

The Mastermaid

by Sir George Webbe Dasent
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Once on a time there was a king who had several sons--I don't know how many there were--but the youngest had no rest at home, for nothing else would please him but to go out into the world and try his luck, and after a long time the king was forced to give him leave to go. Now, after he had travelled some days, he came one night to a Giant's house, and there he got a place in the Giant's service. In the morning the Giant went off to herd his goats, and as he left the yard, he told the Prince to clean out the stable; 'and after you have done that, you needn't do anything else to-day; for you must know it is an easy master you have come to. But what is set you to do you must do well, and you mustn't think of going into any of the rooms which are beyond that in which you slept, for if you do, I'll take your life.'

'Sure enough, it is an easy master I have got', said the Prince to himself, as he walked up and down the room, and carolled and sang, for he thought there was plenty of time to clean out the stable.

'But still it would be good fun just to peep into his other rooms, for there must be something in them which he is afraid lest I should see, since he won't give me leave to go in.'

So he went into the first room, and there was a pot boiling on a hook by the wall, but the Prince saw no fire underneath it. I wonder what is inside it, he thought; and then he dipped a lock of his hair into it, and the hair seemed as if it were all turned to copper.

'What a dainty broth,' he said; 'if one tasted it, he'd look grand inside his gullet'; and with that he went into the next room. There, too, was a pot hanging by a hook, which bubbled and boiled; but there was no fire under that either.

'I may as well try this too', said the Prince, as he put another lock into the pot, and it came out all silvered.

'They haven't such rich broth in my father's house', said the Prince; 'but it all depends on how it tastes', and with that he went on into the

third room. There, too, hung a pot, and boiled just as he had seen in the two other rooms, and the Prince had a mind to try this too, so he dipped a lock of hair into it, and it came out gilded, so that the light gleamed from it.

"'Worse and worse", said the old wife; but I say better and better', said the Prince; 'but if he boils gold here, I wonder what he boils in yonder.'

He thought he might as well see; so he went through the door into the fourth room. Well, there was no pot in there, but there was a Princess, seated on a bench, so lovely, that the Prince had never seen anything like her in his born days.

'Oh! in Heaven's name', she said, 'what do you want here?'

'I got a place here yesterday', said the Prince.

'A place, indeed! Heaven help you out of it.'

'Well, after all, I think I've got an easy master; he hasn't set me much to do to-day, for after I have cleaned out the stable, my day's work is over.'

'Yes, but how will you do it', she said; 'for if you set to work to clean it like other folk, ten pitchforks full will come in for every one you toss out. But I will teach you how to set to work; you must turn the fork upside down, and toss with the handle, and then all the dung will fly out of itself.'

'Yes, he would be sure to do that', said the Prince; and so he sat there the whole day, for he and the Princess were soon great friends, and had made up their minds to have one another, and so the first day of his service with the Giant was not long, you may fancy. But when the evening drew on, she said 'twould be as well if he got the stable cleaned out before the Giant came home; and when he went to the stable, he thought he would just see if what she had said were true, and so he began to work like the grooms in his father's stable; but he soon had enough of that, for he hadn't worked a minute before the stable was so full of dung that he hadn't room to stand. Then he did as the Princess bade him, and turned up the fork and worked with the handle, and lo! in a trice the stable was as clean as if it had been

scoured. And when he had done his work, he went back into the room where the Giant had given him leave to be, and began to walk up and down, and to carol and sing. So after a bit, home came the Giant with his goats.

'Have you cleaned the stable?' asked the Giant.

'Yes, now it's all right and tight, master', answered the Prince.

'I'll soon see if it is', growled the Giant, and strode off to the stable, where he found it just as the Prince had said.

'You've been talking to my Mastermaid, I can see', said the Giant; 'for you've not sucked this knowledge out of your own breast.'

'Mastermaid!' said the Prince, who looked as stupid as an owl, 'what sort of thing is that, master? I'd be very glad to see it.'

'Well, well!' said the Giant; 'you'll see her soon enough'.

Next day the Giant set off with his goats again, and before he went he told the Prince to fetch home his horse, which was out at grass on the hill-side, and when he had done that he might rest all the day.

'For you must know, it is an easy master you have come to', said the Giant; 'but if you go into any of the rooms I spoke of yesterday, I'll wring your head off.'

So off he went with his flock of goats.

'An easy master you are indeed', said the Prince; 'but for all that, I'll just go in and have a chat with your Mastermaid; may be she'll be as soon mine as yours.' So he went in to her, and she asked him what he had to do that day.

'Oh! nothing to be afraid of', said he; 'I've only to go up to the hill-side to fetch his horse.'

'Very well, and how will you set about it?'

'Well, for that matter, there's no great art in riding a horse home. I fancy I've ridden fresher horses before now', said the Prince.

'Ah, but this isn't so easy a task as you think; but I'll teach you how to do it. When you get near it, fire and flame will come out of its nostrils, as out of a tar barrel; but look out, and take the bit which hangs behind the door yonder, and throw it right into his jaws, and he will grow so tame that you may do what you like with him.'

Yes! the Prince would mind and do that; and so he sat in there the whole day, talking and chattering with the Mastermaid about one thing and another, but they always came back to how happy they would be if they could only have one another, and get well away from the Giant; and, to tell the truth, the Prince would have clean forgotten both the horse and the hill-side, if the Mastermaid hadn't put him in mind of them when evening drew on, telling him he had better set out to fetch the horse before the Giant came home. So he set off, and took the bit which hung in the corner, ran up the hill, and it wasn't long before he met the horse, with fire and flame streaming out of its nostrils. But he watched his time, and, as the horse came open-jawed up to him, he threw the bit into its mouth, and it stood as quiet as a lamb. After that, it was no great matter to ride it home and put it up, you may fancy; and then the Prince went into his room again, and began to carol and sing.

So the Giant came home again at even with his goats; and the first words he said were:

'Have you brought my horse down from the hill?'

'Yes, master, that I have', said the Prince; 'and a better horse I never bestrode; but for all that I rode him straight home, and put him up safe and sound.'

'I'll soon see to that', said the Giant, and ran out to the stable, and there stood the horse just as the Prince had said.

'You've talked to my Mastermaid, I'll be bound, for you haven't sucked this out of your own breast', said the Giant again.

'Yesterday master talked of this Mastermaid, and to-day it's the same story', said the Prince, who pretended to be silly and stupid. 'Bless you, master! why don't you show me the thing at once? I should so like to see it only once in my life.'

'Oh, if that's all', said the Giant, 'you'll see her soon enough.'

The third day, at dawn, the Giant went off to the wood again with his goats; but before he went he said to the Prince:

'To-day you must go to Hell and fetch my fire-tax. When you have done that you can rest yourself all day, for you must know it is an easy master you have come to'; and with that off he went.

'Easy master, indeed!' said the Prince. 'You may be easy, but you set me hard tasks all the same. But I may as well see if I can find your Mastermaid, as you call her. I daresay she'll tell me what to do'; and so in he went to her again.

So when the Mastermaid asked what the Giant had set him to do that day, he told her how he was to go to Hell and fetch the fire-tax.

'And how will you set about it?' asked the Mastermaid.

'Oh, that you must tell me', said the Prince. 'I have never been to Hell in my life; and even if I knew the way, I don't know how much I am to ask for.'

'Well, I'll soon tell you', said the Mastermaid; 'you must go to the steep rock away yonder, under the hill-side, and take the club that lies there, and knock on the face of the rock. Then there will come out one all glistening with fire; to him you must tell your errand; and when he asks you how much you will have, mind you say, "As much as I can carry."' "

Yes; he would be sure to say that; so he sat in there with the Mastermaid all that day too; and though evening drew on, he would have sat there till now, had not the Mastermaid put him in mind that it was high time to be off to Hell to fetch the Giant's fire-tax before he came home. So he went on his way, and did just as the Mastermaid had told him; and when he reached the rock, he took up the club and gave a great thump. Then the rock opened, and out came one whose face glistened, and out of whose eyes and nostrils flew sparks of fire.

'What is your will?' said he.

'Oh! I'm only come from the Giant to fetch his fire-tax', said the Prince.

'How much will you have then?' said the other.

'I never wish for more than I am able to carry', said the Prince.

'Lucky for you that you did not ask for a whole horse-load', said he who came out of the rock; 'but come now into the rock with me, and you shall have it.'

So the Prince went in with him, and you may fancy what heaps and heaps of gold and silver he saw lying in there, just like stones in a gravel pit; and he got a load just as big as he was able to carry, and set off home with it. Now, when the Giant came home with his goats at even, the Prince went into his room, and began to carol and sing as he had done the evenings before.

'Have you been to Hell after my fire-tax?' roared the Giant.

'Oh yes; that I have, master', answered the Prince.

'Where have you put it?' said the Giant.

'There stands the sack on the bench yonder', said the Prince.

'I'll soon see to that', said the Giant, who strode off to the bench, and there he saw the sack so full that the gold and silver dropped out on the floor as soon as ever he untied the string.

'You've been talking to my Mastermaid, that I can see', said the Giant; 'but if you have, I'll wring your head off.'

'Mastermaid!' said the Prince; 'yesterday master talked of this Mastermaid, and to-day he talks of her again, and the day before yesterday it was the same story. I only wish I could see what sort of thing she is! that I do.'

'Well, well, wait till to-morrow', said the Giant, 'and then I'll take you in to her myself.'

'Thank you kindly, master', said the Prince; 'but it's only a joke of master's, I'll be bound.'

So next day the Giant took him in to the Mastermaid, and said to her:

'Now, you must cut his throat, and boil him in the great big pot you wot of; and when the broth is ready, just give me a call.'

After that, he laid him down on the bench to sleep, and began to snore so, that it sounded like thunder on the hills.

So the Mastermaid took a knife and cut the Prince in his little finger, and let three drops of blood fall on a three-legged stool; and after that she took all the old rags, and soles of shoes, and all the rubbish she could lay hands on, and put them into the pot; and then she filled a chest full of ground gold, and took a lump of salt, and a flask of water that hung behind the door, and she took, besides, a golden apple, and two golden chickens, and off she set with the Prince from the Giant's house as fast as they could; and when they had gone a little way, they came to the sea, and after that they sailed over the sea; but where they got the ship from, I have never heard tell.

So when the Giant had slumbered a good bit, he began to stretch himself as he lay on the bench and called out, 'Will it be soon done?'

'Only just begun', answered the first drop of blood on the stool.

So the Giant lay down to sleep again, and slumbered a long, long time. At last he began to toss about a little, and cried out:

'Do you hear what I say; will it be soon done?' but he did not look up this time, any more than the first, for he was still half asleep.

'Half done', said the second drop of blood.

Then the Giant thought again it was the Mastermaid, so he turned over on his other side, and fell asleep again; and when he had gone on sleeping for many hours, he began to stir and stretch his old bones, and to call out,--

'Isn't it done yet?'

'Done to a turn', said the third drop of blood.

Then the Giant rose up and began to rub his eyes, but he couldn't see who it was that was talking to him, so he searched and called for the Mastermaid, but no one answered.

'Ah, well! I dare say she's just run out of doors for a bit', he thought, and took up a spoon and went up to the pot to taste the broth; but he found nothing but shoe-soles, and rags, and such stuff; and it was all boiled up together, so that he couldn't tell which was thick and which was thin. As soon as he saw this, he could tell how things had gone, and he got so angry he scarce knew which leg to stand upon. Away he went after the Prince and the Mastermaid, till the wind whistled behind him; but before long, he came to the water and couldn't cross it.

'Never mind', he said; 'I know a cure for this. I've only got to call on my stream-sucker.'

So he called on his stream-sucker, and he came and stooped down, and took one, two, three gulps; and then the water fell so much in the sea, that the Giant could see the Mastermaid and the Prince sailing in their ship.

'Now, you must cast out the lump of salt', said the Mastermaid.

So the Prince threw it overboard, and it grew up into a mountain so high, right across the sea, that the Giant couldn't pass it, and the stream-sucker couldn't help him by swilling any more water.

'Never mind!' cried the Giant; 'there's a cure for this too.' So he called on his hill-borer to come and bore through the mountain, that the stream-sucker might creep through and take another swill; but just as they had made a hole through the hill, and the stream-sucker was about to drink, the Mastermaid told the Prince to throw overboard a drop or two out of the flask, and then the sea was just as full as ever, and before the stream-sucker could take another gulp, they reached the land and were saved from the Giant.

So they made up their minds to go home to the Prince's father, but the Prince would not hear of the Mastermaid's walking, for he thought it seemly neither for her nor for him.

'Just wait here ten minutes', he said, 'while I go home after the seven horses which stand in my father's stall. It's no great way off, and I shan't be long about it; but I will not hear of my sweetheart walking to my father's palace.'

'Ah!' said the Mastermaid, 'pray don't leave me, for if you once get home to the palace, you'll forget me outright; I know you will.'

'Oh!' said he, 'how can I forget you; you with whom I have gone through so much, and whom I love so dearly?'

There was no help for it, he must and would go home to fetch the coach and seven horses, and she was to wait for him by the seaside. So at last the Mastermaid was forced to let him have his way; she only said:

'Now, when you get home, don't stop so much as to say good day to any one, but go straight to the stable and put to the horses, and drive back as quick as you can; for they will all come about you; but do as though you did not see them; and above all things, mind you do not taste a morsel of food, for if you do, we shall both come to grief.'

All this the Prince promised; but he thought all the time there was little fear of his forgetting her.

Now, just as he came home to the palace, one of his brothers was thinking of holding his bridal feast, and the bride, and all her kith and kin, were just come to the palace. So they all thronged round him, and asked about this thing and that, and wanted him to go in with them; but he made as though he did not see them, and went straight to the stall and got out the horses, and began to put them to. And when they saw they could not get him to go in, they came out to him with meat and drink, and the best of everything they had got ready for the feast; but the Prince would not taste so much as a crumb, and put to as fast as he could. At last the bride's sister rolled an apple across the yard to him, saying:

'Well, if you won't eat anything else, you may as well take a bite of this, for you must be both hungry and thirsty after so long a journey.'

So he took up the apple and bit a piece out of it; but he had scarce done so, before he forgot the Mastermaid, and how he was to drive back for her.

'Well, I think I must be mad', he said; 'what am I to do with this coach and horses?' So he put the horses up again, and went along with the others into the palace, and it was soon settled that he should have the bride's sister, who had rolled the apple over to him.

There sat the Mastermaid by the seashore, and waited and waited for the Prince, but no Prince came; so at last she went up from the shore, and after she had gone a bit she came to a little hut which lay by itself in a copse close by the king's palace. She went in and asked if she might lodge there. It was an old dame that owned the hut, and a cross-grained scolding hag she was as ever you saw. At first she would not hear of the Mastermaid's lodging in her house, but at last, for fair words and high rent, the Mastermaid got leave to be there. Now the but was as dark and dirty as a pigsty, so the Mastermaid said she would smarten it up a little, that their house might look inside like other people's. The old hag did not like this either, and showed her teeth, and was cross; but the Mastermaid did not mind her. She took her chest of gold, and threw a handful or so into the fire, and lo! the gold melted, and bubbled and boiled over out of the grate, and spread itself over the whole hut, till it was gilded both outside and in. But as soon as the gold began to bubble and boil, the old hag got so afraid that she tried to run out as if the Evil One were at her heels; and as she ran out at the door, she forgot to stoop, and gave her head such a knock against the lintel, that she broke her neck, and that was the end of her.

Next morning the Constable passed that way, and you may fancy he could scarce believe his eyes when he saw the golden hut shining and glistening away in the copse; but he was still more astonished when he went in and saw the lovely maiden who sat there. To make a long story short, he fell over head and ears in love with her, and begged and prayed her to become his wife.

'Well, but have you much money?' asked the Mastermaid.

Yes, for that matter, he said, he was not so badly off, and off he went home to fetch the money, and when he came back at even he brought a half-bushel sack, and set it down on the bench. So the Mastermaid

said she would have him, since he was so rich; but they were scarce in bed before she said she must get up again:

'For I have forgotten to make up the fire.'

'Pray, don't stir out of bed', said the Constable; 'I'll see to it.'

So he jumped out of bed, and stood on the hearth in a trice.

'As soon as you have got hold of the shovel, just tell me', said the Mastermaid.

'Well, I am holding it now', said the Constable.

Then the Mastermaid said:

'God grant that you may hold the shovel, and the shovel you, and may you heap hot burning coals over yourself till morning breaks.'

So there stood the Constable all night long, shovelling hot burning coals over himself; and though he begged, and prayed, and wept, the coals were not a bit colder for that; but as soon as day broke, and he had power to cast away the shovel, he did not stay long, as you may fancy, but set off as if the Evil One or the bailiff were at his heels; and all who met him stared their eyes out at him, for he cut capers as though he were mad, and he could not have looked in worse plight if he had been flayed and tanned, and every one wondered what had befallen him, but he told no one where he had been, for shame's sake.

Next day the Attorney passed by the place where the Mastermaid lived, and he too saw how it shone and glistened in the copse; so he turned aside to find out who owned the hut; and when he came in and saw the lovely maiden, he fell more in love with her than the Constable, and began to woo her in hot haste.

Well, the Mastermaid asked him, as she had asked the Constable, if he had a good lot of money? and the Attorney said he wasn't so badly off; and as a proof he went home to fetch his money. So at even he came back with a great fat sack of money--I think it was a whole bushel sack--and set it down on the bench; and the long and the short of the matter was, that he was to have her, and they went to bed. But all at

once the Mastermaid had forgotten to shut the door of the porch, and she must get up and make it fast for the night.

'What, you do that!' said the Attorney, 'while I lie here; that can never be; lie still, while I go and do it.'

So up he jumped, like a pea on a drum-head, and ran out into the porch.

'Tell me', said the Mastermaid, 'when you have hold of the door-latch.'

'I've got hold of it now', said the Attorney.

'God grant, then', said the Mastermaid, 'that you may hold the door, and the door you, and that you may go from wall to wall till day dawns.'

So you may fancy what a dance the Attorney had all night long; such a waltz he never had before, and I don't think he would much care if he never had such a waltz again. Now he pulled the door forward, and then the door pulled him back, and so he went on, now dashed into one corner of the porch, and now into the other, till he was almost battered to death. At first he began to curse and swear, and then to beg and pray, but the door cared for nothing but holding its own till break of day. As soon as it let go its hold, off set the Attorney, leaving behind him his money to pay for his night's lodging, and forgetting his courtship altogether, for to tell the truth, he was afraid lest the house-door should come dancing after him. All who met him stared and gaped at him, for he too cut capers like a madman, and he could not have looked in worse plight if he had spent the whole night in butting against a flock of rams.

The third day the Sheriff passed that way, and he too saw the golden hut, and turned aside to find out who lived there; and he had scarce set eyes on the Mastermaid, before he began to woo her. So she answered him as she had answered the other two. If he had lots of money she would have him, if not, he might go about his business. Well, the Sheriff said he wasn't so badly off, and he would go home and fetch the money, and when he came again at even, he had a bigger sack even than the Attorney--it must have been at least a bushel and a half, and put it down on the bench. So it was soon settled that he was to

have the Mastermaid, but they had scarce gone to bed before the Mastermaid said she had forgotten to bring home the calf from the meadow, so she must get up and drive him into the stall. Then the Sheriff swore by all the powers that should never be, and, stout and fat as he was, up he jumped as nimbly as a kitten.

'Well, only tell me when you've got hold of the calf's tail', said the Mastermaid.

'Now I have hold of it', said the Sheriff.

'God grant', said the Mastermaid, 'that you may hold the calf's tail, and the calf's tail you, and that you may make a tour of the world together till day dawns'.

Well you may just fancy how the Sheriff had to stretch his legs; away they went, the calf and he, over high and low, across hill and dale, and the more the Sheriff cursed and swore, the faster the calf ran and jumped. At dawn of day the poor Sheriff was well nigh broken-winded, and so glad was he to let go the calf's tail, that he forgot his sack of money and everything else. As he was a great man, he went a little slower than the Attorney and the Constable, but the slower he went the more time people had to gape and stare at him; and I must say they made good use of their time, for he was terribly tattered and torn, after his dance with the calf.

Next day was fixed for the wedding at the palace, and the eldest brother was to drive to church with his bride, and the younger, who had lived with the Giant, with the bride's sister. But when they had got into the coach, and were just going to drive off, one of the trace-pins snapped off; and though they made at least three in its place, they all broke, from whatever sort of wood they were made. So time went on and on, and they couldn't get to church, and every one grew very downcast. But all at once the Constable said, for he too was bidden to the wedding, that yonder away in the copse lived a maiden.

'And if you can only get her to lend you the handle of her shovel with which she makes up her fire, I know very well it will hold.'

Well! they sent a messenger on the spot, with such a pretty message to the maiden, to know if they couldn't get the loan of her shovel which

the Constable had spoken of; and the maiden said 'yes', they might have it; so they got a trace-pin which wasn't likely to snap.

But all at once, just as they were driving off, the bottom of the coach tumbled to bits. So they set to work to make a new bottom as they best might; but it mattered not how many nails they put into it, nor of what wood they made it, for as soon as ever they got the bottom well into the coach and were driving off, snap it went in two again, and they were even worse off than when they lost the trace-pin. Just then the Attorney said--for if the Constable was there, you may fancy the Attorney was there too: 'Away yonder, in the copse, lives a maiden, and if you could only get her to lend you one-half of her porch-door, I know it can hold together.'

Well! they sent another message to the copse, and asked so prettily if they couldn't have the loan of the gilded porch-door which the Attorney had talked of; and they got it on the spot. So they were just setting out; but now the horses were not strong enough to draw the coach, though there were six of them; then they put on eight, and ten, and twelve, but the more they put on, and the more the coachman whipped, the more the coach wouldn't stir an inch. By this time it was far on in the day, and every one about the palace was in doleful dumps; for to church they must go, and yet it looked as if they should never get there. So at last the Sheriff said, that yonder in the gilded hut, in the copse, lived a maiden, and if they could only get the loan of her calf:

'I know it can drag the coach, though it were as heavy as a mountain.'

Well they all thought it would look silly to be drawn to church by a calf, but there was no help for it, so they had to send a third time, and ask so prettily in the King's name, if he couldn't get the loan of the calf the Sheriff had spoken of, and the Mastermaid let them have it on the spot, for she was not going to say 'no' this time either. So they put the calf on before the horses, and waited to see if it would do any good, and away went the coach over high and low, and stock and stone, so that they could scarce draw their breath; sometimes they were on the ground, and sometimes up in the air, and when they reached the church, the calf began to run round and round it like a spinning jenny, so that they had hard work to get out of the coach, and into the church. When they went back, it was the same story, only

they went faster, and they reached the palace almost before they knew they had set out.

Now when they sat down to dinner, the Prince who had served with the Giant said he thought they ought to ask the maiden who had lent them her shovel-handle and porch-door, and calf, to come up to the palace.

'For', said he, 'if we hadn't got these three things, we should have been sticking here still.'

Yes; the King thought that only fair and right, so he sent five of his best men down to the gilded but to greet the maiden from the King, and to ask her if she wouldn't be so good as to come up and dine at the palace.

'Greet the King from me', said the Mastermaid, 'and tell him, if he's too good to come to me, so am I too good to go to him.'

So the King had to go himself, and then the Mastermaid went up with him without more ado; and as the King thought she was more than she seemed to be, he sat her down in the highest seat by the side of the youngest bridegroom.

Now, when they had sat a little while at table, the Mastermaid took out her golden apple, and the golden cock and hen, which she had carried off from the Giant, and put them down on the table before her, and the cock and hen began at once to peck at one another, and to fight for the golden apple.

'Oh! only look', said the Prince; 'see how those two strive for the apple.'

'Yes!' said the Mastermaid; 'so we two strove to get away that time when we were together in the hillside.'

Then the spell was broken, and the Prince knew her again, and you may fancy how glad he was. But as for the witch who had rolled the apple over to him, he had her torn to pieces between twenty-four horses, so that there was not a bit of her left, and after that they held on with the wedding in real earnest; and though they were still stiff

and footsore, the Constable, the Attorney, and the Sheriff, kept it up with the best of them.