

The Headless Princess

By Unknown

In a certain country there lived a King; and this King had a daughter who was an enchantress. Near the royal palace there dwelt a priest, and the priest had a boy of ten years old, who went every day to an old woman to learn reading and writing. Now it happened one day that he came away from his lessons late in the evening, and as he passed by the palace he looked in at one of the windows. At that window the Princess happened to be sitting and dressing herself. She took off her head, lathered it with soap, washed it with clean water, combed its hair, plaited its long back braid, and then put it back again in its proper place. The boy was lost in wonder.

‘What a clever creature!’ thinks he. ‘A downright witch!’ And when he got home he began telling every one how he had seen the Princess without her head.

All of a sudden the King’s daughter fell grievously ill, and she sent for her father, and strictly enjoined him, saying—

‘If I die, make the priest’s son read the psalter over me three nights running.’

The Princess died; they placed her in a coffin, and carried it to church. Then the king summoned the priest, and said—

‘Have you got a son?’

‘I have, your majesty.’

‘Well then,’ said the King, ‘let him read the psalter over my daughter three nights running.’

The priest returned home, and told his son to get ready. In the morning the priest’s son went to his lessons, and sat over his book looking ever so gloomy.

‘What are you unhappy about?’ asked the old woman.

‘How can I help being unhappy, when I’m utterly done for?’

‘Why what’s the matter? Speak out plainly.’

‘Well then, granny, I’ve got to read psalms over the princess, and, do you know, she’s a witch

‘I knew that before you did! But don’t be frightened, there’s a knife for you. When you go into the church, trace a circle round you; then read away from your psalter and don’t look behind you. Whatever happens there, whatever horrors may appear, mind your own business and go on reading, reading. But if you look behind you, it will be all over with you!’

In the evening the boy went to the church, traced a circle round him with the knife, and betook himself to the psalter. Twelve o’clock struck. The lid of the coffin flew up; the Princess arose, leapt out, and cried—

‘Now I’ll teach you to go peeping through my windows, and telling people what you saw!’

She began rushing at the priest’s son, but she couldn’t anyhow break into the circle. Then she began to conjure up all sorts of horrors. But in spite of all that she did, he went on reading and reading, and never gave a look round. And at daybreak the Princess rushed at her coffin, and tumbled into it at full length, all of a heap.

The next night everything went on just the same. The priest's son wasn't a bit afraid, went on reading without a stop right up to daybreak, and in the morning went to the old woman. She asked him—

‘Well! have you seen horrors?’

‘Yes, granny!’

‘It will be still more horrible this time. Here's a hammer for you and four nails. Knock them into the four corners of the coffin, and when you begin reading the psalter, stick up the hammer in front of you.’

In the evening the priest's son went to the church, and did everything just as the old woman had told him. Twelve o'clock struck, the coffin lid fell to the ground, the Princess jumped up and began tearing from side to side, and threatening the youth. Then she conjured up horrors, this time worse than before. It seemed to him as if a fire had broken out in the church; all the walls were just wrapped in flames! But he held his ground and went on reading, never once looking behind him. Just before daybreak the Princess rushed to her coffin—then the fire seemed to go out immediately, and all the devilry vanished!

In the morning the King came to the church, and saw that the coffin was open, and in the coffin lay the princess, face downwards.

‘What's the meaning of all this?’ says he.

The lad told him everything that had taken place. Then the king gave orders that an aspen stake should be driven into his daughter's breast, and that her body should be thrust into a hole in the ground. But he rewarded the priest's son with a heap of money and various lands.