Andrew Lang

# The White Snake

Not very long ago there lived a King, the fame of whose wisdom was spread far and wide. Nothing appeared to be unknown to him, and it really seemed as if tidings of the most secret matters must be borne to him by the winds. He had one very peculiar habit. Every day, after the dinner table had been cleared, and everyone had retired, a confidential servant brought in a dish. It was covered, and neither the servant nor anyone else had any idea what was on it, for the King never removed the cover or partook of the dish, till he was quite alone.This went on for some time till, one day, the servant who removed the dish was so overcome with curiosity, that he could not resist carrying it off to his own room. After carefully locking the door, he lifted the cover, and there he saw a white snake lying on the dish. On seeing it he could not restrain his desire to taste it, so he cut off a small piece and put it in his mouth.Hardly had it touched his tongue than he heard a strange sort of whispering of tiny voices outside his window. He stepped to the casement to listen, and found that the sound proceeded from the sparrows, who were talking together and telling each other all they had seen in the fields and woods. The piece of the white snake which he had eaten had enabled him to understand the language of animals.Now on this particular day, it so happened that the Queen lost her favourite ring, and suspicion fell on the confidential servant who had access to all parts of the palace. The King sent for him, and threatened him angrily, saying that if he had not found the thief by the next day, he should himself be taken up and tried.It was useless to assert his innocence; he was dismissed without ceremony. In his agitation and distress, he went down to the yard to think over what he could do in this trouble. Here were a number of ducks resting near a little stream, and pluming, themselves with their bills, whilst they kept up an animated conversation amongst themselves. The servant stood still listening to them. They were talking of where they had been waddling about all the morning, and of the good food they had found, but one of them remarked rather sadly, 'There's something lying very heavy on my stomach, for in my haste I've swallowed a ring, which was lying just under the Queen's window.'No sooner did the servant hear this than he seized the duck by the neck, carried it off to the kitchen, and said to the cook, 'Suppose you kill this duck; you see she's nice and fat.''Yes, indeed,' said the cook, weighing the duck in his hand, 'she certainly has spared no pains to stuff herself well, and must have been waiting for the spit for some time.' So he chopped off her head, and when she was opened there was the Queen's ring in her stomach.It was easy enough now for the servant to prove his innocence, and the King, feeling he had done him an injustice, and anxious to make some amends, desired him to ask any favour he chose, and promised to give him the highest post at Court he could wish for.The servant, however, declined everything, and only begged for a horse and some money to enable him to travel, as he was anxious to see something of the world.When his request was granted, he set off on his journey, and in the course of it he one day came to a large pond, on the edge of which he noticed three fishes which had got entangled in the reeds and were gasping for water. Though fish are generally supposed to be quite mute, he heard them grieving aloud at the prospect of dying in this wretched manner. Having a very kind heart he dismounted and soon set the prisoners free, and in the water once more. They flapped with joy, and stretching up their heads cried to him: 'We will remember, and reward you for saving us.'He rode further, and after a while he thought he heard a voice in the sand under his feet. He paused to listen, and heard the King of the Ants complaining: 'If only men with their awkward beasts would keep clear of us! That stupid horse is crushing my people mercilessly to death with his great hoofs.' The servant at once turned into a side path, and the Ant-King called after him, 'We'll remember and reward you.'The road next led through a wood, where he saw a father and a mother raven standing by their nest and throwing out their young: 'Away with you, you young rascals!' they cried, 'we can't feed you any longer. You are quite big enough to support yourselves now.' The poor little birds lay on the ground flapping and beating their wings, and shrieked, 'We poor helpless children, feed ourselves indeed! Why, we can't even fly yet; what can we do but die of hunger?' Then the kind youth dismounted, drew his sword, and killing his horse left it there as food for the young ravens. They hopped up, satisfied their hunger, and piped: 'We'll remember, and reward you!'He was now obliged to trust to his own legs, and after walking a long way he reached a big town. Here he found a great crowd and much commotion in the streets, and a herald rode about announcing, 'The King's daughter seeks a husband, but whoever would woo her must first execute a difficult task, and if he does not succeed he must be content to forfeit his life.' Many had risked their lives, but in vain. When the youth saw the King's daughter, he was so dazzled by her beauty, that he forgot all idea of danger, and went to the King to announce himself a suitor.On this he was led out to a large lake, and a gold ring was thrown into it before his eyes. The King desired him to dive after it, adding, 'If you return without it you will be thrown back into the lake time after time, till you are drowned in its depths.'Everyone felt sorry for the handsome young fellow and left him alone on the shore. There he stood thinking and wondering what he could do, when all of a sudden he saw three fishes swimming along, and recognised them as the very same whose lives he had saved. The middle fish held a mussel in its mouth, which it laid at the young man's feet, and when he picked it up and opened it, there was the golden ring inside.Full of delight he brought it to the King's daughter, expecting to receive his promised reward. The haughty Princess, however, on hearing that he was not her equal by birth despised him, and exacted the fulfilment of a second task.She went into the garden, and with her own hands she strewed ten sacks full of millet all over the grass. 'He must pick all that up to-morrow morning before sunrise,' she said; 'not a grain must be lost.'The youth sat down in the garden and wondered how it would be possible for him to accomplish such a task, but he could think of no expedient, and sat there sadly expecting to meet his death at daybreak.But when the first rays of the rising sun fell on the garden, he saw the ten sacks all completely filled, standing there in a row, and not a single grain missing. The Ant-King, with his thousands and thousands of followers, had come during the night, and the grateful creatures had industriously gathered all the millet together and put it in the sacks.The King's daughter came down to the garden herself, and saw to her amazement that her suitor had accomplished the task she had given him. But even now she could not bend her proud heart, and she said, 'Though he has executed these two tasks, yet he shall not be my husband till he brings me an apple from the tree of life.'The young man did not even know where the tree of life grew, but he set off, determined to walk as far as his legs would carry him, though he had no hope of ever finding it.After journeying through three different kingdoms he reached a wood one night, and lying down under a tree prepared to go to sleep there. Suddenly he heard a sound in the boughs, and a golden apple fell right into his hand. At the same moment three ravens flew down to him, perched on his knee and said, 'We are the three young ravens whom you saved from starvation. When we grew up and heard you were searching for the golden apple, we flew far away over the seas to the end of the world, where the tree of life grows, and fetched the golden apple for you.'Full of joy the young man started on his way back and brought the golden apple to the lovely Princess, whose objections were now entirely silenced. They divided the apple of life and ate it together, and her heart grew full of love for him, so they lived together to a great age in undisturbed happiness.

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