

A FAIRY TALE

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I.

A man had a secret. It was a very good and wholesome secret which meant no harm, but he was resolved that it should not cause any harm by accident either. Consequently, he could not let it go.

He took the secret around with him like a shadow, and mostly it walked quietly by his side. However as is the way of secrets it wanted to tell itself, and it kept plucking at the man's sleeve asking to be set free. The man understood and sympathised, but although he wasn't very wise he was experienced enough to know that this was asking for trouble: "Secrets always say they want to be free," he objected, "but then they run straight to someone else's house and cry to be let in. You know what happens then."

So the man travelled on and wouldn't let the shadow go, but it continued to nag. After many days of this nagging the man was starting to get worn down, when he came to a village where a wise man lived. He went to the wise man and told him his situation.

"What ought I to do?" he asked. "I have this secret like a shadow-monkey hanging on to me but I don't dare to let it go. Is there a way of letting it go without it running around and causing mischief, telling itself to all and sundry?"

"That depends," said the wise man. "Is it a vicious secret?"

"No," said the traveller. "It's gentle and rather beautiful, but left to itself I'm afraid it would get itself into trouble, and me too probably. You know what secrets are like - no common sense."

"Indeed," said the wise man, looking at the traveller's shadow, which was trying to look innocent and appealing. After a moment he said, "Such a secret should be looked after very carefully. Either you must make a vow of silence, and stay in the dark, out of the sun . . ."

"How awful!"

". . . or give it away to someone who hears all but has no voice and casts no shadow."

II.

The traveller was a little relieved that the burden of his secret might be given away safely. But he knew of no one who hears all, yet has no voice and casts no shadow. So he asked the wise man, "Will you take it for me?"

"Not I," said the wise man. "I cast a great shadow for my head is so large. Anyway, why do you think they call me the Wise Man? I am too busy having opinions on everything I hear and I can never keep my mouth shut."

The traveller went next to the Idle Man, who was sitting in the sun. But the Idler shrugged. "I just sit here in the sun all day. So I'm fat, and my fat shadow is as good as painted on the ground. Everyone remarks on it. Better try the Fool, he keeps thin - capers about a lot."

But the Fool stared at him empty-eyed and said, "I hear everything but I have no thoughts of my own, and would probably shout your secret out one day, just for the amazement of having remembered it was there at all. Speak to the deer in the forest."

The man went to the glade in the forest where the red deer came down from the mountain to drink and found a stag with hinds. "Will you take my secret for safe keeping?" he asked. But the great stag shook his antlers. "When I roar out loud in the rut I can be heard for miles," he said, and the hinds sniggered. "No secret is safe with me, and my shadow flies over the hillside beside me as I run. Go talk to the crows; they're mean gossips but they keep themselves to themselves."

After a while he saw two ragged corbies settle side by side on a stone wall, black as burned paper. They cawed at one another, then one said, "We can't take it, we'd only argue and tear it to pieces. And anyway *I* cast a shadow blacker than any bird."

"You do not!" the other said. "Mine is blacker than pitch at midnight!"

"So you say," the first retorted . . . And the man left them arguing.

Next on the slopes of the moor he came upon a skylark. "Will you take my secret into safekeeping?" asked the man. "For you are small and few can see you where you hover high up to sing. You will

cast no shadow."

In answer the little bird rose from its nest in the heather into the blue sky and sang a trilling song so heart-stoppingly sweet that the man was transported. Like the song of the lark he seemed to float into the sky, and for a moment he almost forgot why he was there, until he realised that what was moving him was the beauty of his own secret set to music. Anyone who heard the lark would surely know it.

"You see, I'm an artist," said the lark apologetically when both it and the man had come back down to earth. "I can't help being irresponsible - but you have to make allowances for creativity, I suppose. Try the buzzard, she sings like a squeaking gate and no one can ever make out the words."

But the buzzard was offended when the man let slip that he had already asked the crows and the skylark. "I do have my pride you know!" she mewed, lifting heavily into the air off an old rowan tree stump. "If you'd started at the top I might have been inclined to help. But crows! Hah!" She flapped off in a flurry of indignation.

The man sighed and climbed higher up the mountain side. He wished he *could* have started at the top, but now the great golden eagle was his last hope. When he reached the summit of the mountain he called out, "Eagle, will you carry my secret?", but just then the heather darkened around him as though the shadow of a sudden thunder cloud had eclipsed the sun, and the eagle swept over his head, the span of its wings greater than the height of a man.

"It would be as nothing to me," cried the eagle, "but I've been watching you all day and hearing rumours from the deer about the man who seeks a creature to bear his secret, a creature that hears all but has no voice and casts no shadow."

The man looked on disconsolate as the shadow of the eagle circled around and around him on the mountainside. "There's only one answer to that riddle," said the eagle tauntingly. But the man felt defeated and sat down with the world spread at his feet. "Well if it isn't here," he said, "then I'll never find it. There's nowhere left to go."

Just then the breeze got up and ruffled his hair. Soon the breeze became a bluster and the eagle angled down into the wind close by.

"It's coming," the eagle said.

"What is?" said the man.

But the the eagle was gone.

III.

Alone on the mountain, the man looked about him. But there was nothing but the rising wind, bearing down upon him laden with inarticulate whispers carried from far polar wastes, mumblings out of vast tundras, hissing of sands from breathless deserts, the whoop and chatter of jungles and the roaring of ocean spume on unknown shores.

And suddenly he understood. The wind heard all, yet had no voice, and cast no shadow. He must tell his secret to the wind! He leapt to his feet elated; at last he could disburden himself of the three heavy words he had carried with him, words which would now be carried away like thistledown and blended into a soft cacophany of all the murmurings of all the history of the world, never to be interpreted by a single living soul. He opened his mouth. "I"

But nothing came, no matter how he tried. He could not say it. He couldn't just let it go into empty space, not a secret like this, a people secret, a heart secret. It would be like throwing away heirlooms and love letters. It would be an insult, and no release at all. The wind would carry it all around the world and bring it back to haunt him with his own voice.

Eventually the wind died away and he was left in the silence. He sighed and slowly made his way down the mountain, feeling even worse now that he had tried and failed. The monkey-shadow seemed to dance with relief over the ground beside him. "I don't know what you're so happy about," said the man to the shadow. "We're still stuck with each other. Now you'll never be free and I'll have to suffer your constant nagging."

So the man and the shadow went down the mountain, trying to ignore the stares of the buzzard and the lark and the crows and the deer, and he made his way back to the village. He avoided the gazes of the Fool and the Idler and eventually he arrived back at the house of the Wise Man. He went in to explain what had happened.

The Wise Man blew out his cheeks and said, "Well then, there's only one thing to do."

IV

The Wise Man opened the door and went out to his woodshed, the traveller following him curiously. The Wise Man crouched down and pulled an ancient box from the dusty recesses, blew away cobwebs and opened its lid with very great care. He reached in and brought out something, something small that the traveller could not see, and carried it inside the house, cupped in both hands against his chest as though it might leap away or be disturbed by the light. Once inside he bade the traveller close the door then drew the curtain across the window and sat down at the table. When the traveller had joined him he opened his hands and released the captive onto the board between them.

The traveller looked. There was nothing there.

"What do you think of him?" said the Wise Man enthusiastically. "Cute, or what?"

"Er, very," said the traveller, peering with extreme caution at his host.

"And such a discreet little fellow too," said the other.

"Hmm," offered the traveller, noncommittally.

"But I couldn't possibly part with him for less than, oh, five gold pieces."

"Really."

"Well naturally!" The Wise Man's eyebrows shot up. "You do realise what this is? This is the answer to your prayer, and very lucky you are that I have one hibernating in my woodpile just now."

"Hibernating . . ."

"Yes."

"In June"

"They feel the cold badly"

"Hmm."

At that moment the door opened and the Idler stood there, leaning on the door post. This was astonishing to the Wise Man, who had never before known the Idler to be vertical, still less to move about. Sounds of an amazing commotion drifted in from outside.

"You might want to come and look at this," said the idle man.

Frowning, the Wise Man stepped around him into the street and the exasperated traveller followed behind him.

The Fool was capering towards them in an excited way, and behind him came an extraordinary procession: A belling stag with his harem of hinds, and behind them more stags, and hinds by the dozen, all coughing and roaring; pairs of crows in a great raucous flock; a cloud of skylarks rising and falling in rapturous song; buzzards and their mates mewing and circling; all topped off with a pair of magnificent eagles crying piercingly overhead. The astonishing hubbub of this entourage was borne down the village street towards them by a howling mountain wind.

The Wise Man grinned ironically. "Well, traveller, it seems that the sound of an unspoken secret can still be deafening!"

"What do they want?" cried the traveller, aghast.

"Why, they all want to know your secret after all. Curiosity's got the better of them," said the Wise Man. He was laughing by this time. "You'll have to get rid of it now or the whole world'll be clamouring to find out what it is." The village dogs and cockerels had now taken up the chorus and the din was appalling.

The traveller's shoulders slumped and he sighed. "Five gold pieces?" he shouted over the noise.

"Four, as it's Tuesday."

V.

The Wise Man shouted over the clamour of the animals, "Go home, there's nothing to see here!" Then he and the traveller returned to the house, closing the door on all the noise. The traveller sat back down at the table, and the Wise Man sat opposite, looking expectant.

The traveller hesitated. "So . . . where is it?"

"I can see you're quite a wit," replied the wise man indulgently. "Don't be scared. Pick him up."

The traveller cupped his hands under a smallish volume of empty air, feeling foolish, and raised it to eye level. Somehow he couldn't help staring in case there really was something there, and in the half-light the harder he stared the more it seemed to him that maybe there was - no, it was just his imagination. Or did something softy and furry just tickle his palm? His eyes goggled in the gloom and he began to sweat.

"Easy," said the Wise Man, "don't alarm the little chap."

With an effort the traveller calmed himself. "Um, what's his name?"

As he said this he darted a quick look at the Wise Man who, it must be admitted, only blinked once before saying, "Claud," with a perfectly straight face. Nor is it certain that his momentary hesitation could not be explained by the diffidence of one who knows that to disclose a name is to grant power over the named. After all he had yet to receive his four gold pieces.

"Hello, Claud," said the traveller, trying to keep just the right amount of archness in his tone but not quite succeeding. There really did seem to be something tickling his palm! But of course Claud did not answer and after a moment the traveller gave a snort and levelled a sceptical glance at the Wise Man.

"What?" inquired the latter innocently. "Well of course he doesn't speak - he would be of no use to you if he did. But he hears everything and he casts no shadow. Now you can tell him your secret. Whisper it, mind, so no one else hears you."

The traveller lowered his face towards the Claud-shaped emptiness in his hand for a minute, then

stood and turned to the door, mumbling uncertain thanks. He stepped into the street, where mercifully there was silence, the crowd of inquisitive creatures having apparently dispersed. As he walked away the Wise Man's voice stopped him.

"The four gold pieces?"

The traveller sighed and said, "Sorry," but without much grace. He carefully put Claud in his coat pocket then took off a boot, from which he produced four gold pieces and handed them to the Wise Man.

In return the wise man gave him a folded slip of paper. "Care instructions," he said, and the traveller absently took the slip with a nod.

But as he bent to put his boot back on the wise man cried out in alarm, "Look out! Button your pocket . . . He's getting away!"

Of course the traveller looked about him but saw nothing, and heard nothing. Perhaps he felt the tiniest momentary tug on the hem of his coat, but that could have been the wind, or perhaps the hem caught on his boot buckle. Involuntarily his hand went to his pocket. Of course it was empty.

The Wise Man's hands flew to his head in dismay. "Well, that's the last you'll see of the wee chap."

The traveller managed a wry look. "The last? I haven't seen him at all!" He hesitated. "I don't suppose you'd consider a rebate on the four gold pieces?"

A small knot of curious villagers had gathered, watching the proceedings. The Wise Man's face assumed a bemused expression. "What gold pieces?"

"Yeah, right." The traveller turned and began to walk away down the street.

The Wise Man called after him. "I hope you whispered your secret already before he got away?"

Indeed, the traveller had. But if he had felt stupid at the time, he felt even more stupid now, and refused to respond. Instead he stared steadfastly at the road in front of him and trudged on, leaving the village behind.

VI.

And so it was that, after a few minutes on the road, the traveller noticed a curious thing: His shadow glided along beside him without a murmur, quite well-behaved, with no sleeve-tugging or monkey-business. Well!

He thought about things, and realised that he felt lighter of heart, as though some burden had indeed lifted. It was the strangest thing. He began to walk with a spring in his step, for the first time in a long while.

He began to wonder about Claud, and found himself absently checking all his pockets. Empty, of course. The little fellow had no doubt scampered far away by now. Who knew what a magical creature such as Claud might be capable of? He imagined a tiny bundle of invisible fur roaming over the mountains, wandering the glens and rocky shores, even crossing the seas, spending its brief summer in search of a new nook in which to hibernate, all the while bearing his own silent secret unguessed and unseen by the world of men. Wherever Claud should end up, his secret was surely safe for ever.

But then he was struck by a thought. He reached into a pocket and pulled out the slip of paper the wise man had given him. He sat on a roadside boulder and opened it. He read:

"SECRETUS ELUSIVUS - Care Instructions:

1. Feeding habits: Lives on air and hope, no special dietary additives needed.
2. Exercise: Believed to enjoy running free but never observed in the wild. Occasional walks recommended for pets, but requires complete solitude.
3. Grooming: Occasional private grooming will keep your pet healthy and contented. But see 5.
4. Life expectancy: Indefinite, but depends on 2 & 3.
5. Mating . . . "

The traveller was brought up short by that. "Mating?" he said out loud, then glanced around to make sure nobody had been in earshot. He read on:

"5. Mating: Secretus Elusivus mates only once after a courtship ritual that has of course never been openly observed. It is believed that Secretus is only properly happy when paired with its mate, since

only another of the same species can see and hear it. Despite the best of care (see 2 & 3) a solitary Secretus may become lonely and depressed with no one to talk to. If this occurs, it is recommended that you allow your pet the freedom to seek its mate, after which you should find that it becomes content to return to captivity and occasional TLC from its owner will suffice."

The traveller folded the paper away and looked around at the wide empty landscape. His vision became misty and a cold sense of guilt stole over him. Claud's feelings hadn't occurred to him, of course. Claud had probably been happy hibernating in the woodshed, and without being asked he had been burdened with the traveller's secret.

But then the man hadn't asked for it either, he reasoned, and he had had to do *something* after all. And at least if Claud could find his hibernating Claudette then he might be able to share the secret safely, whereas the man never could.

The traveller shook his head free of speculation and stood up. "Come along, shadow. Time to head on down the road."

But as he walked off into the sunshine his shadow for once didn't argue, or nag, or caper about, but rather trailed after him like a lifeless thing, and he felt a sense of loss. He realised that in spite of everything the secret had been a companion, a confidante, and in the keeping of it he had hoarded possibility like a guilty treasure. And now he had sent it out into the wilderness, maybe to wander abroad forever, never to arrive, never to return.

The long road ahead was beginning to look lonelier. He knew he was not very wise, and he wondered if he done the right thing. But of course it was too late. As it always is
