

THE IMPORTANCE OF SALT

There was once a king who had three beautiful daughters. He loved them equally, and couldn't decide which of them should inherit his kingdom and become queen. As his birthday approached, he had an idea, and called his daughters to him. "My dear girls," he told them "I love you all very much, and, for a long time didn't know how to decide which of you should take my crown when I leave this world. But, now I have decided. Whichever of you gives me, on my birthday, that which is the most necessary for a man to live, will inherit everything. Go now, and apply your minds, very carefully."

On his birthday his two eldest daughters each brought him a rather ordinary gift, which besides being useful, if not necessary, was very valuable and fitting for a king. The youngest didn't. She presented the king with a simple bowl, containing nothing more than a spoonful of salt!

When he saw this, the king became very, very angry, and in his fury had his daughter thrown out of the palace and banned from ever returning. His broken hearted daughter went into exile in the unknown wide world beyond the palace grounds. The little comfort she had came from the trust that, through her quick wits and good sense, she could make her way alone in the world.

After walking some distance, she came to an inn which was owned by an honest and kind woman, who took her in. This woman was an expert cook, who knew everything that there was to know about food, including the importance of salt. The princess became her apprentice, and soon came to be an even better cook than her teacher. The inn was already well known, but now its fame spread into the surrounding countryside. Any passer-by who felt the weight of a few extra pence in his purse, turned aside to order a roast or, very often, something even finer.

Even the king in his palace, heard tell of the wonderful meals served at the inn, and decided to invite its famous young cook to prepare all the dishes for his eldest daughter's wedding. On that day, she worked harder than ever before in the kitchen, and sent up one fine dish after another, each one more delicious than the one before. The banqueting tables were nearly breaking, and every guest was singing the praises of the excellent cook, when she sent up the king's favourite dish. He was the first to taste it.

When the king tried the dish, it was not what he expected. It was bland and tasteless, and not something fit to be served at the royal table. His face reddened with anger, and he cried out "There is no salt in this! Bring the cook to me, now!"

The cook wasn't surprised when she was sent for, and walked calmly into the dining hall. But, she kept her gaze fixed steadily on the ground in front of her, and didn't look into the face of the king. The king screamed at her "Why did you forget to put any salt in my favorite dish? You stupid little girl!"

The cook answered him, quietly and calmly “I did so because you saw no value in salt, when you banished your youngest child because she deemed it the most necessary for a man to live. Perhaps, now you may realise that she might have been right.”

As she said these words, the cook raised her head, looked him directly in the eye, and handed him a simple bowl containing nothing more than a spoonful of salt — for him to season his own meal. He recognised his daughter’s face, the truth of her words, and felt deeply ashamed of his actions, both then and now. He begged her forgiveness, and invited her to sit beside him.

Afterwards, the princess’s banishment was lifted, and she returned to the palace where she lived for many years with the king, as his youngest, cleverest, and favourite daughter.

THE BOY WITH GOLDEN HAIR

There was once a very poor, sad little boy, who spent his days wandering in the forest. One day, he was so sad that he couldn't stop the tears filling his eyes and he felt that his heart would break. On that day, he was found by a strange old woman. Her hair was as grey and dry as the old man's beard which hung from the branches above her, and she had long since lost the last tooth from her mouth.

"Child," the crone asked kindly "why are you crying?"

The little boy answered "Because I have no father, and my mother can't support us on the little she earns. Everyday she sends me out begging, and every day the neighbours call me a rogue and chase me away."

The old woman looked even more kindly on the boy, and said "If that is all there is, then I can easily help you. Come with me."

The little boy followed the old woman deeper into the woods, until, after more than half an hour, they came to a magnificent house. It was built completely out of marble, as white as snow, which glowed brightly through the shadows of the forest. He had never, ever, seen such a beautiful house, and happily followed her inside, and into a great hall. There, the old woman said to him "If you wish, you can live here. All you have to do, is keep the fire burning under the cauldron in the kitchen. If you can do this, I will pay you well when I return, a year from today.

"But —" she continued "you must promise me that, you will never, ever, look inside the pot, and that you will never open the little cupboard on the wall by the hearth. The little boy agreed, so the old woman led him into the kitchen. She showed him, the hearth, the cauldron, the fire, and the little cupboard. And, then she left.

The little boy was now alone in the house, where he lived like a king. He could eat and drink whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, and at night he slept in a soft feather bed. But, he never neglected his duties, and he stoked and fed the fire, so that in, a whole year, it never went out. The cauldron bubbled and hissed continually, but he never looked inside. Exactly one year later, the old woman stood in front of him.

"You have done very well." she told him, and gave him one hundred and fifty golden guilders. "If you continue to do as well, then, when I return next year, I shall give you twice as much." Then she vanished, leaving him alone and wondering where she went.

In the second year, the boy lived just as happily in the marble palace, and was even more careful with his duties in the kitchen. The days passed quickly, and exactly a year later the old woman returned. Again, she told him "You have

done very well. If you continue to do as well, then, when I return next year, I shall give you twice as much again.” She then gave him three hundred golden guilders, and vanished again.

A year later, the old lady appeared again. The boy had been even more careful with keeping the fire burning under the cauldron, and she was very happy with him. She smiled as she gave him six hundred golden guilders, telling him “Once again, you have done very well. If you continue to do as well, then, when I return next year, I shall give you twice as much again.”

The youth was very happy to receive so much and, after the old lady had again vanished, he promised himself that he would work even harder and more diligently in the coming year. But, as he fed the fire and watched the pot, a little voice inside his head kept bothering him. “What harm would it do, if I just took a little peek inside?” it said. For a long time, he ignored this thought, until one day, when the year was nearly over, it got the better of him. He looked into the pot. It was steaming and bubbling inside, but the brew wasn’t clear, and he couldn’t really see anything. So, thinking he might taste it, he stuck his finger in.

When he pulled his finger out, it was yellow and shone like pure gold!

Worse still, the gold colour wouldn’t come off. He washed and scrubbed his hands with everything he could find in the kitchen. He scrubbed them until they were red and sore, except for his one golden finger, which shone as brightly as ever. In the end, he wrapped it in a bandage, as if he had burnt himself, hoping that the old woman wouldn’t see what he had done.

But, now he had started, he didn’t stop. Instead, he went to the little cupboard, on the wall by the hearth, and opened it. Inside, he found a small book, in which was written “Whoever holds this book may wish for anything, and that wish shall be granted.” Recognising it as a magic book, and thinking that it may be useful, he slipped it into his pocket, and turned around.

The old witch was already standing behind him, and she was angry — very angry. Her eyes were red with fire, and she was about to scream at him when he turned and ran. She quickly grabbed the cauldron, and threw it after him. The pot missed him, but the brew spilling out drenched his head. His hair now shone brightly, as if every strand was made of the purest gold.

When he was good distance from the marble palace, he wandered further looking for a place to stay. By the time the sun was setting, he had reached the edge of the forest. In the valley below, he saw a magnificent palace, much larger than the witch’s house, surrounded by a beautiful garden. This was the king’s palace, where he lived with his daughter and many, but never enough, servants. The youth made his way there, to ask the steward for work.

The steward set him to work as a shepherd in the fields. There he worked happily, taking very good care of the ewes and their little lambs. They grew

steadily, none were taken by wolves and other wild animals, and their fleeces were without comparison. The steward was very impressed by the young man with golden hair, and so he brought him down from the hills and set him to work in the royal gardens.

He enjoyed his work as gardener, and took great pains to take care of all of the plants, and was particularly pleased when the flowers were in bloom. Because the garden was so well kept, the princess often visited the garden to walk among the beautiful flowers. She also liked to watch the young gardener as he worked, especially since she had caught sight of his wonderful golden hair.

There came a time when the king became conscious of his age, and his need for an heir. His daughter was now old enough to marry, but she would accept none of the suitors he presented to her. In her heart, she was thinking of the young man with the golden hair, but the words never passed her lips, until one day, her father asked "If you don't like any of the princes and nobles I have found for you, then please, please, tell me who you do like."

So, she told him.

The king immediately flew into a temper. He was so furious that he drove her out of his sight, refused to recognise her as his daughter, and wanted to ban her from the palace and his kingdom. But, after much pleading and begging, she was allowed to remain as a kitchen maid. The king himself didn't fare much better. Now without the love of his daughter, he felt his advancing years even more keenly.

Not long afterwards, despite his rapidly advancing years, the king was called to war. The king assembled his troops at the palace, where the young gardener with the golden hair saw their armour shining brightly in the sun, and their flags fluttering proudly in the breeze. Inspired, and ignorant of what had befallen the princess, he went to the king to seek permission to ride with them. The king hated the young man and his golden hair, and planned to humiliate and insult him before the entire army. He equipped the young man with armour and weapons which were completely rusted through, and set him on a three-legged horse. As the boy with the golden hair sat stoically on his nag, all the other soldiers laughed heartily — and the stern faced king smiled inwardly.

The army moved out, with the king, in shining armour, at its head, and the poor young man bringing up the rear on his lame three-legged mount. For a while, the nag could keep pace with the rest of the troops, until they reached a swamp. Its three good legs sunk into the boggy ground, and its rider could only watch as the army rode forward to meet the enemy. The battle was not far off, but the youth could only watch as the enemy repeatedly attacked, and it became clear to him that all was about to be lost. Then — he remembered the little magic book in his pocket.

He wished for what he needed: a fast and powerful steed; a strong, sharp sword, and shining armour with a royal purple tabard, streaked with silver. No sooner had he done so, than he found himself so dressed and mounted on a magnificent black stallion, with sword in hand.

When the finely dressed prince, with his golden hair flowing behind him, joined the battle, he was everywhere to be found. His horse sprang from one comrade to the next, his sword cutting down the enemy at every turn. Soon, the tide of battle turned, and the king's army, with the unknown prince now at its head, drove the enemy into retreat. It was a glorious victory, and the battle was over.

The king wished to know who the mysterious prince, who had saved the day, was, and commanded him to appear before him. But, instead of approaching the king, the prince with the golden hair turned aside and rode by. Astonished, the king threw his own sword after him, hoping to mark him. Its blade pierced the knight's foot and broke, leaving its point embedded in his heel. The stranger didn't stop, and galloped off in the direction of the palace.

When he reached his old nag in the swamp, he removed his weapons and fine clothes, and the young gardener with the golden hair mounted his three-legged horse. As the returning army passed him by, they all laughed at the boy still sitting stuck in the mud. Even the king appeared to be smiling, but it didn't worry the young man, who turned his horse after them and slowly rode home.

He arrived at the palace two whole days after the king and the rest of the army. His horse was even slower than on the outward journey, and now both mount and rider were lame. During the journey, his wound had festered, and now he could hardly walk. A doctor had to be sent for, and when the king heard this he laughed out loud. It was unbelievable that the young gardener had been injured — he had sat out the battle stuck in the swamp on his three-legged nag.

More out of curiosity than care for his servant, the king went to watch the doctor at work on the young gardener. He was very surprised when he saw where the boy was wounded, and even more so, when the doctor pulled out the tip of a sword. But, most of all, he was shocked when he recognised it as his own sword!

Happy that the young man with the golden hair, was indeed a hero who had saved him in battle, the king had the injured man carried into the palace and treated as if he was his own son. He then sent for the kitchen maid and restored her as princess, and as his daughter who he now loved more than ever. In time, when the prince's wound had healed, the two were married, and somewhere, deep in a forest, an old woman smiled.