

NOBODY KNOWS

Many, many years ago, there was a little inn, next to a great forest. The innkeeper was a selfish, greedy man who treated everything, which came into his hands, as if it were worth its weight in gold. The king, at this time, was a rich and generous man, whose court feasted and celebrated, from one day to the next, with nobody thinking about the cost. On one such day, the king invited everybody to a great hunt, and promised a fantastic prize for the best trophy caught or killed. If the winner was a nobleman, he would receive the hand of the king's daughter in marriage, and a commoner would be richly rewarded with gold.

The innkeeper didn't really like hunting, but he did really like gold, so he took part on the day. All day, the forest next to the inn, was loud with the sound of hunting horns and baying hounds. Many strange and wonderful creatures were found, but the prize went to a neighbouring prince who caught a huge stag with a magnificent set of golden antlers. However, the innkeeper wasn't unhappy with his day's work. Apart from the business the hunt brought his inn, he himself had easily caught — alive — a forest elf, who carried a golden sword. He was so proud of his trophy, that he had a glass cabinet made for the manikin, so that nobody would miss it when they entered the bar.

The innkeeper and his wife also had a son, who was a lively young boy, and their only child. He was fascinated with the little elf, and, more accurately, his sword. The boy would stand for hours by the glass cabinet, thinking to himself "If only I had such a beautiful golden sword", but he would never say it aloud. His father wouldn't like it. But, one day, he came into the bar when it was empty, except for the elf who was peacefully amusing himself. Forgetting all caution, he cried out "Little man! Please, please, let me have your golden sword".

The goblin stopped what he was doing, and turned to the boy. He answered "Of course, I'll gladly give it you — on one condition. You have to let me out of this glass prison, but don't tell anybody. If you do, then I'll let you have my sword."

The boy was very pleased with this answer, and quickly promised to do what the elf asked him. But, it was not going to be easy. His mother always kept the key to the cabinet about her person, and guarded it like it was the greatest treasure on earth. He thought long and hard, and soon came up with a way to get the key.

He went to his mother, complaining that his head itched, and asked her to comb his hair for nits. This surprised, and pleased his mother, because normally her son hated it when she did so. So, she sat him down on a stool, took a comb, and searched in his hair for the little creatures. She was so occupied with her task, that she didn't notice when his hand slipped into her dress pocket, and slid out again holding the key. When she had finished, the young boy joyfully took it, and released the little manikin.

True to his word, the elf gave his sword to the boy before he jumped through the open window and vanished into the forest. The boy held the sword, swung it a few times, and then had an idea for his game. He climbed into the glass cabinet, and made believe that he was the elf. He was still in the cabinet, when his mother found him. She immediately called his father.

When the innkeeper saw what the little boy had done, he was very angry. He dragged his son out of the cabinet, took his birch, and beat him cruelly. Then, in his fury, he grabbed the crying boy and threw him over the garden wall, shouting "Get out of here! Go with your little friend into the forest!"

After he hit the ground, the boy didn't move. He wasn't dead, but he lay for a long time, unconscious in the grass. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw the little forest elf standing over him. The elf took the boy with him into the forest, tended his wounds, and afterwards raised him as his own son. Over time, the boy grew up to be strong, handsome, and brave. When he was big enough to hold a lance, the elf taught him all he needed to carry it, and himself, like a knight. Then, one day, his forest guardian said to him "Now, that you have reached manhood, it's time for you to go back out into the world. Go forth to the city, and seek work at the king's palace. But, if anybody asks who you are, or where you come from, you should only answer them 'Nobody Knows', and remain silent on all other matters." He then gave the boy a sword and a new tunic, of his own design, and sent him on his way.

After so many years, the youth was astonished, and very happy, to be so suddenly sent out into the world on his own. But, at the same time, he was more than a little sad to be leaving his guardian, and his woodland home. After some time, he arrived at the gates of the city. There, he asked to see the king, but the gatekeepers wouldn't let him. They made fun of the youth in his strange clothes, and asked him many questions. He answered none, except when they asked his name. To this, he answered "Nobody Knows", so they called him just that, without the surname.

But, word of the strange youth at the gates did reach the king, who sent for him. The king liked Nobody, so he sent the boy to work in the kitchens. There he had to help the cook by: washing up, carrying water, setting the fires, and even chopping wood. It was unpleasant work, and so he came up with a plan to get out of the kitchen. One day, he threw all the dishes and plates to the ground, smashing them. Then, he stamped on them, making the pieces smaller, and ground them under foot into a fine dust.

When he had finished, the little forest elf appeared and repaired them all.

On the following day, Nobody destroyed all the dishes, plates, pots and pans in the kitchen. Again the elf appeared, and repaired them all before anybody saw or heard anything. But on the third day, another kitchen servant saw Nobody smashing all the crockery, and he told the cook. Nobody was chased out of the kitchen and set to work in the stables.

As he worked as a stablehand, Nobody had to feed and water the horses, and groom them. There was much work for the stableboy to do: the king had been called to war and made ready to leave with his knights and soldiers. It was better work than chopping wood and carrying water in the kitchen, but he still didn't like the work. He would much rather have ridden the horses, and carried a lance, sword and shield.

The enemy had invaded the country, burnt down villages and laid waste to the crops in the fields, and were now nearing the city. The king had to meet them in battle, but it wasn't going well for him. When Nobody heard the news, the elf appeared in the stable. He brought with him, not only armour and weapons, but a whole army of elves. Nobody mounted his steed, and rode off to help the king.

As soon as the enemy saw the arrival of unexpected reinforcements, they turned and fled. Nobody chased after them until it was clear that the battle was over, and then he turned his army back to the city. The king wanted to thank the knight who had brought an army to help him, but by the time he returned, Nobody was there. He was already in the stables, grooming the horses.

But, the war was not yet over. Soon, there was another battle, the elf again brought armour, weapons and an army, and Nobody helped the king to victory.

Once again, the king wanted to thank the knight who had brought his army to help him, but he had vanished as quickly as he had arrived. In the days which followed, he made many enquiries, but nowhere was a trace of him to be found. The same happened at the third, and final battle. Nobody came to his rescue, and by the time the king returned to the castle, Nobody was in the stables, grooming the horses.

Nobody enjoyed riding off into battle with an army, but he didn't like working in the stables. He came up with a plan to get out of the stables. He untied all the horses, and drove them against each other. The wild horses, kicked and trampled each other, until not one was left unmarked. "When the groom sees this" Nobody, "he will surely throw me out of the stables." But, no sooner had he done so, than the elf appeared. Soon the horses were healed, and in their stalls as if nothing had happened to them at all.

On the following day, Nobody again released the horses and set them against each other. This time it was so bad that their blood flowed over the floor. Again the elf appeared, and set things right before anybody saw or heard anything. But, on the third day, the groom saw Nobody release the horses, and heard the noises they made. Nobody was chased out of the stables and set to work in the gardens.

In the gardens, Nobody helped the gardener. He watered the plants, removed dead leaves, and looked after the flowers. He liked this work much better than washing up in the kitchen or grooming horses in the stables, and was happy. He would often stand by the roses, taking in their delicate perfume and

beautiful form. As he did so, Nobody was so at peace, that he didn't even wish to change places with the king.

When he worked in the garden, Nobody always wore a straw hat, pushed down so far on his head that his golden hair was almost completely hidden, and his face was in shadow. But he still wasn't unnoticed. Always, when he was watering the roses, or even just stood enjoying their beauty, the king's eldest daughter sat on the terrace watching him. She liked looking at the handsome youth so much that she could hardly turn her eyes away. And — after seeing him during the day, she often dreamt of him at night.

One day, as he stood in the garden below, she rose from her seat on the terrace and went down to him. She asked him for a bouquet of flowers, but Nobody just stood silently looking at his roses. The flowers were beautiful, but if he cut them they would soon die, so he didn't do as she asked. Neither did he answer her. When, pleading and crying didn't help, the princess took action herself. She walked up to the rose bush, and picked the most beautiful bloom herself. Nobody was angry, and Nobody cried out "Don't just tear the flowers off!"

Then, he remembered his promise to his guardian, and held his tongue further. He just stood there, his downcast face reddening as if he was ashamed. As he stood there, the princess also couldn't be angry with him. She approached him again, and said softly "Please, look at me and take off your hat, so that I can see you better."

Nobody stood still, acting as if he didn't understand what she was saying, so she stretched out her hand to take his hat herself. Without his hat, would surely be recognised by his golden hair. So, before she could take it, Nobody turned and fled, leaving the princess standing pensive, and a little sad, by the roses. After a while, she returned with the single rose to her room, where she dreamt of the strange handsome young man. Afterwards, she sat more often on the terrace, or stood by the window, looking out into the garden. Whenever she saw the young man, her heart was always lighter and her mood brighter.

It had been nearly a year since the war had ended. Red and golden leaves were falling from the trees onto the dew covered grass. The king still remembered the three battles and the three heroes who had brought their armies to his aid. Many times, he had sent out messengers throughout the land to make enquiries. Each time, they had returned with no news, and he was still no wiser. He decided to hold a great banquet, and if the three heroes, who he thought must also be kings, came they could each marry one of his three daughters. The feast was to be held over two days, and the great and noble guests would be invited from near and far. The three princesses were each provided with rich and wonderful gifts, which they were to present to their future husbands.

On the day of the feast, so many guests arrived in carriages and on horseback, that, with all the cries and horns blaring, it might have been the

start of a great hunt. All the gates and doors to the palace were richly decorated, as were the rooms inside. Heavenly music attempted to drift out through the windows of the magnificent banqueting room. Inside it was glorious.

The king and his three, beautifully dressed daughters received their guests gracefully, as they entered. By the time the banquet started, all the invited guests were present, but there was no sign of any of the three princes. As they feasted, the king had little appetite. He had difficulty concealing his disappointment, but as a good host, still tried to eat and make merry. By evening, the honoured guests still hadn't arrived.

The two youngest princesses approached their father, and one of them said "it doesn't look like the three kings are going to come."

The second asked "What shall we do with these rich and wonderful presents?"

"Whatever you will, my poor girls." Answered their father. The girls then returned to their places, collected their gifts, and each presented them to the knight whom they liked best.

The eldest daughter remained calm, and quietly refused to present her gift to any of the guests. She preferred Nobody. When everybody rose from the banquet, she collected her gift, and took it with her into the garden. There she found Nobody. He was again standing, somewhat sadly, by his roses. The princess walked straight up to him smiling, and gave him her present. He silently kissed her hand, but said nothing. This time, he remembered his promise to his guardian, and held his tongue, but his eyes told her everything. Sadly the two lovers parted.

However sad his eldest daughter may have been, the king was even more upset. He had planned a wedding for the next day, and there was still no bridegroom. He didn't sleep at all that night, and by morning his face was sure to be lined and his hair turned grey with worry. But, as the king lay sleepless in his chamber, the little elf came to Nobody in his room. He brought with him, a magnificent golden robe, such as those only kings wear, and told him to change into it. He then, led Nobody into the courtyard, where he saw hundreds of knights mounted on magnificent horses. "These are all yours." the elf told him, "Now go to the king, and ask for his daughter's hand." With that he vanished, and it was the last time Nobody would see the forest elf.

Then, the horsemen blew their horns, which immediately brought the king to his window. Below him, in the courtyard, he saw the prince, with his army, who had aided him in battle. Finding his crown, without which he would be improperly dressed, he hurried down to greet the stranger. He embraced Nobody, and Nobody excused himself for arriving at so late an hour. The king then led his honoured guest into the palace, where he presented him to his three daughters. Given the choice of three brides, Nobody chose the eldest.

If she reconised him, she told Nobody, but she was very happy to have this handsome king as her husband. He had the same golden hair, the same clear eyes, and exactly the same blush to his cheeks as the young man, when she stole the rose.

The wedding celebration was even more magnificent than the banquet on the day before. When all the guests were assembled, and about to drink the health of the happy couple, the great doors suddenly opened. Through them, marched another great king, proud and tall, with a grey beard falling onto his breast. He walked up to Nobody, embraced Nobody, kissed Nobody, and Nobody was surprised. The visitor was none other than the forest elf, whose enchantment had now been lifted, because Nobody had been faithful to his promise.

The celebration continued, even more joyfully than before. After their marriage, the royal couple lived happily, sometimes in the forest kindom, and sometimes in the city palace. In time, when both kings had died, they inherited both kingdoms, and Nobody lived happily ever after.