

TALES FROM THE MUSEUM



The Faerie Locksmith

This story is a tale told by generations of the Hodson family who lived at the Locksmiths House Museum in Willenhall. At the time of the story Willenhall had become an important part of industry within the Black Country area because of its specialisation in lock and key making.

John Hodson was the head of the family and a skilled lock maker. He lived in the house with his wife Sarah, son Edgar and three daughters, Ida, Flora and Edith. They had a ginger cat called Rifkin. Edith, the youngest daughter had a great interest in music and she is the main character in this tale.

From an early age Edith would sing along to the tunes that played on her most treasured possession; a very ornate musical box with two keys. A simple shaped metal key to wind up the mechanism and a smaller, very ornate golden key to open the box. When wound up and opened the box revealed a miniature piano that would play a variety of tunes and Edith has learned all the words which she sang in her sweet, melodic, clear voice.

One Saturday afternoon in December, Edith's sisters went out to play in the snow, so she decided to spend

some time with her favourite music box, but when she picked it up she discovered that the little golden key which opened the box was missing. The whole family knew how precious the box was to her and searched everywhere for the key. It was nowhere to be found and as you can imagine. Edith was extremely saddened to think it would never be found. In fact, she was so upset that she stopped talking and singing from that day.

John Hodson was a skilled lock maker and every night after Edith had gone to sleep he would tiptoe into the bedroom of the sisters' and take the music box down to his workshop. He would then work into the early hours trying to recreate the missing key. He could only see the lock from the outside and would sketch his key designs onto pieces of paper before making them and seeing if they fitted. But night after night nothing he made worked and he had to burn many designs in the workshop fire so that his daughter wouldn't become even more distressed, knowing of his unsuccessful attempts.

At this time a group of faeries lived in Willenhall and although we think of faeries as being tiny people with big transparent wings, these faeries were very much like us but much, much smaller and without wings. They had families and many were locksmiths living around the Holy Well area which was near where St Giles Church is now.

Faerie folk have magical abilities that we don't have and one of these is to be able to read sheets of paper that have been burnt in the fire and sent up the chimney. One night a faerie locksmith was warming himself on the roof near the chimney when he saw the scraps of burned paper in the smoke from the chimney.

He caught some of these scraps and saw the drawings of the key shapes. He knew that although Edith's father was a good locksmith, he would never be able to make the right shape without help.

The faerie had heard about the dilemma of the missing key and how the father and sisters longed to hear again the sweet voice of Edith.

So he decided to help and in his invisible state examined the lock with his tiny fingers to get the correct shape. It took all the skill the faerie locksmith had to recreate the right key but he did finish it on Christmas Eve.

Edith like her sisters had gone to bed that night hoping to wake up to Christmas presents in the morning and of course she hoped her surprise would be the key to her precious music box.

The faerie locksmith came to the house on Christmas Eve carrying the finished key. Faerie folk treat chimneys just the same as front doors and the locksmith came down the chimney and startled Rifkin the cat who was curled up in the hearth next to the fire. Rifkin, like all cats can see the faeries and the locksmith decided to give Rifkin the power of speech so that he would understand what to do to deliver the key to Edith on Christmas morning.

On Christmas Day the family sat around the warm fire opening their simple gifts and presents when Rifkin suddenly jumped onto Edith's lap. She gave the cat a hug and was then overjoyed as she recognised the key around its neck. Rifkin thought he had centre stage and set about telling the story given to him by the faerie locksmith. They all listened and do you know what they heard?

Meow, meow, meow, meow, meow !

The family could have thought that Rifkin had simply stolen the key as some cats do and then decided to return it. But Edith had to remove the key which had been threaded onto Rifkin's collar. Now although cats are clever, how would a cat undo his own collar, thread a key onto it and fasten the collar again?

Edith was delighted and opened her music box. She played it all day and her voice returned. From that day on she was happy and continued to sing. When she grew up, she became a very well-known soprano singer in Willenhall and beyond.

