**Italy – The Golden Lion**

[0](http://europeisnotdead.com/disco/books-of-europe/european-fairy-tales/italy-the-golden-lion/#respond)

There was once a rich merchant who had three sons, and when they were grown up the eldest said to him, “Father, I wish to travel and see the world. I pray you let me.”

So the father ordered a beautiful ship to be fitted up, and the young man sailed away in it. After some weeks the vessel cast anchor before a large town, and the merchant’s son went on shore.

The first thing he saw “vas a large notice written on a board saying that if any man could find the king’s daughter within eight days he should have her to wife, but that if he tried and failed his head must be the forfeit.

“Well,” thought the youth as he read this proclamation, “that ought not to be a very difficult matter;” and he asked an audience of the king, and told him that he wished to seek for the princess.

“Certainly,” replied the king. “You have the whole palace to search in; but remember, if you fail it will cost you your head.”

So saying, he commanded the doors to be thrown open, and food and drink to be set before the young man, who, after he had eaten, began to look for the princess. But though he visited every corner and chest and cupboard, she was not in any of them, and after eight days he gave it up and his head was cut off.

All this time his father and brothers had had no news of him, and were very anxious. At last, the second son could bear it no longer, and said, “Dear father, give me, I pray you, a large ship and some money, and let me go and seek for my brother.”

So another ship was fitted out, and the young man sailed away, and was blown by the wind into the same harbour where his brother had landed.

Now when he saw the first ship lying at anchor his heart beat high, and he said to himself, “My brother cannot surely be far off,” and he ordered a boat and was put on shore.

As he jumped on to the pier his eye caught the notice about the princess, and he thought,” He has undertaken to find her, and has certainly lost his head. I must try myself, and seek him as well as her. It cannot be such a very difficult matter.” But he fared no better than his brother; and in eight days his head was cut off.

So now there was only the youngest at home, and when the other two never came he also begged for a ship that he might go in search of his lost brothers. And when the vessel started a high wind arose, and blew him straight to the harbour where the notice was set.

“Oho!” said he, as he read, “whoever can find the king’s daughter shall have her to wife. It is quite clear now what has befallen my brothers. But in spite of that I think I must try my luck,” and he took the road to the castle.

On the way he met an old woman, who stopped and begged.

“Leave me in peace, old woman,” replied he.

“Oh, do not send me away empty,” she said. “You are such a handsome young man you will surely not refuse an old woman a few pence.”

“I tell you, old woman, leave me alone.”

“You are in some trouble?” she asked. “Tell me what it is, and perhaps I can help you.”

Then he told her how he had set his heart on finding the king’s daughter.

“I can easily manage that for you as long as you have enough money.”

“Oh, as to that. I have plenty,” answered he.

“Well, you must take it to a goldsmith and get him to make it into a golden lion, with eyes of crystal; and inside it must have something that will enable it to play tunes. When it is ready bring it to me.”

The young man did as he was bid, and when the lion was made the old woman hid the youth in it, and brought it to the king, who was so delighted with it that he wanted to buy it. But she replied, “It does not belong to me, and my master will not part from it at any price.”

At any rate, leave it with me for a few days,” said he; “I should like to show it to my daughter.”

“Yes, I can do that,” answered the old woman; “but to-morrow I must have it back again. And she went away.

The king watched her till she was quite out of sight, so as to make sure that she was not spying upon him; then he took the golden lion into his room and lifted some loose boards from the floor. Below the floor there was a staircase, which he went down till he reached a door at the foot. This he unlocked, and found himself in a narrow passage closed by another door, which he also opened. The young man, hidden in the golden lion, kept count of everything, and marked that there were in all seven doors. After they had all been unlocked the king entered a lovely hall, where the princess was amusing herself with eleven friends. All twelve girls wore the same clothes, and were as like each other as two peas.

“What bad luck!” thought the youth. “Even supposing that I managed to find my way here again, I don’t see how I could ever tell which was the princess.”

And he stared hard at the princess as she clapped her hands with joy and ran up to them, crying, “Oh, do let us keep that delicious beast for to-night; it will make such a nice plaything.”

The king did not stay long, and when he left he handed over the lion to the maidens, who amused themselves with it for some time, till they got sleepy, and thought it was time to go to bed. But the princess took the lion into her own room and laid it on the floor.

She was just beginning to doze when she heard a voice quite close to her, which made her jump. “O lovely princess, if you only knew what I have gone through to find you!” The princess jumped out of bed screaming, “The lion! the lion!” but her friends thought it was a nightmare, and did not trouble themselves to get up.

“O lovely princess!” continued the voice, “fear nothing! I am the son of a rich merchant, and desire above all things to have you for my wife. And in order to get to you I have hidden myself in this golden lion.”

“What use is that?” she asked. “For if you cannot pick me out from among my companions you will still lose your head.”

“I look to you to help me,” he said. ° I have done so much for you that you might do this one thing for me.”

“Then listen to me. On the eighth day I will tie a white sash round my waist, and by that you will know me.”

The next morning the king came very early to fetch the lion, as the old woman was already at the palace asking for it. When they were safe from view she let the young man out, and he returned to the king and told him that he wished to find the princess.

“Very good,” said the king, who by this time was almost tired of repeating the same words; “but if you fail your head will be the forfeit.”

So the youth remained quietly in the castle, eating and looking at all the beautiful things around him, and every now and then pretending to be searching busily in all the closets and corners. On the eighth day he entered the room where the king was sitting. “Take up the floor in this place,” he said. The king gave a cry, but stopped himself, and asked, “What do you want the floor up for? There is nothing there.”

But as all his courtiers were watching him he did not like to make any more objections, and ordered the floor to be taker. up, as the young man desired. The youth then went straight down the staircase till he reached the door; then he turned and demanded that the key should be brought. So the king was forced to unlock the door, and the next and the next and the next, till all seven were open, and they entered into the hall where the twelve maidens were standing all in a row, so like that none might tell them apart. But as he looked one of them silently drew a white sash from her pocket and slipped it round her waist, and the young man sprang to her and said, “This is the princess, and I claim her for my wife.” And the king owned himself beaten, and commanded that the wedding feast should be held.

After eight days the bridal pair said farewell to the king, and set sail for the youth’s own country, taking with them a whole shipload of treasures as the princess’s dowry. But they did not forget the old woman who had brought about all their happiness, and they gave her enough money to make her comfortable to the end of her days.