

HELL'S LITTLE GATEKEEPER

There was once a little boy who didn't like to be washed. No amount of complaining or threatening would make him take a bath or wash his face, and every day he became dirtier and dirtier. But, when somebody never washes, and is so unclean, the Devil can easily sniff him out and take him. This is what happened to the little boy who, one day, simply vanished.

For seven long years nobody saw hide nor hair of him, and he was almost forgotten by everyone except his mother. But then, one day he came back, much older and very changed. His face was covered with dirt and grime, his hair was long and matted, and his clothes were reduced to rags. But the biggest change was not in his appearance, but in his manner. Before, he had been lively and argumentative, always answering back when he was told to clean himself up or asked to help his parents. Now he was quiet and reserved, and only spoke when he really thought that he had something worth hearing to say.

As he grew older, one story he did tell to the children who came after him, was how the Devil took him, and what happened afterwards. He, as a little boy, was not taken inside, but was put to work outside the gates of Hell as its gatekeeper. He was made to work day and night for seven years, and in that time he saw everybody who entered through those gates. There were so many that he could never count them. Some were rich and others poor. Some were proud and others humble, some were old men and young women, and others were children. And, they were all terrified of the fate which awaited them behind those doors. The little gatekeeper was thankful that he did not have to pass through the gates which he guarded.

After seven years when he was set free, he kept himself clean in body and in habits, and swore that the Devil would never take him again. He vowed that he would never ever again serve as Hell's gatekeeper and be forced to watch the endless procession of the damned passing through its doors.

THE THREE HUNTING DOGS

There was once a young man who lived alone with his aged father. They were very poor and the father had nothing of value, except for his three faithful hunting dogs. The first was an excellent chaser, who was as fast as the wind and could run down the fleetest of prey. The second was brave and determined, and could harry the fiercest of beasts and hold them at bay. The third had jaws of iron, with which it could worry the strongest of creatures, and teeth like steel which could crush anything which came between them.

When the old man died he had nothing to leave his son except for the three dogs and the faith that, with their help, his son would make his fortune. On the third day after his death, the old man was laid to rest and the young man was forced to leave his family home. He packed his few belongings, called his dogs to him, and set out into the world. Together, they wandered for many months seeking food, shelter and work where they could find it.

One hot summer day, when he had wandered far from his home, the young man saw the high roofs and great towers of a distant town. He decided to see if he could find work and lodging there, and turned his steps towards it. As he came near, he saw that the whole town was in mourning. All the houses, and even the great towers, were draped in black. As he entered the town, everywhere was silent, and nobody was to be seen. All the shops were closed and their windows shuttered. There were no carts or coaches in the street, and no hawkers or beggars. The market square was empty, except for a young girl dressed in black who was getting water from the fountain. The young man with his three dogs approached her to ask why the city was in mourning.

The girl told him that everybody, in the town and the outlying areas, lived in fear of a terrible dragon which had its lair nearby. The only way the people could prevent the monster from laying waste to the city and killing everybody, was to sacrifice two maidens to it — each and every day. The girls were selected by drawing lots, and, on that day, one of them was the king's only daughter. The king had promised to give his entire kingdom and his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever could save her. But, none of the lords or knights, or any other champion or hero, had wished to face certain death, so he had placed the whole kingdom in mourning for his daughter and all the other girls. Now, there was only one hour left, until noon when the princess had to be fed to the dragon.

As she finished her tale, there was a sound of horns being blown and a heavy carriage rolling into the square. The coach was pulled pulled by six white horses and accompanied by six heralds in fine uniforms with shining brass trumpets. Inside was a beautiful young lady, with golden hair and bright blue eyes. But, her eyes were wet with tears and she was dressed completely in black. The carriage stopped in the middle of the square and the heralds blew their horns again. One stepped forward and announced: "Hear Ye! Hear Ye! This is the king's command. Whosoever saves the princess from the dragon shall be offered

her hand in marriage and will be named as their to the kingdom.” Then, everything was silent and nobody stepped forward.

The young man with his three dogs listened and watched. He saw the princess sitting quietly crying in the carriage, and his own heart wept with her. He promised himself that he would do anything in his power to prevent her being eaten by the dragon, and to end its reign of terror. Slowly he stepped forward, and announced his intention to kill the beast. The princess turned to face him and smiled through her tears. This made hm more determined to help her, and he was brought before her father. The old grey-haired king was overjoyed, embraced him and blessed his adventure. Then, as the clock struck twelve, the young man called his three dogs and left.

The dragon’s lair was a little to the north of the town, and the monster was in the mouth of the cave, impatiently awaiting its meal. It was spewing so much fire, that the cave looked like the door of a giant furnace. As he approached, the young hunter released the first dog, the chaser which was as fast as the wind and could run down the fleetest of prey. It was so fast coming at the dragon, that the monster was shocked into swallowing its own fire. Immediately, he released the second dog. This was the brave and determined hound which could harry the fiercest of beasts and hold them at bay. Like all other creatures before it, the dragon couldn’t resist the onslaught, and couldn’t escape. Now came the third dog with jaws of iron, with which it could worry the strongest of creatures, and teeth like steel which could crush anything which came between them. The steel teeth shattered the hard scales of the monster’s armour like glass, and the iron jaws drove them deeper into its flesh. The dog only released its grip when the beast was still. Finally, the hunter made certain of the kill, and, with his hunting knife, cut out the dragon’s tongue to present to the king.

When the old king saw the proof that the dragon was no more, he embraced the young man and had him dressed in fine clothes as if he was his own son. He then led him to the princess, who was now no longer dressed in mourning and no longer weeping. She was dressed in bright colours and her smile itself was a beautiful as a clear summer morning. As he gave his blessing, the king took both their hands and placed them together. They kept them there, not saying a word for a long time, only looking at each other and smiling. That evening, they were married, and everybody, including the three dogs, lived happily ever after.

The young couple live happily for many years, and when the old king died the young man took his place. He ruled wisely for many years, and his three faithful hounds guarded him, his family and his kingdom faithfully until he too died. Nobody knows what happened to the dogs afterwards, but no other dragon has ever been seen in the kingdom since.

THE PRINCE AND THE CAT

Many, many years ago there was a great kingdom ruled by a great king, whose people loved him because he was fair, wise and just. He had three sons, but he ruled alone. When he grew old he wished to live the rest of his life quietly, and he decided to pass the crown and all of his wealth to his eldest son. His two younger sons were not pleased, and demanded that he give the crown to one of them. They told him that their elder brother was foolish and not wise enough to be a good king.

The wise old king called the three princes together, and told them that he had devised a test to see who should be king. He told them “Go out into the world and seek a chalice. Whichever of you returns with the most magnificent and richly decorated cup shall be my heir, and the others will serve him faithfully.”

The two younger brothers both went away happily on their quest, but the older brother went with a heavy heart. He was sad that his own brothers had said that he was foolish and not wise enough to rule, and wanted to cast him out. Lost in thought, he wandered deep into the king’s forest, and was surprised to find himself standing in front of a magnificent castle which should not be there. He knew every inch of these woods, and walked in them nearly every day, but he had never seen this place before. The gate and doors were wide open, so he went in.

The whole castle was empty. He walked into the first room. It was beautifully furnished and very comfortable, but nobody was there. He went into the next, which was also empty, and then the next, and so on until he reached the last room. As he approached the door, it opened and a grey cat came out, and sat in the hallway facing him. Then it spoke. She asked him kindly what she could do for him. The prince answered politely, explaining all that had happened, why he was there, and that he needed to find the most magnificent and richly decorated cup. The cat nodded her head gently, and turned away back through the door.

A moment later, she returned and placed before him a great golden bejewelled chalice. The prince had never seen anything so magnificent. It was engraved with wonderful scenes of knights and ladies at tournaments, fairs and festivities. Its jewels sparkled like stars in the golden glow of the setting sun, which seemed to fill the whole room. When he looked up to thank the cat for her wonderful gift, she was already gone and he was alone.

When the prince arrived at his father’s palace, his two brothers were already waiting with their prizes. They were shocked when they saw the great golden bejewelled chalice, because it was clear for all to see that it was the most magnificent and richly decorated cup. Nevertheless, they

argued that it was difficult to judge which of the three really was the best. They asked their father, the wise old king, to set another test, and begged and pleaded until he agreed. He told them “Go out into the world and seek a weapon. Whichever of you returns with the most magnificent and richly decorated sword shall be my heir, and the others will serve him faithfully.”

The two younger brothers both went away happily on their quest, but the older brother went into the forest to where he had found the castle and met the cat who lived there. This time she was sitting just outside the door, as if she were waiting for him. As he approached, she asked him kindly what she could do for him. The prince answered politely, explaining all that had happened, why he was there, and that he needed to find the most magnificent and richly decorated sword. The cat nodded her head gently, and turned away back through the door.

A moment later, she returned and placed before him a great shining sword. The prince had never seen anything so magnificent. Its silvery white blade was long and broad, and the jewels in its belt and scabbard sparkled like stars in the clear moonlight. As he fastened the sword belt around his waste, the cat said to him “If you come again, pick me up by my back legs and carry me into the kitchen. There you should hold me before the stove until I can’t be seen.” Then she turned and vanished inside the castle.

When the prince arrived at his father’s palace, his two brothers were already waiting with their prizes. They were shocked when they saw the great shining sword, because it was clear for all to see that it was the most magnificent and richly decorated sword. Nevertheless, they argued that it was difficult to judge which of the three really was the best. They asked their father, the wise old king, to set a third test, and begged and pleaded until he agreed. He told them “Go out into the world and seek a bride. Whichever of you returns with the most beautiful and elegant lady shall be married to her. He will be my heir, and the others will serve him faithfully.”

The two younger brothers both went away happily on their quest, as did the older brother who went into the forest to where he had found the castle and met the cat who lived there. This time he had no doubt that the grey cat would help him, if he did what she had told him when they last met. When he arrived at the castle the cat, which had been sitting at the gate, approached him and asked him kindly what she could do for him.

The prince didn’t answer her. Instead, with both hands he grabbed her two back legs and lifted her off the ground, and ran into the castle kitchen. There he stood before the stove, and the smoke from the fire billowed around him and the cat until she was completely hidden. When the smoke cleared, there was no cat. In front of him stood the most

beautiful and elegant young lady he had ever seen. Instead of the cat's paws, in his hands he held the shimmering train of a finely woven golden gown.

Together they returned to his father's palace, where his two brothers were already waiting with their intended brides. When the pair entered the hall, everybody bowed in awe because she was the most beautiful and elegant young lady that anybody there had ever seen. The old king rose from his throne and removed his crown. He placed this on the head of his oldest son, and a matching coronet on the head of his queen.

There chirps a little bird,
Now my tale has been heard.