Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Drakestail

Andrew Lang

Drakestail was very small, which is why he was called Drakestail. But he was clever and knew what he was about, and starting from nothing he had saved up a hundred crowns.

Now the king of that country was extravagant and never had any money of his own. When he heard that Drakestail had savings, he came in person to borrow them. Drakestail was very proud to have lent money to a king. But after the first year and the second, when the king never even mentioned the interest, Drakestail began to worry. At last he decided to go and see His Majesty and get his money back.

So one fine morning, spruce and fresh, Drakestail set out down the road, singing:

"*Quack, quack, quack, when shall I get my money back?*"

He hadn't gone far when he met Friend Fox.

"Good morning, neighbour! Where are you off to so early?"

"To the king, for what he owes me."

"Oh, take me with you!"

Drakestail thought, *One can't have too many friends.* "I will," he said, "but you'll get tired going on all fours. Make yourself very small, get into my throat, go down into my gizzard, and I'll carry you."

"Splendid idea!" said Fox, and, presto, he was gone like a letter into the mailbox.

Drakestail set off again, singing. Soon he met his lady friend Ladder, leaning against a wall.

"Good morning, my duckling. Where are you off to?"

"To the king, for what he owes me."

"Oh, take me with you!"

"I will, but with those wooden legs you'll soon be tired. Make yourself small, get into my throat, and I'll carry you."

"Splendid idea!" said Ladder, and in she went to keep Fox company.

Drakestail went on, quacking his song. Next he met his sweetheart, River, wandering quietly in the sunshine.

"Where are you going, my love, all alone on this muddy road?"

"To the king, for what he owes me."

"Oh, take me with you!"

"I will, but you sleep while you walk, and you'll be tired. Make yourself small, get into my throat, and I'll carry you."

Glou, glou, glou, in went River, between Fox and Ladder.

Drakestail walked on. A little farther he met Wasp's-Nest, drilling his wasps.

"Good morning, Drakestail! Where are we going so spruce and fresh?"

"To the king, for what he owes me."

"Take me with you!"

"With your whole battalion you'll be exhausted. Make yourself small, get into my throat, and I'll carry you."

"What a good idea!" said Wasp's-Nest, and in went the whole battalion. It was a tight squeeze, but they managed.

And Drakestail marched into the capital, up the high street, singing, "Quack, quack, quack, when shall I get my money back?" while everyone stared. At last he came to the king's palace and rapped on the knocker: *Toc! Toc!*

"Who's there?" asked the porter.

"Drakestail. I wish to speak to the king."

"The king is at dinner and won't be disturbed."

"Tell him it's me, and he knows why I've come."

The porter told the king, who was just sitting down to dinner with a napkin tucked under his chin, surrounded by his ministers.

"Ah, I know what he wants!" laughed the king. "Let him in, and put him with the turkeys and chickens."

"This way," said the porter. "One step farther... There you are."



"What? In the poultry yard?"

Drakestail was furious. "Very well," he said. "I'll make them receive me. *Quack, quack, quack, when shall I get my money back?*" But turkeys and chickens don't care for strangers who look and sound different. They crowded around, and all at once rushed at him to peck him.

"I'm done for!" thought Drakestail. Then he remembered Fox and called out:

"*Reynard, Reynard, come out of your earth, Or Drakestail's life is of little worth!*"

Fox, who had been waiting for just those words, leaped out and chased the fowls in all directions, until the poultry yard was empty and quiet. Drakestail, quite content, went back to singing his song.

When the king heard it and the poultry woman told him what had happened, he was furious. He ordered Drakestail thrown into the well. Drakestail despaired of ever climbing out of such a deep hole. Then he remembered Ladder.

"*Ladder, Ladder, come out of thy hold, Or Drakestail's days will soon be told!*"

Ladder came out, rested her arms on the edge of the well, and Drakestail scrambled up her back and hopped out into the yard, singing louder than ever.

The king, still laughing at the trick he thought he'd played on his creditor, heard the song again and turned pale with rage. He ordered the furnace heated, saying Drakestail must be a sorcerer and should be thrown in.

The furnace grew hot, but Drakestail wasn't afraid now. He counted on River.

"*River, River, outward flow, Or to death Drakestail must go!*"

River gushed out, *errouf!*, and poured into the furnace, drowning the fire and sending everyone running. Then she flowed growling into the great hall of the palace, four feet deep. Drakestail floated happily, singing, "Quack, quack, quack, when shall I get my money back?"

The king, who thought he was sure of winning, heard him again and got up from the table shaking his fists. "Bring him here! I'll cut his throat!"

Two footmen fetched Drakestail. "At last they're going to receive me," he thought as he climbed the great stairs. But when he walked in, the king was as red as a turkey-cock, and all his ministers stood around with swords drawn. This time Drakestail was truly afraid. Luckily he still had one friend left.

"*Wasp's-Nest, Wasp's-Nest, make a sally, Or Drakestail nevermore may rally!*"

"Forward!" cried Wasp's-Nest, and out came his whole battalion, buzzing. They stung the king and ministers on their noses and cheeks so fiercely that they threw down their swords and ran out of the palace, howling, and were never seen again.

Drakestail stood alone in the great hall, astonished. Then he remembered what he had come for and began to hunt through every room for his money. But he found nothing in any drawer. It had all been spent.

Tired from searching, he reached the throne room and sat on the throne to think over his adventure. Meanwhile the people had found out that the king and his ministers had fled. They hurried into the palace to see what had happened, and when they saw someone sitting on the throne, they cried out in joy and surprise:

"*The king has gone, long live the king! Heaven has sent us this wonderful thing!*"

Drakestail, who was past being surprised at anything, accepted the cheers as if he'd done it all his life. A few people grumbled that a drake wouldn't make much of a king, but others who knew him said a clever Drakestail would make a far better king than a spendthrift who borrowed and never paid. So they took the crown and put it on his head, where it fit like wax.

And that is how Drakestail became king.

"And now," he said after the ceremony, "ladies and gentlemen, let's have supper. I'm starving!"

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