

The Talisman

By Eugene Field

There was a boy named Wilhelm who was the only son of a widow. He was so devoted and obedient that other people in the village used to be saying always:

“What a good son Wilhelm is; how kind he is to his mother.” So, while he was the example for all the other boys in the village, he was the pride of his mother, who told him that some day he would marry a princess for having been such a good and dutiful son.

When the time came for him to go out into the world and make his living, his mother blessed him and said, “Here, my son, is a talisman, which you are to hang about your neck and wear nearest your heart. Whenever you are in trouble, look at this talisman and it will preserve you from harm.”

So, with his mother’s kiss upon his lips and the talisman next his heart, Wilhelm set out to make his fortune in the world. The talisman was simply an old silver coin which had been smoothly polished upon one side and inscribed with the word “Mother;” yet Wilhelm prized it above all other earthly things—first, because his mother had given it to him, and again because he believed it possessed a charm that would keep him from harm.

Wilhelm travelled many days through the forests and over the hills in search of a town where he might find employment, and the food with which his mother had provided him for the journey was nearly gone. But whenever he was inclined to sadness, he drew the talisman from his bosom and the sight of the name of mother restored his spirits.

One evening as he climbed a hill, he beheld a great city about a league distant.

Here at last I shall find employment,” thought he. But he had no sooner uttered these words than he heard something like a sigh issuing from the roadside and as he turned to discover whence it came, he saw a dark and forbidding looking old castle standing back some way from the road in a cluster of forest trees. The grounds belonging to this old castle were surrounded by a single fence, between the palings of which a white swan stretched out its neck and gave utterance to the sighs which had attracted Wilhelm’s attention.

The dismal noise made by the bird and its strange actions—for it fluttered its wings wildly and waved its head as if it would have Wilhelm approach—excited Wilhelm’s curiosity, and he drew nearer the fence and said, “Why do you act so strangely, white swan?”

But the swan made no answer except to sigh more dismally than before and flap its wings still more widely. Then Wilhelm saw that the swan, although a swan in every other particular, had the eyes of a human being. He had scarcely recovered from the astonishment occasioned by this discovery, when the first swan was joined by a full score of other white swans that came running over the green sword, sighing very dismally and many of them shedding tears from their human eyes.

It was only the approach of night that hastened Wilhelm on his journey to the city, and, as he trudged along, he could not help thinking of the singular adventure with the swans. Presently he came upon a countryman sitting by the roadside, and to him he told the story of the castle and the swans.

“Ah,” said the countryman, “you are an innocent lad to be sure! That was the castle of the old witch, and the swans you saw are unfortunate princes whom she has enchanted.”

Then Wilhelm begged him to tell him about the old witch and the poor princes, and the countryman told him all from first to last, only I will have to make it much shorter, as it was a long tale.

It seems that the old witch was once a princess who was famed for her beauty and wit. She had a younger sister who was quite as beautiful, but much more amiable and much less ambitious. These sister princesses lived in the castle together, and the elder, whose name was Mirza, guarded the younger very jealously lest the younger should be first married. One time the Prince Joseph determined he would wed. He was the handsomest and bravest prince in the land and all the princesses set their caps for him, Mirza among the others. But it came to the prince’s ears that Mirza was learned in and practised witchcraft, so, despite her beauty and her grace, he would have no thought of Mirza, but chose her younger sister to wife.

When the prince wedded the younger princess, Mirza was enraged beyond all saying, and forthwith she dismissed her court and gave up her life to the singing of incantations and the dreadful practices of a witch; and so constant was she in the practice of those black arts that her back became bent, her hair white, and her face wrinkled, and she grew to be the most hideous hag in the whole kingdom. Meanwhile, the prince had become king; and his wife, the queen, had presented him with a daughter, so beautiful that her like had never been seen on earth. This little princess was named Mary, a name esteemed then, as now, as the most beautiful of all names. Mary increased in loveliness each day and when she was fifteen the fame of her beauty and amiability was worldwide.

But one day, as the princess sat counting her pearls in her chamber, the old witch Mirza flew in through the window on a broomstick and carried the princess Mary off to her forlorn old castle, a league beyond the city. The queen mother, who had witnessed this violence, fell into a swoon from which she never recovered, and the whole court was thrown into a vast commotion.

Having buried his fair queen, the bereaved king set about to recover his daughter, the princess Mary, but this was found to be impossible, since the witch had locked the girl in an upper chamber of the castle and had set a catamaran and a boogaboo to guard the place. So, whenever the king’s soldiers attempted to rescue the princess, the catamaran breathed fire from his nostrils upon them while the boogaboo tore out their hearts with his fierce claws.

Finally the king sent word to the witch that he would bestow upon her all the riches of his kingdom if she would restore his daughter, but she replied that there was only one condition upon which she would give up the princess and that was that some young man of the kingdom should rightly answer three questions she would propound. At once the bravest and handsomest knights in the kingdom volunteered to rescue the princess, but having failed to answer the questions of the old witch, they were transformed into swans and were condemned to eke out miserable existences in the dreary park around the old witch’s castle.

This,” said the countryman, “is the story of the princess, the witch and the swans. Every once in a while, an adventuresome youth seeks to restore the princess to her father, and he is as surely transformed into a swan. So, while the court is in mourning, the princess pines in the witch’s castle and the swans wander about the castle yard.”

This piteous tale awakened Wilhelm's sympathy, and although it was now quite dark, he determined to go back to the witch's castle and catch a glimpse of the beautiful princess.

"May luck attend thee," said the countryman, "but beware of the catamaran and the boogaboo."

As he was plodding back to the witch's castle, Wilhelm drew his talisman from his bosom and gazed tenderly upon it. It had never looked so bright and shining. The moon beams danced upon its smooth face and kissed it. Wilhelm was confident that this was an omen that his dear mother approved the errand he was on. Then he knelt down by the roadside and said a little prayer, and when he had finished, the night zephyrs breathed their sweetest music in his ears, and Wilhelm thought it was the heavenly Father whispering words of encouragement to him. So Wilhelm went boldly toward the witch's castle.

As he drew nigh to the castle, he saw the old witch fly away on her broomstick, accompanied by a bevy of snarling hobgoblins that were also on broomsticks and looked very hideous. Then Wilhelm knew the witch and her escort were off for the forest and would not return till midnight.

The princess Mary was standing at the barred window of her chamber and was weeping. As Wilhelm approached the castle, the swans rushed to meet him, and the flapping of their wings and their piteous cries attracted the attention of the princess, and she saw Wilhelm.

"Oh, fly from here, sweet prince," cried the princess; "for if the witch were to return, she would kill you and boil your heart in her cauldron!"

"I am no prince," replied Wilhelm, "and I do not fear the ugly old witch."

Then Wilhelm told the princess who he was and how he was ready to serve her, for, having perceived her rare beauty and amiability, he was madly in love with her and was ready to die for her sake. But the princess, who was most agreeably impressed by his manly figure, handsome face, and honest valor, begged him not to risk his life for her.

"It is better that I should pass my existence here in prison" said she, "than that you should be transformed as these other wretched princes have been."

And when they heard these words, the swans craned their necks and gave utterance to such heartrending sighs that the princess sobbed with renewed vigor and even Wilhelm fell to weeping.

At this moment, hearing the commotion in the yard, the hideous catamaran and the ugly boogaboo came out of the castle and regarded Wilhelm with ferocious countenances. Never before had Wilhelm seen such revolting monsters!

The catamaran had a body and tail like an alligator, a head like a hippopotamus, and four legs like the legs of an ostrich. The body was covered with greenish scales, its eyes were living fire, and scorching flames issued from its mouth and ears. The boogaboo was none the less frightful in its appearance. It resembled a monster ape, except that instead of a hairy hide it had a scabby skin as red as a salamander's. Its arms were long and muscular, and its bony hands were armed with eleven fingers each, upon which were nails or claws shaped like fish hooks and keen as razors. This boogaboo had skinny wings like a huge bat, and at the end of its rat-like tail was a sting more deadly than the poison of a snake.

These hideous reptiles—the catamaran and the boogaboo—stood glaring at Wilhelm.

“Ow—wow—wow—wow!” roared the catamaran; “I will scorch you to a cinder.”

“Ow—wow—wow—wow!” bellowed the boogaboo, “I will tear your heart from your bosom.”

So, in the wise determination not to die until he had made a brave and discreet struggle for the princess, Wilhelm left the castle and stole down the highway towards the city.

That night he slept in a meadow, and the stars watched over him and the daisies and buttercups bent their heads lovingly above him and sang lullabies, while he dreamed of his mother and the princess, who seemed to smile upon him all that night.

In the morning, Wilhelm pushed on to the city, and he went straight to the palace gate and demanded to see the king. This was no easy matter, but finally he was admitted and the king asked him what he wanted. When the king heard that Wilhelm was determined to make an attempt to rescue the princess, he burst out crying and embracing the youth, assured him that it was folly for him—a simple country boy—to undertake to accomplish what so many accomplished and skilled princes had essayed in vain.

But Wilhelm insisted, until at last the king called his court together and announced that the simple country lad had resolved to guess the riddles of the old witch. The courtiers straightway fell to laughing at the presumption of the rural wight, as they derisively called him, but it was much to the credit of the court ladies that they admired the youth for his comely person, ingenuous manners, and brave determination. The end of it all was that, at noon that very day, a long procession went with Wilhelm to the witch’s castle, the courtiers hardly suppressing their mirth, but the ladies all in tears for fear the handsome youth would not guess the riddles and would therefore be transformed by the witch.

The old witch saw the train approaching her castle and she went out into the yard and sat on a rickety bench under a upas tree to receive the king and his court. She was attended by twelve snapdragons, a score of hobgoblins, and innumerable gnomes, elves, ghouls, and hoodoos. On her left stood the catamaran, and on her right the boogaboo, each more revoltingly hideous than ever before.

When the king and Wilhelm and the rest of the cavalcade came into the castle yard and stood before the witch, she grinned and showed her black gums and demanded to know why they had come.

“We have a youth here who would solve your three riddles,” said the king.

Then the old witch laughed, “Ha, ha, ha!” and the gnomes, ghouls, and all the rest of the enchantress’ followers took up the refrain and laughed till the air was very dense with sulphurous fumes.

“Well, if the youth is resolved, let him see the doom that awaits him,” said the witch, and she waved her stick.

Forthwith a strange procession issued from the castle. First came two little imps, then came two black demons, and last of all the swans, two by two, mournfully flapping their wings and giving utterance to sighs and moans more dismal than any sounds ever before heard.

“You are going to have a new companion, my pretty pets,” said the old witch to the swans, whereupon the swans moaned and sighed with renewed vigor.

The king and his court trembled and wept at the spectacle, for in these unhappy birds they recognized the poor princes who had fallen victims to the foul witch’s arts. To add to the misery of the scene, the beautiful princess Mary appeared at the barred window of her chamber in the castle and stretched out her white arms beseechingly. But the king and

his court could avail her nothing, for the hideous catamaran and the cruel boogaboo were prepared to pounce upon and destroy whosoever attempted to rescue the unhappy maiden by violence.

“Let the presumptuous youth stand before me,” cried the witch. And Wilhelm strode boldly to the open spot between the witch and the king’s retinue.

“A fine, plump swan will you make,” hissed the old witch. “Now can you tell me what is sweeter than the kiss of the princess’ mother?”

Now the witch had supposed that Wilhelm would reply “The kiss of the princess herself,” for this was the reply that all the other youths had made. But Wilhelm made no such answer. He faced the old witch boldly and replied, “The kiss of my own mother!”

And hearing this, which was the correct answer, the witch quivered with astonishment and rage, and the catamaran fell down upon the grass and vomited its flaming breath upon itself until it was utterly consumed. So that was the last of the hideous catamaran.

Having said that, he will not think to repeat it,” thought the old witch, and she propounded the second question, which was:

“What always lieth next a good man’s heart?”

Now for a long time Wilhelm paused in doubt, and the king and his retinue began to tremble and the poor swans dolorously flapped their wings and sighed more piteously. But the old witch chuckled and licked her warty chops and muttered, “He will have feathers all over his back presently.”

And in his doubt Wilhelm remembered the words of his dear mother: “Whenever in trouble, look at the talisman and it will preserve you from harm.” So Wilhelm put his hand in his bosom and drew forth the talisman, and lo! the inscription seemed to burn itself into his very soul. Gently he raised the talisman to his lips and reverently he kissed it. And then he uttered the sacred name, “Mother.”

And straightway the hideous boogaboo fell down upon the grass and with its cruel talons tore out its own heart, so that the boogaboo perished miserably in the sight of all. The old witch cowered and foamed at her ugly black mouth and uttered fearful curses and imprecations.

It was never known what the third and last riddle was, for as soon as they saw her deprived of her twin guardians, the catamaran and the boogaboo, the king’s swordsmen fell upon the witch and hewed off her head, and the head and body tumbled to the ground. At that very instant the earth opened and, with a sickening groan, swallowed up the dead witch and all her elves, gnomes, imps, ghouls, snapdragons, and demons. But the swans were instantaneously transformed back into human beings, for as soon as the witch died, all enchantment over them was at an end, and there was great joy.

The recovery of the beautiful princess Mary was easily accomplished now, and the next day she was wedded to Wilhelm amid great rejoicing, the rescued princes serving as the bridegroom’s best men. The king had it proclaimed that Wilhelm should be his successor, and there was great rejoicing in all the kingdom.

In the midst of his prosperity, Wilhelm did not forget his dear old mother. He sent for her at once, and she lived with Wilhelm and his bride in the splendid palace, and she was always very particular to tell everybody what a good, kind, and thoughtful son Wilhelm had always been.

Dear little boys, God has put into your bosoms a talisman which will always tell you that love of mother is the sweetest and holiest of all human things. Treasure that sacred

talisman, and heaven's blessings will be always with you. And then each of you shall marry a beautiful princess, or at least one who is every whit as good as a beautiful princess.