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Opening extract from

A Tale Dark and Grimm

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Faithful Johannes

Once upon a time, in a kingdom called Grimm, an old king lay on his deathbed. He was Hansel and Gretel's grandfather – but he didn't know that, for neither Hansel nor Gretel had been born yet.

Now hold on a minute.

I know what you're thinking.

I am well aware that nobody wants to hear a story that happens *before* the main characters turn up. Stories like that are boring, because they all end in exactly the same way. With the main characters turning up.

But don't worry. This story is like no story you've ever heard.

You see, Hansel and Gretel don't just *turn up* at the end of this story.

They turn up.

And then they get their heads cut off.

Just thought you'd like to know.

*

The old king knew he was soon to pass from this world, and so he called for his oldest and most faithful servant. The servant's name was Johannes; but he had served the king's father, and his father's father, and his father's father's father so loyally that all called him Faithful Johannes.

Johannes tottered in on bowed legs, heaving his crooked back step by step and leering with his one good eye. His long nose sniffed at the air. His mouth puckered round two rotten teeth. But, despite his grotesque appearance, when he came within view, the old king smiled and said, 'Ah, Johannes!' and drew him near.

The king's voice was weak as he said, 'I am soon to die. But before I go, you must promise me two things. First, promise that you will be as faithful to my young son as you have been to me.'

Without hesitation, Johannes promised.

The old king went on. 'Second, promise that you will show him his entire inheritance – the castle, the treasures, all this fine land – except for one room. Do not show him the room with the portrait of the golden princess. For if he sees the portrait he will fall madly in love with her. And I fear it will cost him his life.'

The king gripped Johannes's hand. 'Promise me.'

Again Johannes promised. Then the wrinkles of worry left the king's brow, and he closed his eyes and breathed his last.

Soon the prince was crowned as the new king. He was celebrated with processions and toasts and feasts all

throughout the kingdom. But, when the revelry finally subsided, Johannes sat him down for a talk.

First, Johannes described to him all of the responsibilities of the throne. The young king tried not to fall asleep.

Then he explained that the old king had asked him to show the young king his entire inheritance – the castle, the treasures, all this fine land. At the word treasures the young king's face lit up. Not that he was greedy. It was just that he found the idea of treasures exciting.

Finally, Johannes tried to explain his own role to the young king. 'I have served your father, and your father's father, and your father's father's father before that,' Johannes said. The young king started calculating on his fingers how that was even possible, but before he could get very far, Johannes had moved on. 'They call me Faithful Johannes because I have devoted my life to the Kings of Grimm. To helping them. To advising them. To under-standing them.'

'Understanding them?' the young king asked.

'No. Under-standing them. In the ancient sense of the word. Standing beneath them. Supporting them. Bearing their troubles and their pains on my shoulders.'

The young king thought about this. 'So you will under-stand me too?' he asked.

'I will.'

'No matter what?'

'Under any circumstances. That is what being faithful means.'

'Well, under-stand that I am tired of this, and would

like to see the treasures now.' And the young king stood up.

Faithful Johannes shook his head and sighed.

They began by exploring every inch of the castle – the treasure crypts, the towers, and every single room. Every single room, that is, save one. One room remained locked, no matter how many times they passed it.

Well, the young king was no fool. He noticed this. And so he asked, 'Why is it, Johannes, that you show me every room in the castle, but never this room?'

Johannes squinted his one good eye and curled up his puckered, two-toothed mouth. Then he said, 'Your father asked me not to show you that room, Your Highness. He feared it might cost you your life.'

I'm sorry, I need to stop for a moment. I don't know what you're thinking right now, but when I first heard this part of the story, I thought, 'What, is he crazy?'

Maybe you know something about young people, and maybe you don't. I, having been one myself once upon a time, know a few things about them. One thing I know is that if you don't want one to do something – for example, go into a room where there's a portrait of an unbearably beautiful princess – saying, 'It might cost you your life' is about the *worst* thing you could possibly say. Because then that's *all* that young person will want to do.

I mean, why didn't Johannes say something else? Like, 'It's a broom cupboard. Why? Do you want to see a

broom cupboard?' Or, 'It's a fake door, silly. For decoration.' Or even, 'It's the ladies' loo, Your Majesty. Best not go poking your head in there.'

Any of those would have been perfectly sufficient, as far as I can see.

But he didn't say any of those things. If he had, none of the horrible, bloody events to follow would ever have happened.

(Well, in that case, I suppose I'm glad he told the truth.)

'Cost me my life?!' the young king proclaimed with a toss of his head. 'Nonsense!' He insisted he be let into the room. First he demanded. But Johannes refused. Then he commanded. Still Johannes refused. Then he threw himself on the floor and had a tantrum, which was very unbecoming for a young man the king's age. Finally, Faithful Johannes realised there was little he could do. So, wrinkling his old, malformed face into a wince, he unlocked and opened the door.

The king burst into the room. He found himself staring, face-to-face with the most beautiful portrait of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. Her hair looked like it was spun from pure gold thread. Her eyes flashed like the ocean on a sunny day. And yet, around her lips, there was a hint of sadness, of loneliness.

The young king took one look at her and fainted dead away.

*

Later, in his room, he came to. Johannes hovered over his bed. 'Who was that radiant creature?' the king asked.

'That, Your Majesty, is the golden princess,' Johannes answered.

'She's the most beautiful woman in the world,' the young king said.

And Johannes answered, 'Yes, she is.'

'And yet she looked almost sad. Why is that?'

Johannes took a deep breath, and replied, 'Because, young king, she is cursed. Every time she has tried to marry, her husband has died; and it is said that a fate worse than death is destined for her children, if ever she should have any. She lives in a black marble palace, topped with a golden roof, all by herself. And, as you can imagine, she is terribly lonely and terribly sad.'

The king sat straight up in his bed and grabbed the front of Faithful Johannes's tunic. And though he stared into the old man's face, he saw only the princess's ocean-bright eyes and her lips ringed with sadness. 'I must have her,' he said. 'I will marry her. I will save her.'

'You may not survive,' Johannes said.

'I will survive, if you help me. If you are faithful to me, if you under-stand me, you'll do it.'

Johannes feared for the young king's life. But he had under-stood the young king's father, and his father's father, and his father's father's father before that. What could he say?

Johannes sighed. 'I'll do it.'

*

It was widely known that in all the golden princess's days of loneliness, the only thing that gave her any degree of happiness was gold. So Johannes told the king to gather all of the gold in the kingdom and to command his goldsmiths to craft the most exquisite golden objects that the world had ever seen. Which soon was done.

Then Johannes disguised himself and the king as merchants and loaded a ship with the golden goods. And they set off for the land of the golden princess.

As their ship's prow split the sea, Johannes tutored the king in his part: 'You're a gold merchant, Your Majesty. The princess has always loved gold, but these days, it is the only thing that gives her any joy. So when I bring her to the ship, charm her not only with your gentle manners and fine looks, but also with the gold. Then, perhaps, she will be yours.'

When they landed, the king readied the ship and tended to his merchant costume, while Johannes, carrying a few golden objects in his bag, made his way to the towering ramparts of black marble where the golden princess lived. He entered the courtyard, and there discovered a serving girl drawing water from a well with a golden bucket.

'Pretty maid,' he said, smiling his kind but unhandsome smile, 'do you think your lady might be interested in such trifling works of gold as these?' And he produced two of the finest, most exquisite golden statuettes that man's hand has ever made.

The girl was stunned by their beauty. She took them from Johannes and hurried within. Not ten minutes had

elapsed before the golden princess herself emerged from the castle, holding the statuettes in her hands. She was as gorgeous as her portrait – more so in fact – and as she greeted Johannes, her golden hair flashed in the light and her ocean-blue eyes danced with pleasure. Still, round her lips there was sadness.

'Tell me, old man,' she said, 'are these really for sale? I've never seen anything so beautiful, so fine.'

Faithful Johannes bowed. 'But there is more, fair princess, much more. My master's ship is full of such wonders. And they can be yours, if you will just accompany me down to the harbour.'

The princess hesitated for a moment – since her last husband-to-be had died, she had not set foot outside the palace. But the allure of the gold was too strong. She threw a shining travelling cloak over her shoulders and followed Johannes to the boat.

The young king, in his disguise as a merchant, greeted her. Her beauty was so stunning, her sadness so evident and so tender, that he nearly fainted again. But somehow he did not, and she smiled at him and invited him to show her all the treasures he had brought to her fair land.

As soon as they had descended below the deck, Johannes hurried to the captain of the ship, and, in whispered tones, instructed him to cast off from the shore and set sail for home immediately.

Now, my young readers, I know just what you're thinking. You're thinking, *Hmmm. Stealing a girl. That's an*

interesting *way of winning her heart*. Allow me to warn you now that, under any other circumstances, stealing a girl is about the worst way of winning her heart you could possibly imagine.

But, because this happened long ago, in a faraway land, it seems to have worked.

For the golden princess came back up to the deck and saw that her land was far away from her. At first she did indeed protest, and fiercely too, that she'd been carried away by lowborn merchants. But when one of the 'merchants' revealed himself to be a king, and revealed that, furthermore, he was madly in love with her, and when, besides, Johannes assured her that, if she really wanted to, she could go home, but she couldn't take the gold if she did, the princess realised that in fact the young king was just the kind of man she would like to marry after all, and decided that she'd give the whole matrimony thing one last shot.

And they all lived happily ever after.