



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Old Woman And The Knight

F. J. H. Darton

In the old days of King Arthur all the land was filled with fairies, and the elf queen and her merry company held many a dance in the green meadows where now you will see never one of them. But that was many hundred years ago.

It happened that there was at King Arthur's court a young knight, in the full vigour and pride of his strength, who one day, as he was riding out, came upon a maiden walking all alone. She was very beautiful, and the sight of her made him forget his knighthood.

He went up to her, and tried to carry her off with him by force; but before he could succeed help came, and he was seized and taken before the king.

The king sentenced him to die, according to the law at that time, and he would surely have been put to death if the queen and her ladies had not long and earnestly prayed for mercy. The king at last relented and granted him his life, and left it to the queen to say what punishment should be given him.

When the queen had thanked King Arthur she sent for the knight. She did not wish to let him go wholly free.

"You are still in danger of losing your life," she said to him; "but I will give you your freedom on one condition: you must find me the answer to the question—'What is it that women most desire?' If you cannot now give me the answer that I have in my mind you shall have a year and a day in which to learn it. Do your best, and take great care, for if at the end of that time you still cannot answer, you must die."

The knight pondered awhile, but he could not guess the answer at once.

So he pledged himself to return to the court at the end of a year and a day, and went away very sorrowfully.

How was he to find the answer to the riddle? He thought for a long time by himself, and then asked every one he met what it was that women loved best. But nowhere could he discover two people who agreed in saying the same thing. Some told him the answer was honour; some, riches; others, fine clothing; others, again, flattery. But none of these replies pleased the knight, and he could not guess anyhow what it was that the queen had in her mind as the right answer.

He wandered far and wide in his mournful search for some one wise enough to help him. At length the time came when he had to turn homewards again, in order to return to the queen by the appointed day. His way lay through a forest, and he was riding along sadly enough when suddenly he saw a strange sight. In a little glade just in front of him was a ring of fair ladies dancing, four-and-twenty or more of them; but as he drew nigh eagerly to look at them more closely, and see if by chance he might gain an answer from them, they all vanished.

In the place where they had been not a living thing remained except an old woman sitting on the grass. When he came near to her he saw that she was withered and ugly, and as horrible a sight as could be imagined,

"Sir knight," she said to him, standing up, "this road leads to no place. Whither are you going? Tell me your errand, and perchance I can help you. We old folk have knowledge of many things."

"Old mother," he said, "my trouble is this: I am as good as dead if I cannot discover what it is that women love best. If you could help me I would reward you well." And he told her the conditions on which his life was spared.

"Give me your word here and now that you will do the next thing that I ask of you, whatever it is, if it is in your power," said the hag when she heard the story, "and I will tell you the answer."

"I give my word," the knight replied.

"Then your life is safe. I promise you that my answer will be that which the queen wishes to have, and the proudest lady of all her court will not dare gainsay it. Let us go on our journey without any more talking."

She whispered a word or two in his ear, and bade him pluck up heart; and together they rode to the court.

The knight came before the queen, and said that he was ready to give his answer, and a great company of noble ladies gathered to hear what he would reply to the riddle. Silence was proclaimed, and he was called upon to speak.

"I have kept my word faithfully," he said in a manly voice that was heard all over the hall, "and I am here on the day appointed, prepared to answer the queen's question. The answer she desired was that women love power best, whether it be over husband or lover. If that is not the right answer do with me as you wish. I am here ready to die if you so will it."



They all agreed that he had saved his life by his reply. But when their verdict was made known up started the old hag who had told the knight the answer.

"Give me justice, lady queen, before your court departs," she cried. "I told the knight that answer, and he gave me his word that he would do the first thing that I asked of him if it lay in his power. Now, before all this court, I ask you, sir knight, to take me to be your wife; and remember it is I who have saved your life."

"Alas!" said the knight; "truly I gave my word, but will you not ask some other thing of me? Take all my riches, and let me go."

"No," insisted the old woman. "Though I be old and poor and ugly I would not let you go for all the gold on earth. I will be your wife and your love."

"My love!" he cried; "nay, rather my death! Alas that any of my race should suffer such dishonour."

All the knight's prayers and entreaties were of no avail. He had to keep his word and marry the hideous old hag; and a mournful wedding he made of it. He took his new bride home to his house, feeling not at all like a happy lover; and his woe was increased by her first words to him.

"Dear husband, will you not kiss me? Is it the custom of the king's court for every knight to neglect his wife? I am your own love, who saved you from death, and I have done you no wrong. Yet you act towards me like a madman who has lost his senses, with your groans and your glum looks. Tell me what I have done amiss, and I will set it right."

"You cannot set it right," said the knight sorrowfully. "Do you wonder that I am ashamed to have married one of such mean birth, so poor and old and ugly?"

"Is that the cause of your grief?" she asked.

"Yes," answered he.

"I could set it right," said his wife. "But you speak so proudly of your high birth and old family. Such pride is worth nothing, for poverty and low birth are no sin. Look rather at him who leads the best life both in secret and in the open, who strives always to do gentle and honourable deeds; take him for the truest gentleman, and be sure that a noble nature like his is not made only by high birth or the wealth of his fathers. But you say that I am low-born, old, and ugly. Well, choose now which you would desire me to be—as I am, poor, old, and ugly, but a true and faithful wife who will obey you always; or young and fair, but fickle and fond of vain pleasures, always emptying your purse and wounding your love?"

The knight did not know which to choose. He was moved to shame by his wife's words, and after long thought he said: "My lady, my dear wife, I put myself in your hands. Choose for yourself; that will do honour to you, and what you wish is enough for me."

"Then I have gained the mastery! I have power over you," said she, "if I may choose as I please."

"Yes, dear wife," he answered, "I think that best."

"Kiss me," she said, "and let us quarrel no longer. I will be both to you—both fair and true. I will be as good a wife as ever there was since the beginning of the world; and if I am not as beautiful as any lady, queen, or empress in the whole earth, from east to west, then slay me or do with my life as you wish."

The knight looked up at her again. But instead of the withered old crone he expected to see, his eyes fell upon the most beautiful wife that could be imagined; for the old woman was a fairy, and had wished to give him a lesson before he knew her as she really was. No longer now was he ashamed of her, and they lived together happily to their lives' end.

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why riri.ro offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share riri.ro and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: [@riri_ro_reading](https://www.instagram.com/riri_ro_reading) · Pinterest: [pinterest.com/riri_rocom](https://www.pinterest.com/riri_rocom)