

Asmund and Signy

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

Long, long ago, in the days when fairies, witches, giants and ogres still visited the earth, there lived a king who reigned over a great and beautiful country. He was married to a wife whom he dearly loved, and had two most promising children--a son called Asmund, and a daughter who was named Signy.

The king and queen were very anxious to bring their children up well, and the young prince and princess were taught everything likely to make them clever and accomplished. They lived at home in their father's palace, and he spared no pains to make their lives happy.

Prince Asmund dearly loved all outdoor sports and an open-air life, and from his earliest childhood he had longed to live entirely in the forest close by. After many arguments and entreaties he succeeded in persuading the king to give him two great oak trees for his very own.

'Now,' said he to his sister, 'I will have the trees hollowed out, and then I will make rooms in them and furnish them so that I shall be able to live out in the forest.'

'Oh, Asmund!' exclaimed Signy, 'what a delightful idea! Do let me come too, and live in one of your trees. I will bring all my pretty things and ornaments, and the trees are so near home we shall be quite safe in them.'

Asmund, who was extremely fond of his sister, readily consented, and they had a very happy time together, carrying over all their pet treasures, and Signy's jewels and other ornaments, and arranging them in the pretty little rooms inside the trees.

Unfortunately sadder days were to come. A war with another country broke out, and the king had to lead his army against their enemy. During his absence the queen fell ill, and after lingering for some time she died, to the great grief of her children. They made up their minds to live altogether for a time in their trees, and for this purpose they had provisions enough stored up inside to last them a year.

Now, I must tell you, in another country a long way off, there reigned a king who had an only son named Ring. Prince Ring had heard so much about the beauty and goodness of Princess Signy that he determined to marry her if possible. So he begged his father to let him have a ship for the voyage, set sail with a favourable wind, and after a time landed in the country where Signy lived.

The prince lost no time in setting out for the royal palace, and on his way there he met such a wonderfully lovely woman that he felt he had never seen such beauty in all his life. He stopped her and at once asked who she was.

‘I am Signy, the king’s daughter,’ was the reply.

Then the prince inquired why she was wandering about all by herself, and she told him that since her mother’s death she was so sad that whilst her father was away she preferred being alone.

Ring was quite deceived by her, and never guessed that she was not Princess Signy at all, but a strong, gigantic, wicked witch bent on deceiving him under a beautiful shape. He confided to her that he had travelled all the way from his own country for her sake, having fallen in love with the accounts he had heard of her beauty, and he then and there asked her to be his wife.

The witch listened to all he said and, much pleased, ended by accepting his offer; but she begged him to return to his ship for a little

while as she wished to go some way further into the forest, promising to join him later on.

Prince Ring did as she wished and went back to his ship to wait, whilst she walked on into the forest till she reached the two oak trees.

Here she resumed her own gigantic shape, tore up the trees by their roots, threw one of them over her back and clasped the other to her breast, carried them down to the shore and waded out with them to the ship.

She took care not to be noticed as she reached the ship, and directly she got on board she once more changed to her former lovely appearance and told the prince that her luggage was now all on board, and that they need wait for nothing more.

The prince gave orders to set sail at once, and after a fine voyage landed in his own country, where his parents and his only sister received him with the greatest joy and affection.

The false Signy was also very kindly welcomed. A beautiful house was got ready for her, and Prince Ring had the two oaks planted in the garden just in front of her windows so that she might have the pleasure of seeing them constantly. He often went to visit the witch, whom he believed to be Princess Signy, and one day he asked: 'Don't you think we might be married before long?'

'Yes,' said she, quite pleased, 'I am quite ready to marry you whenever you like.'

'Then,' replied Ring, 'let us decide on this day fortnight. And see, I have brought you some stuff to make your wedding-dress of.' So saying he gave her a large piece of the most beautiful brocade, all woven over with gold threads, and embroidered with pearls and other jewels.

The prince had hardly left her before the witch resumed her proper shape and tore about the room, raging and storming and flinging the beautiful silk on the floor.

‘What was SHE to do with such things?’ she roared. ‘SHE did not know how to sew or make clothes, and she was sure to die of starvation into the bargain if her brother Ironhead did not come soon and bring her some raw meat and bones, for she really could eat nothing else.’

As she was raving and roaring in this frantic manner part of the floor suddenly opened and a huge giant rose up carrying a great chest in his arms. The witch was enchanted at this sight, and eagerly helped her brother to set down and open the chest, which was full of the ghastly food she had been longing for. The horrid pair set to and greedily devoured it all, and when the chest was quite empty the giant put it on his shoulder and disappeared as he had come, without leaving any trace of his visit.

But his sister did not keep quiet for long, and tore and pulled at the rich brocade as if she wanted to destroy it, stamping about and shouting angrily.

Now, all this time Prince Asmund and his sister sat in their trees just outside the window and saw all that was going on.

‘Dear Signy,’ said Asmund, ‘do try to get hold of that piece of brocade and make the clothes yourself, for really we shall have no rest day or night with such a noise.’

‘I will try,’ said Signy; ‘it won’t be an easy matter, but it’s worth while taking some trouble to have a little peace.’

So she watched for an opportunity and managed to carry off the brocade the first time the witch left her room. Then she set to work, cutting out and sewing as best she could, and by the end of six days she had turned it into an elegant robe with a long train and a mantle. When it was finished she climbed to the top of her tree and contrived to throw the clothes on to a table through the open window.

How delighted the witch was when she found the clothes all finished! The next time Prince Ring came to see her she gave them to him, and he paid her many compliments on her skilful work, after which he took leave of her in the most friendly manner. But he had scarcely left the house when the witch began to rage as furiously as ever, and never stopped till her brother Ironhead appeared.

When Asmund saw all these wild doings from his tree he felt he could no longer keep silence. He went to Prince Ring and said: 'Do come with me and see the strange things that are happening in the new princess's room.'

The prince was not a little surprised, but he consented to hide himself with Asmund behind the panelling of the room, from where they could see all that went on through a little slit. The witch was raving and roaring as usual, and said to her brother:

'Once I am married to the king's son I shall be better off than now. I shall take care to have all that pack of courtiers put to death, and then I shall send for all my relations to come and live here instead. I fancy the giants will enjoy themselves very much with me and my husband.'

When Prince Ring heard this he fell into such a rage that he ordered the house to be set on fire, and it was burnt to the ground, with the witch and her brother in it.

Asmund then told the prince about the two oak trees and took him to see them. The prince was quite astonished at them and at all their

contents, but still more so at the extreme beauty of Signy. He fell in love with her at once, and entreated her to marry him, which, after a time, she consented to do. Asmund, on his side, asked for the hand of Prince Ring's sister, which was gladly granted him, and the double wedding was celebrated with great rejoicings.

After this Prince Asmund and his bride returned to his country to live with the king his father. The two couples often met, and lived happily for many, many years. And that is the end of the story.

[From Islandische Mahrchen.]