



## *Fair Brow*

### *A Folktale from Italy*

From *Italian Popular Tales*, by Thomas Frederick Crane, London: Macmillan and Company, 1885.

There was once a boy whose father said to him at the end of his schooling, “My son, now that you’ve finished your studies, the time is right for you to begin to travel. I will give you a ship so that you can get a start in loading, unloading, buying and selling. Work seriously, because I want you to learn to earn your living as soon as possible!”

He gave him seven thousand crowns with which to buy goods, and the boy set out. He had already sailed some distance without buying anything, when he came into a port and saw sitting on the shore a coffin, into which passers-by would all drop a small donation of money.

“Why are you keeping that corpse there?” he asked. “The dead wish to be buried.”

“That man died saddled with debts,” the boy was told. “It’s the custom here to bury no one who has not paid his debts. We will not bury the man until his debts are paid up in full by charity.”

“In that case let it be known that all his creditors should come to me to be paid. And take him away and bury him at once.”

They made the announcement, and he paid every debt, without one penny left over for himself when he had finished. He therefore went back home, and his father asked, “What is the meaning of your returning so soon?”

“I sailed the sea and ran into pirates, who took all my capital.”

“Don’t worry, my son but be thankful they didn’t take your life as well! I’ll fit you out again, but don’t venture into the same waters the next time.” And he gave the boy another seven thousand crowns.

“You can be sure, Father, I’ll change my course!” At that, he set out again.

Halfway across the sea, he saw a Turkish vessel and said to himself, “In this spot it’s better to make friends than enemies. Let’s call on them and invite them to likewise.” He boarded the Turks’ vessel and asked, “Where do you come from?”

“We come from the East.”

“And what do you carry?”

“Nothing but a beautiful maiden.”

“To whom are you taking this maiden?”

“We will sell her to whoever wants to buy her. She’s the daughter of our sultan and we kidnapped her on account of her great beauty.”

“Let me have a look at her.” When he saw her, he asked, “How much do you want for her?”

“We are asking seven thousand crowns!”

So the youth gave the pirates all the money his father had given him and took the maiden to his ship. He married her, and returned home to his father.

“Welcome back, my son so fair,  
I can guess what prize you bring....”

“Father, I bring a most precious gem,  
You will sing with joy when you see her!  
A maiden lovelier than you’ve e’er beheld:  
The daughter of a sultan of Turkey  
I bring as my first commodity!”

“Idiot! Is that all you’ve brought?” And the father angrily shook them both and threw them out of the house.

Poor things! They didn’t know which way to turn.

“What will we do now?” he wondered. “I’ve nothing to my name.”

But she said, “I can paint fine pictures. That’s what I’ll do and you’ll go out and sell them. But beware of ever telling a soul they were done by me.”

Meanwhile, in Turkey, the sultan had dispatched ship after ship in search of his daughter. By chance, one of them arrived at the town where the young people were living. Many men disembarked, and the youth, seeing all those visitors in town, said to his wife, “Paint a lot of pictures, which we’ll certainly sell today.”

She did the pictures and said, “Here you are, but don’t sell a one for less than twenty crowns.”

He took them to the town square. The Turks arrived, glanced at the paintings and said to one another, “Nobody but the sultan’s daughter could have done these! She alone paints like that!” They moved closer and asked the young man how much he wanted for them.

“They are expensive,” he replied, “I’m letting none of them go for less than twenty crowns.”

“Fine, we’ll buy them. But we’d like others as well.”

“Come home and talk to my wife about it. She’s the one who paints the pictures.”

The Turks followed him home, and there was the sultan’s daughter. They seized her, bound her, and carried her back to Turkey.

The husband was heartbroken. There he was with no wife, no trade, and no money. Every day he went to the harbor to look for a ship that might take him aboard, but he never found a one. Finally, one day he saw an old man fishing from a little boat and said, “How much better off you are, good old soul, than I am!”

“Why do you say that, my boy?” replied the old man.

“How I would like to fish with you, good old soul!”

“If you wish to fish with me, come ahead! What with your pole and my boat, we might catch something of note!”

So the youth got in, and they made a pact to share everything, good and bad alike, that came their way. To begin, the old man divided his supper with the boy.

After eating, they went to sleep. Meanwhile a storm suddenly came up. The wind seized the boat, swept it over the waves, and finally grounded it on the shore of Turkey.

Seeing this boat land, the Turks took possession of it, made slaves of the two fishermen, and carried them before the sultan, who put them to work in the garden. The old man was to look after the vegetables, and the youth after the flowers. The two slaves made friends with the other gardeners and were very well off in the sultan’s garden. The old man fashioned guitars, violins, flutes, clarinets and piccolos, and the youth played them all and sang songs.

Now the sultan’s daughter, for her punishment, had been imprisoned in a tall tower with her maids of honor. Hearing that fine playing and singing, she thought of her husband far away. “Only Fair Brow (as she called him) could play all instruments and sing in a voice far sweeter than any of them. Who is that playing and singing in the garden?”

Peeping through the slats in the blinds, which she was unable to open, she saw that the young musician was none other than her husband.

Every day the maids of honor took the gardeners a big basket to fill with flowers. The sultan’s daughter therefore said to them, “Put that young man in the basket, cover him with flowers, and bring him up here!”

For a joke the gardeners put him in the basket, and the maids of honor carried him up in the tower. When they set the basket down, he bobbed up from under the flowers and found himself face to face with his wife! They hugged and kissed, telling each other everything. Then they began planning their escape.

They had a large ship loaded with pearls, precious stones, bars of gold, and jewels. Into the hold they lowered Fair Brow, then the sultan's daughter, then, one by one, all her maids of honor, after which the ship weighed anchor.

They were already on the open sea, when Fair Brow remembered the old man and said to his wife, "My dearest, I may lose my life for doing so, but I have to go back to shore. I cannot be unfaithful to my sworn word! I promised that old man we would always share everything, good and bad alike, that came our way!"

They turned back and found the old man on shore waiting for them. They brought him aboard and regained the open sea.

"Good old soul," said Fair Brow, "let us now divide things up. One half of all this treasure is for you, and the other half is for me."

"The same goes for your wife," said the old man. "One half of her is for you and the other half is for me!"

"Good old soul," replied the youth, "I am indebted to you, so I'll let you have all the treasure on this ship. But let me keep my wife all for myself."

"You are a generous youth. Note that I am the soul of the dead man for whose burial you arranged. All your luck stems from that good deed of yours."

He gave him his blessing and vanished.

The boat glided into its home port firing mighty cannon salutes. Fair Brow, the world's richest nobelman, was arriving with his wife. And who should be waiting on shore with open arms but his father.

Happily from then on did they live,  
But nothing to me did they ever give.