weighed heavily on his mind. He was determined to complete the quest, whatever the cost.

Whenever the prince met people, he would ask them, "Tell me, please, where I can find the potion of truth." Every time, the answer was, "Far away, in a distant land, in a place where many dangers await you." But despite these discouraging replies, the prince did not give up.

One day, as the prince was riding through a deep, dark wood he heard a strange cry. After a long search, he came upon a beautiful white raven caught in a snare. To his great surprise, the bird spoke to him: "Please, my prince, set me free. An evil goblin has trapped me in this snare and if it finds me it will kill and eat me."

The prince, who was very kind at heart, freed the bird. The white raven spread its wings and prepared to fly but as it did so said, "Dear prince, I am forever in your debt. You have saved



my life. Is there anything that I can do for you? Let me know your heart's desire." The prince said, "Please help me to find the potion of truth. I have looked for it far and wide, but it is nowhere to be found."

The raven replied, "Dear prince, I will help you but you must listen very carefully. Not far from here, in the deepest part of this dark, dangerous wood, you will find a castle. You should enter this castle but beware. The castle is just an illusion. In truth, it's the lair of a wicked goblin. This goblin has caused me great suffering and is also responsible for the misery that has visited your father's kingdom. Therefore, be cautious. Do not eat or drink anything you are offered or you will fall into a deep sleep and be unable to complete your quest. So just feign that you are doing so. When everyone is asleep tonight, I will come and find you. I will lead you to a magic sword which is the only weapon that can kill the goblin. You must cut off its head, and then you will find the potion of truth among its treasure in the cave."

When the prince arrived at the castle, it was just as the white raven had told him. Delicious food and wine were put before him, but the prince only pretended to eat and drink. The same beautiful women smiled at him and the prince just smiled back. After a while, the prince laid down and pretended to be fast asleep.

When the castle was completely silent the prince heard the sound of wings and the white raven appeared. As it had promised, the bird guided him to the magic sword, which the prince fastened to his belt. Then he followed the raven into the depths of the cave, from which strange sounds were coming. It was the evil goblin, fast asleep and snoring loudly. With one great thrust



of the sword the prince cut off its ugly head. The raven then flew to a shelf in the farthest corner, where the prince found the phial containing the potion of truth. As he put it safely in his pack, he heard desperate cries and loud banging even deeper in the cave. There he found his unfortunate brother, imprisoned in a dungeon. Another great thrust of the magic sword sliced through the heavy lock and the brothers fell into one another's arms.

Saying farewell to the white raven, the two princes set off on the long journey home. But as they traveled, the older prince grew more and more quiet and withdrawn. He was deeply ashamed that he had fallen for the evil goblin's tricks and failed in the quest to find the potion of truth. Now, he remembered what their father had said as he gave them his blessing: his younger brother would inherit the kingdom.

His heart was torn with envy. As they got nearer to the kingdom, the older prince determined to kill his brother and steal the potion. He would tell his father that his brother had died bravely but that he was the one who had successfully completed the quest. He would be named the future king. As they drew close to home, the older prince looked for an opportunity to murder his brother and take the magic phial.

One day, as they rested near a well, the older prince saw that his chance had come. He told his brother that he could hear a raven calling from deep in the well. His brother said he could hear nothing. "Come closer to the well," said the older prince. The younger prince approached but could still hear nothing. "I fear it is our friend the white raven," said the older prince. At this, the younger prince ran to the well and leaned over to try to see the bird. As he did so, his brother pushed him as hard as

he could and the poor prince tumbled in. Without looking back, the older prince took the potion from his brother's pack, jumped on his horse, and rode towards the kingdom.

When he reached the castle, the first thing his father asked was, "Where is your brother? Why isn't he here? What happened to him?"

"Alas, father," said the prince, "we came to a crossing and my brother took the way of no return. After we parted, I saw him no more. But despite the many hardships that lay before me, I succeeded in obtaining the potion of truth."

On hearing this news, the king cried with joy that the spell that hung over the kingdom could now be broken. But he also shed many tears over the loss of his younger son, and cherished the secret hope that he might still be alive.

And indeed he was. The well into which he had been pushed was dry, and filled with soft leaves that broke his fall. For many hours the younger prince called for help, hoping that a passing traveler might hear him. After some time, a traveler did stop by, hoping to water his horse. When he heard the desperate cries coming from deep in the well, he lowered a rope, and helped the prince out. Thanking his rescuer from the bottom of his heart, the younger prince went on his way to the kingdom.

When he arrived at his father's castle, there was great joy throughout the land. But the king turned red with anger when the prince told his father how his older brother had robbed him of the potion and tried to kill him. "How could he do such a vile thing to his brother?" cried the king. "He will die for this."

But the young prince pleaded with his father to spare his brother's life and eventually softened the old man's heart.



Instead, the older prince was banished from the kingdom. Where he went, nobody knew-and nobody ever cared.

The king told the prince what the wise woman had decreed should be done with the potion of truth. "Climb to the top of the mountain behind the castle. When you reach the summit, open the phial and cast the potion of truth into the wind. It will be blown throughout the kingdom and the spell of the wicked goblin will be broken."

To his great surprise, when the prince reached the summit of the mountain, he saw the white raven soaring high above him. As the prince opened the phial, the bird swooped down from the sky, snatched it from the prince's hand, and rose high on the wind, scattering the precious potion as it flew. Then the bird dropped to earth at the feet of the prince and before his eyes transformed into a beautiful princess-the loveliest woman the prince had ever seen.

As the drops of potion were spread through the sky, it was as if a dark cloud had lifted from the land. All over the kingdom people suddenly felt transformed. They were no longer strangers to themselves. And the king realized that he no longer needed the magic mirror to know how to rule wisely and well.

Princess White Raven told the prince that when the potion of truth had lifted the curse that was on the kingdom, it had also broken the spell that the wicked goblin had put on her and enabled her to return to her true form. The prince, having proven himself to the White Raven by lifting the curse, had won her heart. In due course, they were married, eventually ruling the kingdom with clear-sightedness and compassion.



somewhere to sleep. Whenever you see a man or woman giving alms to a beggar, give that person five times what they gave and tell them they have the blessing of their king. And if you come upon a poor creature who looks neither man nor beast and nothing so much as a monster, give it food and shelter because you will find it has a good heart.”

The people were full of wonder. How their king had changed! Now he no longer scowled, raged or threatened. Now he smiled and asked his courtiers for advice and listened to what they said. Now he greeted his subjects when he passed them in the palace or rode through the streets. He stopped to admire and praise their work, their homes, their vegetable gardens, and their orchards. “Why, we thought he was a proud and heartless monster,” the people said to each other. “But he has shown us that he has a warm and caring heart.”

One day, seeing that matters of state were now in order, the king called for the royal carriage with its eight white horses to be brought to him and told his coachmen to drive to the old man’s cottage. The old man began to tremble with fear when he saw his oppressor’s carriage at his door and with great trepidation invited the king to enter. Imagine his bewilderment when the king greeted him gently, asked after his health and for his permission to sit down, and praised the neatness and comfort of his home. The old man could barely stammer his gratitude for the king’s changed nature, then asked what he could do for the king. To his amazement, the king asked to meet his three daughters. “I know that they are very beautiful,” he said, “and I would like to ask one of your daughters to be my queen.” The old man went swiftly to fetch them.

When the two oldest daughters heard who their visitor was and why he had come they pulled on their finest dresses and rushed to greet him. They elbowed and pinched and stamped on each others’ feet in an effort to be the first to offer the king wine and delicious things to eat. The king thanked them politely but barely noticed their smiles and simpering and attempts to flatter. He was looking for the youngest daughter but she remained in the kitchen, in her shabbiest dress, longing for the Bear-King.

Finally, the king grew impatient and said, “Old man, where is your youngest daughter?” “Oh, sire,” said the oldest sister, “you have no need to meet her. She does nothing but toil and mope and weep by the kitchen fire.” “Worse,” said the second sister, “she toils and mopes and weeps for a hideous monster that she loves.” But the king would not be refused and commanded the old man to fetch his youngest daughter and bring her to him.

When she entered the room and saw the king, the youngest daughter curtsied deeply, not daring to look at him. She trembled because of her old dress and the smuts on her face then trembled even more as the king reached out and took one of her careworn hands. Into her palm he dropped a golden ring, burnished bright with a sparkling jewel. It was the exact same ring that she wore on her finger and that the Bear-King had given her before he left! How had it come into the possession of the king? Torn between hope and fear, she gazed into the king’s face.

“Yes,” said the king, “I am the wretched monster that you invited in. A curse was put upon me because of my arrogance and cruelty and I roamed my kingdom as an outcast for a long



while. But my curse became a blessing because I learned the value of humility, modesty and a good heart. And when I had learned that lesson, I regained my human form and became a king once more.”

With this, the king took the youngest daughter in his arms. When her sisters realized that the king they had just been flattering was the beast-like monster they had ridiculed, they ran out of the house in shame.

Who can doubt what happened next? The king married his queen; happiness, prosperity and laughter spread throughout the land; and the people, like the king and queen, lived happily ever after.