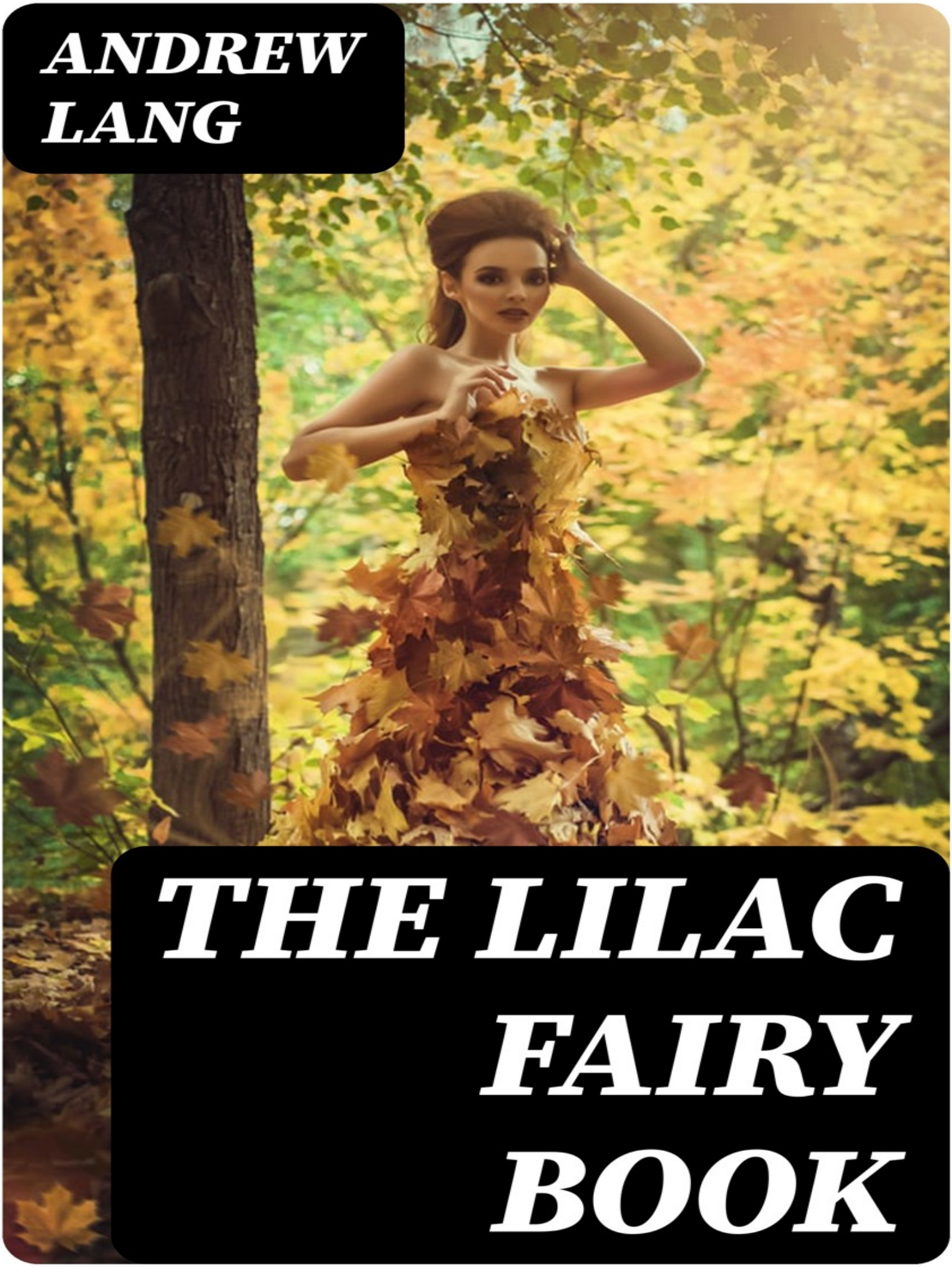
ANDREW LANG



THE LILAC FAIRY BOOK

Andrew Lang

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EAN 8596547374862

DigiCat, 2022
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Preface

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‘What cases are you engaged in at present?’ ‘Are you stopping many teeth just now?’ ‘What people have you converted lately?’ Do ladies put these questions to the men—lawyers, dentists, clergymen, and so forth—who happen to sit next them at dinner parties?

I do not know whether ladies thus indicate their interest in the occupations of their casual neighbours at the hospitable board. But if they do not know me, or do not know me well, they generally ask ‘Are you writing anything now?’ (as if they should ask a painter ‘Are you painting anything now?’ or a lawyer ‘Have you any cases at present?’). Sometimes they are more definite and inquire ‘What are you writing now?’ as if I must be writing something—which, indeed, is the case, though I dislike being reminded of it. It is an awkward question, because the fair being does not care a bawbee what I am writing; nor would she be much enlightened if I replied ‘Madam, I am engaged on a treatise intended to prove that Normal is prior to Conceptional Totemism’—though that answer would be as true in fact as obscure in significance. The best plan seems to be to answer that I have entirely abandoned mere literature, and am contemplating a book on ‘The Causes of Early Blight in the Potato,’ a melancholy circumstance which threatens to deprive us of our chief esculent root. The inquirer would never be undeceived. One nymph who, like the rest, could not keep off the horrid topic of my occupation, said ‘You never write anything but fairy books,

do you?’ A French gentleman, too, an educationist and expert in portraits of Queen Mary, once sent me a newspaper article in which he had written that I was exclusively devoted to the composition of fairy books, and nothing else. He then came to England, visited me, and found that I knew rather more about portraits of Queen Mary than he did.

In truth I never did write any fairy books in my life, except ‘Prince Prigio,’ ‘Prince Ricardo,’ and ‘Tales from a Fairy Court’—that of the aforesaid Prigio. I take this opportunity of recommending these fairy books—poor things, but my own—to parents and guardians who may never have heard of them. They are rich in romantic adventure, and the Princes always marry the right Princesses and live happy ever afterwards; while the wicked witches, stepmothers, tutors and governesses are never cruelly punished, but retire to the country on ample pensions. I hate cruelty: I never put a wicked stepmother in a barrel and send her tobogganing down a hill. It is true that Prince Ricardo did kill the Yellow Dwarf; but that was in fair fight, sword in hand, and the dwarf, peace to his ashes! died in harness.

The object of these confessions is not only that of advertising my own fairy books (which are not ‘out of print’; if your bookseller says so, the truth is not in him), but of giving credit where credit is due. The fairy books have been almost wholly the work of Mrs. Lang, who has translated and adapted them from the French, German, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, and other languages.

My part has been that of Adam, according to Mark Twain, in the Garden of Eden. Eve worked, Adam superintended. I also superintend. I find out where the stories are, and advise, and, in short, superintend. I do not write the stories out of my own head. The reputation of having written all the fairy books (an European reputation in nurseries and the United States of America) is ‘the burden of an honour unto which I was not born.’ It weighs upon and is killing me, as the general fash of being the wife of the Lord of Burleigh, Burleigh House by Stamford Town, was too much for the village maiden espoused by that peer.

Nobody really wrote most of the stories. People told them in all parts of the world long before Egyptian hieroglyphics or Cretan signs or Cyprian syllabaries, or alphabets were invented. They are older than reading and writing, and arose like wild flowers before men had any education to quarrel over. The grannies told them to the grandchildren, and when the grandchildren became grannies they repeated the same old tales to the new generation. Homer knew the stories and made up the ‘Odyssey’ out of half a dozen of them. All the history of Greece till about 800 B.C. is a string of the fairy tales, all about Theseus and Heracles and Oedipus and Minos and Perseus is a Cabinet des Fes, a collection of fairy tales. Shakespeare took them and put bits of them into ‘King Lear’ and other plays; he could not have made them up himself, great as he was. Let ladies and gentlemen think of this when they sit down to write fairy tales, and have them nicely typed, and send them to Messrs. Longman & Co. to be published. They think that to write a new fairy tale is easy work. They are mistaken: the

thing is impossible. Nobody can write a new fairy tale; you can only mix up and dress up the old, old stories, and put the characters into new dresses, as Miss Thackeray did so well in ‘Five Old Friends.’ If any big girl of fourteen reads this preface, let her insist on being presented with ‘Five Old Friends.’

But the three hundred and sixty-five authors who try to write new fairy tales are very tiresome. They always begin with a little boy or girl who goes out and meets the fairies of polyanthuses and gardenias and apple blossoms: ‘Flowers and fruits, and other winged things.’ These fairies try to be funny, and fail; or they try to preach, and succeed. Real fairies never preach or talk slang. At the end, the little boy or girl wakes up and finds that he has been dreaming.

Such are the new fairy stories. May we be preserved from all the sort of them!

Our stories are almost all old, some from Ireland, before that island was as celebrated for her wrongs as for her verdure; some from Asia, made, I dare say, before the Aryan invasion; some from Moydart, Knoydart, Morar and Ardnamurchan, where the sea streams run like great clear rivers and the saw-edged hills are blue, and men remember Prince Charlie. Some are from Portugal, where the golden fruits grow in the Garden of the Hesperides; and some are from wild Wales, and were told at Arthur’s Court; and others come from the firesides of the kinsmen of the Welsh, the Bretons. There are also modern tales by a learned Scandinavian named Topelius.

All the stories were translated or adapted by Mrs. Lang, except ‘The Jogi’s Punishment’ and ‘Moti,’ done by Major

Campbell out of the Pushtoo language; ‘How Brave Walter hunted Wolves,’ which, with ‘Little Lasse’ and ‘The Raspberry Worm,’ was done from Topelius by Miss Harding; and ‘The Sea King’s Gift,’ by Miss Christie, from the same author.

It has been suggested to the Editor that children and parents and guardians would like ‘The Grey True Ghost-Story Book.’ He knows that the children would like it well, and he would gladly give it to them; but about the taste of fond anxious mothers and kind aunts he is not quite so certain. Before he was twelve the Editor knew true ghost stories enough to fill a volume. They were a pure joy till bedtime, but then, and later, were not wholly a source of unmixed pleasure. At that time the Editor was not afraid of the dark, for he thought, ‘If a ghost is here, we can’t see him.’ But when older and better informed persons said that ghosts brought their own light with them (which is too true), then one’s emotions were such as parents do not desire the young to endure. For this reason ‘The Grey True Ghost-Story Book’ is never likely to be illustrated by Mr. Ford.

The Shifty Lad

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In the land of Erin there dwelt long ago a widow who had an only son. He was a clever boy, so she saved up enough money to send him to school, and, as soon as he was old enough, to apprentice him to any trade that he would choose. But when the time came, he said he would not be bound to any trade, and that he meant to be a thief.

Now his mother was very sorrowful when she heard of this, but she knew quite well that if she tried to stop his having his own way he would only grow more determined to get it. So all the answer she made was that the end of thieves was hanging at the bridge of Dublin, and then she left him alone, hoping that when he was older he might become more sensible.

One day she was going to church to hear a sermon from a great preacher, and she begged the Shifty Lad, as the neighbours called him from the tricks he played, to come with her. But he only laughed and declared that he did not like sermons, adding:

‘However, I will promise you this, that the first trade you hear named after you come out from church shall be my trade for the rest of my life.’

These words gave a little comfort to the poor woman, and her heart was lighter than before as she bade him farewell.

When the Shifty Lad thought that the hour had nearly come for the sermon to be over, he hid himself in some bushes in a little path that led straight to his mother’s house, and, as she passed along, thinking of all the good things she had heard, a voice shouted close to her ear ‘Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!’ The suddenness of it made

her jump. The naughty boy had managed to change his voice, so that she did not know it for his, and he had concealed himself so well that, though she peered about all round her, she could see no one. As soon as she had turned the corner the Shifty Lad came out, and by running very fast through the wood he contrived to reach home before his mother, who found him stretched out comfortably before the fire.

‘Well, have you got any news to tell me?’ asked he.

‘No, nothing; for I left the church at once, and did not stop to speak to anyone.’

‘Oh, then no one has mentioned a trade to you?’ he said in tones of disappointment.

‘Ye—es,’ she replied slowly. ‘At least, as I walked down the path a voice cried out “Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!” but that was all.’

‘And quite enough too,’ answered the boy. ‘What did I tell you? That is going to be my trade.’

‘Then your end will be hanging at the bridge of Dublin,’ said she. But there was no sleep for her that night, for she lay in the dark thinking about her son.

‘If he is to be a thief at all, he had better be a good one. And who is there that can teach him?’ the mother asked herself. But an idea came to her, and she arose early, before the sun was up, and set off for the home of the Black Rogue, or Gallows Bird, who was such a wonderful thief that, though all had been robbed by him, no one could catch him.

‘Good-morning to you,’ said the woman as she reached the place where the Black Gallows Bird lived when he was

not away on his business. ‘My son has a fancy to learn your trade. Will you be kind enough to teach him?’

‘If he is clever, I don’t mind trying,’ answered the Black Gallows Bird; ‘and, of course, if ANY one can turn him into a first-rate thief, it is I. But if he is stupid, it is of no use at all; I can’t bear stupid people.’

‘No, he isn’t stupid,’ said the woman with a sigh. ‘So to-night, after dark, I will send him to you.’

The Shifty Lad jumped for joy when his mother told him where she had been.

‘I will become the best thief in all Erin!’ he cried, and paid no heed when his mother shook her head and murmured something about ‘the bridge of Dublin.’

Every evening after dark the Shifty Lad went to the home of the Black Gallows Bird, and many were the new tricks he learned. By-and-by he was allowed to go out with the Bird and watch him at work, and at last there came a day when his master though that he had grown clever enough to help in a big robbery.

‘There is a rich farmer up there on the hill, who has just sold all his fat cattle for much money and has bought some lean ones which will cost him little. Now it happens that, while he has received the money for the fat cattle, he has not yet paid the price of the thin ones, which he has in the cowhouse. To-morrow he will go to the market with the money in his hand, so to-night we must get at the chest. When all is quiet we will hide in the loft.’

There was no moon, and it was the night of Hallowe’en, and everyone was burning nuts and catching apples in a tub of water with their hands tied, and playing all sorts of other

games, till the Shifty Lad grew quite tired of waiting for them to get to bed. The Black Gallows Bird, who was more accustomed to the business, tucked himself up on the hay and went to sleep, telling the boy to wake him when the merry-makers had departed. But the Shifty Lad, who could keep still no longer, crept down to the cowshed and loosened the heads of the cattle which were tied, and they began to kick each other and bellow, and made such a noise that the company in the farmhouse ran out to tie them up again. Then the Shifty Lad entered the room and picked up a big handful of nuts, and returned to the loft, where the Black Rogue was still sleeping. At first the Shifty Lad shut his eyes too, but very soon he sat up, and taking a big needle and thread from his pocket, he sewed the hem of the Black Gallows Bird's coat to a heavy piece of bullock's hide that was hanging at his back.

By this time the cattle were all tied up again, but as the people could not find their nuts they sat round the fire and began to tell stories.

'I will crack a nut,' said the Shifty Lad.

'You shall not,' cried the Black Gallows Bird; 'they will hear you.'

'I don't care,' answered the Shifty Lad. 'I never spend Hallowe'en yet without cracking a nut'; and he cracked one.

'Some one is cracking nuts up there,' said one of the merry-makers in the farmhouse. 'Come quickly, and we will see who it is.'

He spoke loudly, and the Black Gallows Bird heard, and ran out of the loft, dragging the big leather hide after him which the Shifty Lad had sewed to his coat.

‘He is stealing my hide!’ shouted the farmer, and they all darted after him; but he was too swift for them, and at last he managed to tear the hide from his coat, and then he flew like a hare till he reached his old hiding-place. But all this took a long time, and meanwhile the Shifty Lad got down from the loft, and searched the house till he found the chest with the gold and silver in it, concealed behind a load of straw and covered with loaves of bread and a great cheese. The Shifty Lad slung the money bags round his shoulders and took the bread and the cheese under his arm, then set out quietly for the Black Rogue’s house.

‘Here you are at last, you villain!’ cried his master in great wrath. ‘But I will be revenged on you.’

‘It is all right,’ replied the Shifty Lad calmly. ‘I have brought what you wanted’; and he laid the things he was carrying down on the ground.

‘Ah! you are the better thief,’ said the Black Rogue’s wife; and the Black Rogue added:

‘Yes, it is you who are the clever boy’; and they divided the spoil and the Black Gallows Bird had one half and the Shifty Lad the other half.

A few weeks after that the Black Gallows Bird had news of a wedding that was to be held near the town; and the bridegroom had many friends and everybody sent him a present. Now a rich farmer who lived up near the moor thought that nothing was so useful to a young couple when they first began to keep house as a fine fat sheep, so he bade his shepherd go off to the mountain where the flock were feeding, and bring him back the best he could find. And the shepherd chose out the largest and fattest of the

sheep and the one with the whitest fleece; then he tied its feet together and put it across his shoulder, for he had a long way to go.

That day, the Shifty Lad happened to be wandering over the moor, when he saw the man with the sheep on his shoulder walking along the road which led past the Black Rogue's house. The sheep was heavy and the man was in no hurry, so he came slowly and the boy knew that he himself could easily get back to his master before the shepherd was even in sight.

'I will wager,' he cried, as he pushed quickly through the bushes which hid the cabin—'I will wager that I will steal the sheep from the man that is coming before he passes here.'

'Will you indeed?' said the Gallows Bird. 'I will wager you a hundred silver pieces that you can do nothing of the sort.'

'Well, I will try it, anyway,' replied the boy, and disappeared in the bushes. He ran fast till he entered a wood through which the shepherd must go, and then he stopped, and taking off one of his shoes smeared it with mud and set it in the path. When this was done he slipped behind a rock and waited.

Very soon the man came up, and seeing the shoe lying there, he stooped and looked at it.

'It is a good shoe,' he said to himself, 'but very dirty. Still, if I had the fellow, I would be at the trouble of cleaning it'; so he threw the shoe down again and went on.

The Shifty Lad smiled as he heard him, and, picking up the shoe, he crept round by a short way and laid the other shoe on the path. A few minutes after the shepherd arrived, and beheld the second shoe lying on the path.

‘Why, that is the fellow of the dirty shoe!’ he exclaimed when he saw it. ‘I will go back and pick up the other one, and then I shall have a pair of good shoes,’ and he put the sheep on the grass and returned to fetch the shoe. Then the Shifty Lad put on his shoes, and, picking up the sheep, carried it home. And the Black Rogue paid him the hundred marks of his wager.

When the shepherd reached the farmhouse that night he told his tale to his master, who scolded him for being stupid and careless, and bade him go the next day to the mountain and fetch him a kid, and he would send that as a wedding gift. But the Shifty Lad was on the look-out, and hid himself in the wood, and the moment the man drew near with the kid on his shoulders began to bleat like a sheep, and no one, not even the sheep’s own mother, could have told the difference.

‘Why, it must have got its feet loose, and have strayed after all,’ thought the man; and he put the kid on the grass and hurried off in the direction of the bleating. Then the boy ran back and picked up the kid, and took it to the Black Gallows Bird.

The shepherd could hardly believe his eyes when he returned from seeking the sheep and found that the kid had vanished. He was afraid to go home and tell the same tale that he had told yesterday; so he searched the wood through and through till night was nearly come. Then he felt that there was no help for it, and he must go home and confess to his master.

Of course, the farmer was very angry at this second misfortune; but this time he told him to drive one of the big

bulls from the mountain, and warned him that if he lost THAT he would lose his place also. Again the Shifty Lad, who was on the watch, perceived him pass by, and when he saw the man returning with the great bull he cried to the Black Rogue:

‘Be quick and come into the wood, and we will try to get the bull also.’

‘But how can we do that?’ asked the Black Rogue.

‘Oh, quite easily! You hide yourself out there and baa like a sheep, and I will go in the other direction and bleat like a kid. It will be all right, I assure you.’

The shepherd was walking slowly, driving the bull before him, when he suddenly heard a loud baa amongst the bushes far away on one side of the path, and a feeble bleat answering it from the other side.

‘Why, it must be the sheep and the kid that I lost,’ said he. ‘Yes, surely it must’; and tying the bull hastily to a tree, he went off after the sheep and the kid, and searched the wood till he was tired. Of course by the time he came back the two thieves had driven the bull home and killed him for meat, so the man was obliged to go to his master and confess that he had been tricked again.

After this the Black Rogue and the Shifty Lad grew bolder and bolder, and stole great quantities of cattle and sold them and grew quite rich. One day they were returning from the market with a large sum of money in their pockets when they passed a gallows erected on the top of a hill.

‘Let us stop and look at that gallows,’ exclaimed the Shifty Lad. ‘I have never seen one so close before. Yet some say that it is the end of all thieves.’

There was no one in sight, and they carefully examined every part of it.

‘I wonder how it feels to be hanged,’ said the Shifty Lad. ‘I should like to know, in case they ever catch me. I’ll try first, and then you can do so.’

As he spoke he fastened the loose cord about his neck, and when it was quite secure he told the Black Rogue to take the other end of the rope and draw him up from the ground.

‘When I am tired of it I will shake my legs, and then you must let me down,’ said he.

The Black Rogue drew up the rope, but in half a minute the Shifty Lad’s legs began to shake, and he quickly let it down again.

‘You can’t imagine what a funny feeling hanging gives you,’ murmured the Shifty Lad, who looked rather purple in the face and spoke in an odd voice. ‘I don’t think you have every tried it, or you wouldn’t have let me go up first. Why, it is the pleasantest thing I have ever done. I was shaking my legs from sheer delight, and if you had been there you would have shaken your legs too.’

‘Well, let me try, if it is so nice,’ answered the Black Rogue. ‘But be sure you tie the knot securely, for I don’t want to fall down and break my neck.’

‘Oh, I will see to that!’ replied the Shifty Lad. ‘When you are tired, just whistle, and I’ll let you down.’

So the Black Rogue was drawn up, and as soon as he was as high as the rope would allow him to go the Shifty Lad called to him:

‘Don’t forest to whistle when you want to come down; but if you are enjoying yourself as I did, shake your legs.’

And in a moment the Black Rogue’s legs began to shake and to kick, and the Shifty Lad stood below, watching him and laughing heartily.

‘Oh, how funny you are! If you could only see yourself! Oh, you ARE funny! But when you have had enough, whistle and you shall be let down’; and he rocked again with laughter.

But no whistle came, and soon the legs ceased to shake and to kick, for the Black Gallows Bird was dead, as the Shifty Lad intended he should be.

Then he went home to the Black Rogue’s wife, and told her that her husband was dead, and that he was ready to marry her if she liked. But the woman had been fond of the Black Rogue, thief though he was, and she shrank from the Shifty Lad in horror, and set the people after him, and he had to fly to another part of the country where none knew of his doings.

Perhaps if the Shifty Lad’s mother knew anything of this, she may have thought that by this time her son might be tired of stealing, and ready to try some honest trade. But in reality he loved the tricks and danger, and life would have seemed very dull without them. So he went on just as before, and made friends whom he taught to be as wicked as himself, till they took to robbing the king’s storehouses, and by the advice of the Wise Man the king sent out soldiers to catch the band of thieves.

For a long while they tried in vain to lay hands on them. The Shifty Lad was too clever for them all, and if they laid

traps he laid better ones. At last one night he stole upon some soldiers while they were asleep in a barn and killed them, and persuaded the villagers that if THEY did not kill the other soldiers before morning they would certainly be killed themselves. Thus it happened that when the sun rose not a single soldier was alive in the village.

Of course this news soon reached the king's ears, and he was very angry, and summoned the Wise Man to take counsel with him. And this was the counsel of the Wise Man—that he should invite all the people in the countryside to a ball, and among them the bold and impudent thief would be sure to come, and would be sure to ask the king's daughter to dance with him.

'Your counsel is good,' said the king, who made his feast and prepared for his ball; and all the people of the countryside were present, and the Shifty Lad came with them.

When everyone had eaten and drunk as much as they wanted they went into the ballroom. There was a great throng, and while they were pressing through the doorway the Wise Man, who had a bottle of black ointment hidden in his robes, placed a tiny dot on the cheek of the Shifty Lad near his ear. The Shifty Lad felt nothing, but as he approached the king's daughter to ask her to be his partner he caught sight of the black dot in a silver mirror. Instantly he guessed who had put it there and why, but he said nothing, and danced so beautifully that the princess was quite delighted with him. At the end of the dance he bowed low to his partner and left her, to mingle with the crowd that was filling the doorway. As he passed the Wise Man he

contrived not only to steal the bottle but to place two black dots on his face, and one on the faces of twenty other men. Then he slipped the bottle back in the Wise Man’s robe.

By-and-by he went up to the king’s daughter again, and begged for the honour of another dance. She consented, and while he was stooping to tie the ribbons on his shoe she took out from her pocket another bottle, which the Wizard had given her, and put a black dot on his cheek. But she was not as skilful as the Wise Man, and the Shifty Lad felt the touch of her fingers; so as soon as the dance was over he contrived to place a second black dot on the faces of the twenty men and two more on the Wizard, after which he slipped the bottle into her pocket.

At length the ball came to an end, and then the king ordered all the doors to be shut, and search made for a man with two black dots on his cheek. The chamberlain went among the guests, and soon found such a man, but just as he was going to arrest him and bring him before the king his eye fell on another with the same mark, and another, and another, till he had counted twenty—besides the Wise Man—on whose face were found spots.

Not knowing what to do, the chamberlain hurried back with his tale to the king, who immediately sent for the Wise Man, and then for his daughter.

‘The thief must have stolen your bottle,’ said the king to the Wizard.

‘No, my lord, it is here,’ answered the Wise Man, holding it out.

‘Then he must have got yours,’ he cried, turning to his daughter.

‘Indeed, father, it is safe in my pocket,’ replied she, taking it out as she spoke; and they all three looked at each other and remained silent.

‘Well,’ said the king at last, ‘the man who has done this is cleverer than most men, and if he will make himself known to me he shall marry the princess and govern half my kingdom while I am alive, and the whole of it when I am dead. Go and announce this in the ballroom,’ he added to an attendant, ‘and bring the fellow hither.’

So the attendant went into the ballroom and did as the king had bidden him, when, to his surprise, not one man, but twenty, stepped forward, all with black dots on their faces.

‘I am the person you want,’ they all exclaimed at once, and the attendant, as much bewildered as the chamberlain had been, desired them to follow him into the king’s presence.

But the question was too difficult for the king to decide, so he called together his council. For hours they talked, but to no purpose, and in the end they hit upon a plan which they might just as well have thought of at the beginning.

And this was the plan. A child was to be brought to the palace, and next the king’s daughter would give her an apple. Then the child was to take the apple and be led into a room where the twenty men with the black dots were sitting in a ring. And to whomsoever the child gave the apple, that man should marry the king’s daughter.

‘Of course,’ said the king, ‘it may not be the right man, after all, but then again it MAY be. Anyhow, it is the best we can do.’

The princess herself led the child into the room where the twenty men were now seated. She stood in the centre of the ring for a moment, looking at one man after another, and then held out the apple to the Shifty Lad, who was twisting a shaving of wood round his finger, and had the mouthpiece of a bagpipe hanging from his neck.

‘You ought not to have anything which the others have not got,’ said the chamberlain, who had accompanied the princess; and he bade the child stand outside for a minute, while he took away the shaving and the mouthpiece, and made the Shifty Lad change his place. Then he called the child in, but the little girl knew him again, and went straight up to him with the apple.

‘This is the man whom the child has twice chosen,’ said the chamberlain, signing to the Shifty Lad to kneel before the king. ‘It was all quite fair; we tried it twice over.’ In this way the Shifty Lad won the king’s daughter, and they were married the next day.

A few days later the bride and bridegroom were taking a walk together, and the path led down to the river, and over the river was a bridge.

‘And what bridge may this be?’ asked the Shifty Lad; and the princess told him that this was the bridge of Dublin.

‘Is it indeed?’ cried he. ‘Well, now, many is the time that my mother has said, when I played her a trick, that my end would be that I should hang on the bridge of Dublin.’

‘Oh, if you want to fulfil her prophecies,’ laughed the princess, ‘you have only to let me tie my handkerchief round your ankle, and I will hold you as you hang over the wall of the bridge.’

‘That would be fine fun,’ said he; ‘but you are not strong enough to hold me up.’

‘Oh, yes, I am,’ said the princess; ‘just try.’ So at last he let her bind the handkerchief round his ankle and hang him over the wall, and they both laughed and jested at the strength of the princess.

‘Now pull me up again,’ called he; but as he spoke a great cry arose that the palace was burning. The princess turned round with a start, and let go her handkerchief, and the Shifty Lad fell, and struck his head on a stone, and died in an instant.

So his mother’s prophecy had come true, after all.

West Highland Tales.

The False Prince and the True

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The king had just awakened from his midday sleep, for it was summer, and everyone rose early and rested from twelve to three, as they do in hot countries. He had dressed himself in cool white clothes, and was passing through the hall on his way to the council chamber, when a number of young nobles suddenly appeared before him, and one amongst them stepped forward and spoke.

‘Sire, this morning we were all playing tennis in the court, the prince and this gentleman with the rest, when there broke out some dispute about the game. The prince lost his

temper, and said many insulting things to the other, who was playing against him, till at length the gentleman whom you see there struck him violently in the face, so that the blood ran from his mouth and nose. We were all so horrified at the sight, that we should most likely have killed the man then and there, for daring to lay hands on the prince, had not his grandfather the duke stepped between and commanded us to lay the affair before you.'

The king had listened attentively to the story, and when it was ended he said:

'I suppose the prince had no arms with him, or else he would have used them?'

'Yes, sire, he had arms; he always carries a dagger in his belt. But when he saw the blood pouring from his face, he went to a corner of the court and began to cry, which was the strangest thing of all.'

On hearing this the king walked to the window and stood for a few minutes with his back to the room, where the company of young men remained silent. Then he came back, his face white and stern.

'I tell you,' he said, 'and it is the solemn truth, that I would rather you had told me that the prince was dead, though he is my only son, than know that he would suffer such an injury without attempting to avenge it. As for the gentleman who struck him, he will be brought before my judges, and will plead his own cause, but I hardly think he can escape death, after having assaulted the heir to the crown.'

The young man raised his head as if to reply, but the king would not listen, and commanded his guards to put him

under arrest, adding, however, that if the prisoner wished to visit any part of the city, he was at liberty to do so properly guarded, and in fifteen days he would be brought to trial before the highest judges in the land.

The young man left the king’s presence, surrounded by soldiers, and accompanied by many of his friends, for he was a great favourite. By their advice he spent the fourteen days that remained to him going about to seek counsel from wise men of all sorts, as to how he might escape death, but no one could help him, for none could find any excuse for the blow he had given to the prince.

The fourteenth night had come, and in despair the prisoner went out to take his last walk through the city. He wandered on hardly knowing where he went, and his face was so white and desperate that none of his companions dared speak to him. The sad little procession had passed some hours in this manner, when, near the gate of a monastery, an old woman appeared round a corner, and suddenly stood before the young man. She was bent almost double, and was so wizened and wrinkled that she looked at least ninety; only her eyes were bright and quick as those of a girl.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘I know all that has happened to you, and how you are seeking if in any wise you can save your life. But there is none that can answer that question save only I myself, if you will promise to do all I ask.’

At her words the prisoner felt as if a load had all at once been rolled off him.

‘Oh, save me, and I will do anything!’ he cried. ‘It is so hard to leave the world and go out into the darkness.’

‘You will not need to do that,’ answered the old woman, ‘you have only got to marry me, and you will soon be free.’

‘Marry you?’ exclaimed he, ‘but—but—I am not yet twenty, and you —why, you must be a hundred at least! Oh, no, it is quite impossible.’

He spoke without thinking, but the flash of anger which darted from her eyes made him feel uncomfortable. However, all she said was:

‘As you like; since you reject me, let the crows have you,’ and hurried away down the street.

Left to himself, the full horror of his coming death rushed upon the young man, and he understood that he had thrown away his sole chance of life. Well, if he must, he must, he said to himself, and began to run as fast as he could after the old crone, who by this time could scarcely be seen, even in the moonlight. Who would have believed a woman past ninety could walk with such speed? It seemed more like flying! But at length, breathless and exhausted, he reached her side, and gasped out:

‘Madam, pardon me for my hasty words just now; I was wrong, and will thankfully accept the offer you made me.’

‘Ah, I thought you would come to your senses,’ answered she, in rather an odd voice. ‘We have no time to lose—follow me at once,’ and they went on silently and swiftly till they stopped at the door of a small house in which the priest lived. Before him the old woman bade the prisoner swear that she should be his wife, and this he did in the presence of witnesses. Then, begging the priest and the guards to leave them alone for a little, she told the young man what

he was to do, when the next morning he was brought before the king and the judges.

The hall was full to overflowing when the prisoner entered it, and all marvelled at the brightness of his face. The king inquired if he had any excuse to plead for the high treason he had committed by striking the heir to the throne, and, if so, to be quick in setting it forth. With a low bow the youth made answer in a clear voice:

‘O my lord and gracious king, and you, nobles and wise men of the land, I leave my cause without fear in your hands, knowing that you will listen and judge rightly, and that you will suffer me to speak to the end, before you give judgment.

‘For four years, you, O king, had been married to the queen and yet had no children, which grieved you greatly. The queen saw this, and likewise that your love was going from her, and thought night and day of some plan that might put an end to this evil. At length, when you were away fighting in distant countries, she decided what she would do, and adopted in secret the baby of a poor quarryman, sending a messenger to tell you that you had a son. No one suspected the truth except a priest to whom the queen confessed the truth, and in a few weeks she fell ill and died, leaving the baby to be brought up as became a prince. And now, if your highness will permit me, I will speak of myself.’

‘What you have already told me,’ answered the king, ‘is so strange that I cannot imagine what more there is to tell, but go on with your story.’

‘One day, shortly after the death of the queen,’ continued the young man, ‘your highness was hunting, and outstripped all your attendants while chasing the deer. You were in a part of the country which you did not know, so seeing an orchard all pink and white with apple-blossoms, and a girl tossing a ball in one corner, you went up to her to ask your way. But when she turned to answer you, you were so struck with her beauty that all else fled from your mind. Again and again you rode back to see her, and at length persuaded her to marry you. She only thought you a poor knight, and agreed that as you wished it, the marriage should be kept secret.

‘After the ceremony you gave her three rings and a charm with a cross on it, and then put her in a cottage in the forest, thinking to hide the matter securely.

‘For some months you visited the cottage every week; but a rebellion broke out in a distant part of the kingdom, and called for your presence. When next you rode up to the cottage, it was empty, and none could inform you whither your bride had gone. That, sire, I can now tell you,’ and the young man paused and looked at the king, who coloured deeply. ‘She went back to her father the old duke, once your chamberlain, and the cross on her breast revealed at once who you were. Fierce was his anger when he heard his daughter’s tale, and he vowed that he would hide her safely from you, till the day when you would claim her publicly as your queen.

‘By and bye I was born, and was brought up by my grandfather in one of his great houses. Here are the rings

you gave to my mother, and here is the cross, and these will prove if I am your son or not.’

As he spoke the young man laid the jewels at the feet of the king, and the nobles and the judges pressed round to examine them. The king alone did not move from his seat, for he had forgotten the hall of justice and all about him, and saw only the apple-orchard, as it was twenty years ago, and the beautiful girl playing at ball. A sudden silence round him made him look up, and he found the eyes of the assembly fixed on him.

‘It is true; it is he who is my son, and not the other,’ he said with an effort, ‘and let every man present swear to acknowledge him as king, after my death.’

Therefore one by one they all knelt before him and took the oath, and a message was sent to the false prince, forbidding him ever again to appear at court, though a handsome pension was granted him.

At last the ceremony was over, and the king, signing to his newly found son to follow him, rose and went into another room.

‘Tell me how you knew all that,’ he said, throwing himself into a carved chair filled with crimson cushions, and the prince told of his meeting with the old woman who had brought him the jewels from his mother, and how he had sworn before a priest to marry her, though he did not want to do it, on account of the difference in their ages, and besides, he would rather receive a bride chosen by the king himself. But the king frowned, and answered sharply:

‘You swore to marry her if she saved your life, and, come what may, you must fulfil your promise.’ Then, striking a