Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Flying Ship

Andrew Lang

Once there lived an old couple with three sons. The two older boys were clever. The youngest, everyone said, was a fool. The clever sons loved their mother, wore good clothes, and spoke politely to her. The youngest was always underfoot, and she had no patience with him.

One day word came to the village that the King had made a decree: whoever built a ship that could fly would marry the Princess. The two elder brothers decided to try. Their mother smartened up their clothes, packed provisions for the road, and added a bottle of brandy. When they had gone, the youngest begged her to dress him up and let him go too.

"What would become of a dolt like you? The wolves would eat you!"

But he kept saying, "I'll go! I'll go! I'll go!" At last she gave up. She handed him a hard crust and a bottle of water and ignored him after that.

He set off down the road. Before long he met a little old man. They greeted each other, and the old man asked where he was going.

"To the King's court. He's promised his daughter to anyone who can build a flying ship."

"Can you build one?"

"Not me."

"Then why go?"

"No idea," said the youngest.

"Well, then, sit down with me. Let's rest and eat. What have you got in your bag?"

The boy was ashamed to show his crust. But he didn't want to be rude, so he opened the bag, and could hardly believe his eyes. Instead of the crust there were two fresh rolls and cold meat. He shared them with the old man, who licked his lips and said, "Go into that wood. Stop in front of the first tree. Bow three times, strike the tree with your axe, then fall on your knees and press your face to the ground. Stay there until someone lifts you up. You'll find a ship beside you. Step in and fly to the King's palace. If you meet anyone along the way, take

them with you."

The boy thanked him and went on. At the first tree, he did exactly as he was told. He fell asleep on the ground. After a while someone woke him, and he rubbed his eyes and saw a ship ready-made beside him. He climbed in.

The ship rose higher and higher and flew through the air. From the deck the boy saw a man below on the road, kneeling with his ear against the damp ground.

"Hello! What are you doing?"

"Listening to what's going on in the world."

"Come aboard!"

The man gladly climbed in, and the ship flew on and on. Soon the boy saw a man hopping on one leg, with his other leg tied up behind his ear.

"Why are you hopping?"

"I walk so fast that if I didn't tie up one leg, I'd be at the end of the earth in a single step."



"Come with us!" And he joined them. The ship flew on and on until the boy saw a man aiming a gun into the distance.

"What are you aiming at? There's not a bird in sight."

"What good is a close shot? I can hit anything at a hundred miles."

"Come aboard!" And he joined them. Farther on they saw a man with a basket of bread on his back.

"Where are you going?"

"To get bread for my breakfast."

"But you have a whole basket!"

"That's nothing. I'd finish this in one mouthful."

"Come along!" And the glutton joined them. Soon they saw a man walking along the shore of a great lake, looking around.

"What are you looking for?"

"Something to drink. I'm so thirsty."

"There's a whole lake right there!"

"That? I'd drink it in one gulp."

"Come with us!" And the great drinker joined them. Next they saw a man dragging a bundle of wood through the forest.

"Why carry wood through a forest?"

"This isn't ordinary wood. If you throw it on the ground, it turns into an army of soldiers."

"Come aboard!" And he joined them. The last man they met was carrying straw on his back.

"Where are you taking that?"

"To the village."

"Don't they have straw in the village?"

"Not this kind. If you scatter it, even in the hottest summer, the air turns cold and snow falls and people freeze."

"Come with us!" And he joined too.

At last the ship and its strange crew reached the King's court. The King was at dinner. He sent a courtier to find out what this huge new bird was. The courtier peeked into the ship and hurried back. "It's a flying ship, Your Majesty, and it's full of peasants."

The King remembered his promise. But he had no intention of letting his daughter marry a poor peasant. He thought and thought, then decided: *I'll give him impossible tasks. That's the way to get rid of him.* He sent a courtier to order the boy to fetch healing water from the end of the world before the King had finished dinner.

But while the King was still giving instructions, the man with the extraordinary hearing overheard and told the boy. "Oh no!" he cried. "It would take me a year, maybe my whole life, to find that water."

"Don't worry," said the man with the tied-up leg. "I'll get it." The courtier arrived with the King's command.

"Tell His Majesty his orders will be carried out," said the boy. The fast man untied his leg and was off, and in no time he reached the end of the world and drew water from the well. "That was tiring," he thought. "I'll rest a few minutes. The King's barely at his dessert." He lay on the grass, the sun was dazzling, and he closed his eyes and fell sound asleep.

Back on the ship, everyone waited anxiously. The King's dinner was almost over, and their friend hadn't returned. The man with the good hearing lay down and

put his ear to the ground. "That fine fellow!" he said. "He's lying there snoring!"

The marksman grabbed his gun, aimed toward the end of the world, and fired to wake the sleeper. A moment later the runner appeared and stepped aboard, and handed the water to the boy. While the King was still finishing his dinner, they brought word that his order had been carried out.

The King thought of a harder task. He ordered the boy and his friends to eat twelve roast oxen and twelve tons of bread on the spot. The man with the good hearing overheard it again and told the boy, who sighed, "It would take us our whole lives!"

"Don't worry," said the glutton. "It'll hardly be enough for me. I'm starving." The oxen and bread were brought alongside the ship, and he ate the lot in one sitting. "That was a snack," he said. "I wish they'd brought more."

Next the King ordered them to drink forty casks of wine, forty gallons each. The boy despaired, but the thirsty man said, "I'll drink it in a gulp." And he did. "I'm still thirsty," he said. "Two more casks would have been welcome."

The King thought again, and invited the boy to take a bath before the betrothal. The bathhouse was made of iron, and the King ordered it heated so hot that the boy would be smothered. The boy walked in and found the walls glowing red. But the man with the straw had slipped in behind him. When the door was shut, he scattered the straw, and the red-hot walls turned cold. Snow fell, and the water in the bath froze. The boy climbed on top of the stove, wrapped himself in the bath blankets, and spent the night there. In the morning they opened the door and found him safe, singing to himself.

The King grew gloomy. He didn't know how to be rid of this unwanted son-in-law. Then he had an idea. "Tell the rascal to raise me an army! Right now!" And to himself he said, *That will finish him.*

The man with the good hearing overheard and told the boy, who groaned, "I'm done for!"

"Not at all," said the man with the wood. "Have you forgotten me?"

The courtier ran all the way from the palace and arrived panting to deliver the message.

"Good," said the boy. "I'll raise an army for the King. But if he still refuses to accept me as his son-in-law, I'll wage war on him and take the Princess by force."

That night the boy and the man with the wood went to a big field and spread the bundle in every direction. At once a mighty army stood there, regiment after regiment of foot soldiers and horsemen. Bugles blared and drums beat. The horses neighed and the riders couched their lances.

In the morning the King woke to the sound of war. He went to the window and saw lances gleaming and armour flashing in the sun. "I'm powerless against this man," he said. He sent royal robes and costly jewels and invited the boy to the palace to marry the Princess. The boy put on the robes and looked so grand that no one recognised the one who'd been called a fool. The Princess fell in love with him on sight.

It was the grandest wedding ever seen. There was so much food and wine that even the glutton and the great drinker had enough.

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