

Stith Thompson - The Folktale

A. FAITHLESS MOTHER, SISTER, OR WIFE

A small group of tales, with a tendency to fade into one another and thus obscure their identity, concern the evil deeds of a faithless sister or mother. The main action in these stories is nearly always the same, the differences being found in the introductions. In *The Faithless Sister* (Type. 315) a brother and sister have been promised to a water spirit (or some other kind of monster). After they enter the services of the monster, the sister marries him and plots against her brother. In *The Prince and the Arm Bands* (Type 590) a boy who is traveling with his mother finds an arm band (or a blue belt) which gives him supernatural strength. They find lodging with a giant, who persuades the mother to marry him. Later the mother joins the giant in his plot against the boy. Whether the young man's opponent be his mother or his sister, a succession of attempts is made against his life. Because of his strength he defeats the giant. The mother or sister feigns sickness, and sends the boy on a quest for lion's milk. Because of his great strength he succeeds, not only in getting the milk, but in bringing the lions along with him and turning them loose on the giant. Likewise, he is sent for magic apples which grow in the garden of the giant's brother. These apples will cause him to sleep, so that the brothers may kill him, but the lions protect him. On awakening from his magic sleep, he rescues a princess from the giant's castle, marries her, and lives in the castle until she leaves to go to her father, a distant king. He now returns to his mother and she beguiles him into telling the secret of his strength. She steals the belt, blinds the boy, and sets him adrift in a boat. He is rescued from his peril by the helpful lions, who restore his sight with magic water which they have seen animals use for that purpose. He eventually recovers his belt, avenges himself, and brings back his wife.

Where the sister is involved as the faithless relative, practically the same train of events may occur, though there is a good deal of variety in the details. The sending for the dangerous animals because of feigned sickness is the most characteristic trait of these two stories. This cycle of tales has not been analyzed so as to see whether that about the faithless mother is really anything more than a variant of the one about the faithless sister. They would certainly have to be studied together, because if they are not really variations of one tale, they have influenced each other profoundly.

They would seem to be primarily east European. They are found in abundance in the Baltic countries, Russia, and the Balkans (particularly Roumania) ,(2) and are rather well established

in North Africa and the Near East. On the other hand, they are scarce in western Europe. A particularly good version of The Prince and the Arm Bands is found in Norway, and this Norwegian version is apparently responsible for the presence of this tale in almost identical form among the Chipewyan Indians of western Canada.(3)

(2). Schullerus, in his survey of Roumanian tales, lists all his 22 versions of The Prince and the Arm Bands (Type 590) under 315A, where it might well belong.

(3). It was a study of the relation of this Norwegian and Chipewyan tale which helped mark the beginning of my interest in the North American Indian tales, and which eventually led to my study, *European Tales Among the North American Indians* (1919) and *Tales of the North American Indians* (1929). Dr. Pliny Earl Goddard had sent this Chipewyan tale to the late Professor Kittredge for his opinion as to where it may have come from. Professor Kittredge happened at the moment to be working over some Roumanian variants of the same tale. He read the letter to a seminar of which I was a member and discussed the interest of the problem and later encouraged me to study it. I have never learned whether he went further with the study of this story in southeastern Europe.