

## MARTL AND THE HORSE

There was once a very rich nobleman who held many great estates, and castles and palaces. In the highest tower of the greatest castle, where he lived, he kept a treasure of immeasurable wealth which, by any means he could, he kept adding to. But, he was neither a prince nor a king. He wasn't even the greatest lord in the land. That would have been his neighbour, and he hated him because of it. He spent much of his time plotting and scheming how he could dispose of him, and take all his estates and treasure for himself, without risking a battle, which he would surely lose.

One day, having no idea of his own, he rode alone into the forest to consult a wizard who lived there. It cost him much more than he would have liked to pay, but the magician was able to help him. He gave him a wooden key, which could open any door or gate, a magic wand, and many useful instructions.

The greedy lord rode happily back to his castle where, that night, he set his plans in motion. He ordered his most trusted, and best paid, soldiers to arm themselves, and in the middle of the night they arrived at his neighbour's castle. He opened the gate with the wooden key, and his soldiers killed the guards before they could sound the alarm. They did the same to all the servants and, finding the good lord's bedchamber, he ran him through himself. But he didn't kill his neighbour's son. Finding him peacefully asleep, he simply touched him with the magic wand. As he did so, the young man was instantly turned into a snow white colt.

Leaving two of his men behind, to guard the horse and castle, the greedy lord returned to his own castle and spent the rest of the night as if nothing untoward had happened, or could happen. He now had everything he had wished for, and could rule over the land like a king, counted his new riches on the next day, and slept peacefully in his bed on the following night. But, it wasn't so for the two soldiers he left guarding the other castle. As night fell, strange sounds filled the empty castle. Horses neighed and whinnied in the stables and courtyard. There was the sound of soldiers marching, and footsteps of knights on the stairs. All the doors and shutters flew open, and slammed shut. The windows rattled, and even the chairs and tables wandered around the room. The two guards, who had fiercely braved every danger in battle, cowering in a corner of the dining room, closed their eyes and covered their ears. The noise became even louder, until at midnight, a ghostly army of servants and guards marched into the room and sat themselves at the table. They stayed there, watching the two soldiers, until the first light of day when they vanished. As the rays of the sun fell across the floor, the castle was now empty and as silent as the grave.

On the second night, the castle was again filled with noise and the ghosts, of the people, they had murdered returned to face the two guards. When in the morning, they had again vanished, the two terrified soldiers decided that, under no circumstances, would they stay for a third night. So, after feeding the white

horse, they locked all the doors and the castle gate, and returned to tell the evil lord what had happened in the last two nights. He may, or may not, have believed them, and he did laugh at their lack of courage but, in the end he replaced them with two other guards. But on the next day, these two also came back, declaring that they couldn't spend another night in the haunted castle. After that, he couldn't find a third pair of guards who were willing to watch the castle at any price.

He then, sent for his oldest, most faithful servant, and said to him "Martl, you've always had a good head on your shoulders, and your heart in the right place. I also know that you have never been afraid of anything in this world, or beyond it. If you take over watching the other castle, I will reward you more richly than you have ever dreamed."

Martl thought carefully, scratching first his chin and then behind his ear, and, when the lord didn't give up begging him, he finally agreed. After receiving further orders, that he should only feed the with horse a handful of hay each day, he settled into the haunted castle. There he lived alone, except for the white horse, slept by day, and watched the ghosts by night. Every morning, he fed the horse a handful of hay, just as he had been ordered. But, he was dismayed to see that, day by day, the horse became thinner and thinner. Soon its ribs were showing, and its coat became dull. Martl often thought to himself that, maybe he should give the horse not only more to eat, but better food. But, still he followed the order his lord had given him. So, the horse continued to grow weaker, until it could barely stand, and the kindhearted Martl couldn't stand it anymore. He had always thought his lord's order to be strange, and could never understand why he would want to make such a beautiful animal suffer. He asked himself "what would happen if I gave the horse enough to eat?", and decided to do so.

He not only gave the poor horse more than one handful of hay, but also oats for extra nourishment. Once the horse had eaten its fill, it turned to him and spoke. It said "God bless you! If you really wish things to be better, then tomorrow give me again enough to eat. Then jump on my back and ride around the lake below the castle. Your lord will chase us, riding like the devil on a black stallion, but you can stop him catching us. If you take the whip, which hangs in the hall, and strike the ground with it, we will be saved."

Martl, finding it strange that a horse should be talking to him, wasn't sure what he should do. After thinking a while, first scratching his chin and then behind his ear, he told the horse that, if what it told him was true, he would follow its instructions. The horse raised its front right leg and replied "I swear by God and everything that is holy, that every word I have spoken is true".

"I need to think." said the confused Martl.

"But, please don't repeat a word of what I have said to another living soul," warned the horse, "or we are both doomed."

Martl left the stable, and thought carefully about what he should do. "I have never seen, or even heard of, a talking horse before." he said quietly to himself, "That alone is strange, but why should my lord keep it and not look after it well? I can't ask him, but there is one thing I can check. I can go into the hall, and see if there really is a whip hanging on the wall. I've been in there many times, but I've never noticed one." So, he climbed the stairs and entered the hall. There, under a portrait of the old earl, he saw a beautiful riding whip with a golden handle.

"By God, there is something very strange going on!" exclaimed Martl "This whip definitely wasn't here yesterday, but there is nobody in this castle except me." The longer that he stared at the whip, and thought about it, the stranger he thought the whole situation to be. And, the stranger he found everything, the more curious he became, and soon his curiosity got the better of him. He decided to trust the horse, and follow its instructions.

The next morning, after feeding the horse well, he mounted it and they rode out of the gate towards the lake. No sooner had they reached the shore, than the evil lord came racing towards them on a pitch-black horse, with burning eyes and spurting fire out of its nostrils. The white colt ran as fast as it could, but the black monster was gaining on them. It looked like all was lost when Martl hit the ground hard with the golden whip. A hillock immediately sprang out of the ground behind them, blocking their pursuer. The white horse put some distance between them, but the black horse soon caught up. Martyl again used the whip. This time a bigger hill sprang up and the white horse raced ahead, and reached the end of the circuit. As soon as they arrived where they had strated along the shore, Martl fell to the ground, and — so did the horse's coat. Standing before him was now a handsome young knight, who gave Martl his hand and said "God bless you for saving me. I will forever be in your debt."

At the same time there was terrible crack, louder than any thunder, and they saw the ground open under the black horse. Both the horse and rider disappeared under the earth as it closed around them. The demon horse really was the devil himself, and he had now taken the greedy lord for his own. Martl then returned with the young lord to his father's castle, where he remained for a while as a faithful and valued advisor. But, before long he retired to his own rich estate, where he lived happily for many years.