

The King with the Donkey's Ears

A long time ago in ancient Ireland there lived a king named Labhraí Loingseach. He was a very troubled king because he had to keep a great secret. He had donkey ears! Every day he wore his crown pulled tightly over them so nobody would see them. This became a big problem every time he needed a haircut. To keep his donkey ears a secret, he had every poor barber who cut his hair killed!

Now, in King Labhraí's kingdom there was a young man named Dónal. He dreamed of becoming a famous barber but his mother did not approve.

"You are my only son. What if our cruel king asks you to cut his hair? You would be killed!"

Dónal's mother wanted him to become a great hero instead. Then one day, a messenger from the king's court knocked at the door. Dónal had been chosen to be the next unfortunate barber to the king.

His mother became very worried. It wasn't fair that Dónal should be put to death. She raced as fast as she could to the king's palace but the guards would not let her pass. So she knelt at the palace walls, weeping and wailing all day and all night. Her cries could be heard for miles around and the king's dogs whimpered at the sound. Eventually, King Labhraí thought his eardrums would burst with her terrible screeches and he went out to speak to Dónal's mother:

“Why are you screaming and crying outside my palace? I haven’t slept a wink all night!”

She pleaded with the king:

“I am in despair because my son Dónal is to cut your hair. Please, do not have him killed! He is my only son. If you do not spare his life, I will stay here and weep for him for the rest of my life!”

King Labhraí was moved by the woman’s grief. Also, he could not imagine having to listen to her cries any longer. He promised to spare Dónal’s life on one condition:

“Your son must swear not to tell anybody what he sees when he cuts my hair. Not a word to anything with eyes or ears!”

Dónal promised to keep King Labhraí’s secret. He cut his hair and was allowed to live, but he soon became very ill. His mother was worried and asked him what was wrong.

“It’s the king’s secret. I can’t think about anything else and I can’t sleep. Worst of all, I can’t tell anybody!”

His mother took him to see a druid. The druid listened to Dónal’s problem and said to him:

“The cure is obvious! If you can’t tell this terrible secret to anything with eyes or ears, you must tell it to an old oak tree.”

Dónal went to a river nearby and whispered the King Labhraí’s secret to an old oak tree, like the druid told him to. He immediately felt better.

It happened at this time King Labhraí’s favourite musician was looking for a new harp. He had searched for one throughout the land, but he could not find a harp with the perfect sound. He was walking by the river when he saw the old oak tree. He thought to himself:

“The wood of this tree would make a beautiful harp!”

And so, he cut a branch from the tree and made himself a harp. That evening, the king ordered music after his grand banquet. The musician walked to the centre of the room with his new harp, and everyone remarked how beautiful it was. As soon as he played the first note, the harp suddenly started to sing, all by itself!

‘Labhraí Loingseach has donkey’s ears,’

Labhraí Loingseach has donkey’s ears,

Labhraí Loingseach has donkey’s ears..!’

King Labhraí jumped out of his throne in a furious rage. His crown went tumbling off his head and fell to the floor with a crash! There was silence in the room as the king’s soft, furry donkey ears stood tall and proud for all to see. The king soon discovered that he felt much better now that his secret was out.

After a few minutes, nobody took any notice of his ears. He realised that it really wasn't a big deal. He also realised that there wasn't any point trying to keep a secret in Ireland. He felt happier and more relaxed than ever before. In fact, the whole kingdom was a happier place.

Thanks to Dónal, all the barbers in the kingdom were saved from certain death. This made him a great hero, just as his mother had always wanted. Dónal was delighted too because his own dream of becoming a famous barber came true. He was promoted to Royal Barber!