

A BOY, A GIANT, AND THREE OTHERS

Long, long ago there was a troublesome giant. He wasn't mean, but he was so strong and careless that he caused no end of mayhem. He would take the thickest tree trunks and weave them into wattle, and he threw the heaviest rocks so far and fast that no one could see them coming. Quite frankly, the people of the village had had enough, and they all decided that something must be done, but what? Nobody had the strength to fight the giant, or even the courage to challenge him. But then, somebody had the idea to build a trap.

The villagers dug a huge, deep pit in the meadow where the giant liked to walk. They then covered it with branches, and laid turf on top of the branches, so that it looked just like the surrounding fields. Then, they waited — but not for long. The next time the giant wandered into the meadow, he fell through the branches and turf, and into the pit. His screams and curses were so loud that, not only the trees in the forest, but also the mountains themselves shook. They bound him hand and foot with unbreakable magic cords, and carried him off to a cellar, where they left him without food or drink. There, his only visitor was a young boy who took pity on him, and secretly brought him something to eat, whenever his parents allowed him to see the “little man”.

The giant kept begging the boy to remove the bonds from his hands, but he always refused — not because he was afraid of the giant, but because he was afraid of the anger of the villagers. But, eventually, he agreed, saying to himself “What harm could it do? His legs will still be bound, so he can't escape.” So, after releasing his hands, he was more than a little surprised when the giant reached down and untied his own feet. Now the boy was going to be in trouble, and he cried bitterly.

Quietly, the giant said to him “Don't cry little one, I'll reward you well. If you come with me, you'll marry a princess and, in time, will become king.” Not knowing whether to believe the giant or not, but terrified of the punishment he was sure to get from his parents and the rest of the villagers, the boy decided to go with the giant. They travelled deep into the forest, where in a clearing they found twelve bears and twelve horses. Grazing amongst the horses, was a beautiful stallion with golden hindquarters.

The giant then told the boy “Watch over these twelve bears and twelve horses, and don't be afraid of them. I'll give you a magic harp for you to play music to calm them. Whenever you play it, they will follow you as if they were little baby lambs.”

“But,” he continued, “when another giant comes, he will be angry and will try to kill you. To stop him, cry out ‘Drop down!’ three times. On the third time, he will fall to the ground, and one hit about the head with the stick, which I will give you, will kill him instantly.”

“But then another, bigger, angry giant will come. He will ask you ‘Why have you killed my brother? You will suffer for this!’ and come at you. To stop him, you must cry out the same and hit him about the head with the stick.

“Then a third giant, the biggest and most terrible of all three, will come at you with a huge iron bar, seeking revenge for his brothers. Again, you must cry out ‘Drop down!’ three times and, when he falls, kill him with a single stroke about the head.”

The giant then gave the boy the harp and the stick, and continued “When you have killed all three giants, take the horse with the golden hindquarters and ride to the royal city. There you will make your fortune and find your princess.” With that, the giant turned and vanished into the forest.

When the giant had gone, the boy noticed that the bears were watching him with interest. He picked up the harp and gently plucked at the strings. There came forth a beautiful music, softer and sweeter than anything he had ever heard before. The horses lifted up their heads and stood, listening, as if they were rooted to the ground. All twelve bears crept forward, and laid at his feet, and even the birds stopped their singing to listen. Everything was quiet, except for the gentle music of the harp drifting through the trees.

Then, there was a loud rustling and crashing, and an even louder voice shouting “What are you doing with *my* bears and *my* horses? You will suffer for this!” The first giant had arrived, and he was angry.

With blazing eyes he sprang forward into the clearing. But as he did so the youth closed his eyes and cried out “Drop down! Drop down! Drop down!” When he opened his eyes, the giant was laid out in front of him like a fallen tree. Quickly, he took up his friend’s stick and, with one blow, dispatched the unfriendly giant.

Not too long after, his harp playing was disturbed again, by the loud arrival of the second giant. This one, was bigger and more terrifying than the first, but the youth dealt with him just as easily as the first. Then, came the third, even bigger and more terrible than his brothers. The ground shook with each step he took, and the trees quivered as he shouted “You! You have killed my two little brothers. I’ll make you pay with *your* life!” With eyes blazing with fury, and a huge iron bar in his fist, he sprang into the clearing, and — as the youth spoke the magic words three times — fell flat on the ground.

With all three giants laying dead in the clearing, the boy searched their bodies for anything which might be useful, or valuable. He didn’t find much. The first was carrying an iron key; the second a silver key; and the third a gold one. Taking these, and the magic harp, he mounted the horse with the golden hindquarters, and rode off in the direction from which the giants came.

After a while, he came to the edge of the woods, where, on the hill, he saw a magnificent palace, and behind it, a beautiful garden. The garden was full of

the brightest, sweet smelling flowers, and there was an orchard with beautiful trees carrying the wonderful ripe fruit. It was also surrounded an unclimbably high wall, which also extended around the palace to a locked gate.

The youth was very tired and very hungry, and so he needed to get inside. He remembered the three keys, which he had taken from the dead giants, and wondered if one of them would open the gate. First he tried the golden key. It didn't work. Then he tried the silver one, which also didn't fit the lock. But the third key — the iron one — did open the lock, and he went inside, and on into the palace.

He found himself in a great entrance hall, more finely decorated with gold and silver than he had ever seen before. At the far end, a white marble stairway rose to another locked door. This one, he opened with the silver key. Inside, he found his way to the kitchen, and then moved on to a grand dining room. The table was already set for a great dinner, if not for a giant feast. It groaned under the weight of the finest foods: all kinds of meat and fish, roast and fried; cakes and pastries; fresh fruit; and wine. The ravenous boy, sat himself at the table, and tried everything. He ate, and ate, until he could eat no more, after which he laid down on a couch to rest.

When he awoke, it was already morning and the sun was shining through the high windows of the dining room. He sprang from the couch, helped himself to a light breakfast, and set off to explore the castle properly. Before long, he came to a great gold door. It was locked, but the golden third key opened it. The room inside was more magnificent than any other in the palace. Not only did its golden walls shine brightly and sparkle with jewels, but everything inside was made out of the same precious materials. For a while, the young man just stood and stared in wonder, but then he gathered his wits about him, and moved around, inspecting everything. He first found a golden tunic which shone as brightly as the midday sun. It was much too small for a giant, but looked like it might fit him. So he tried it on. It fitted perfectly, and he spent some time admiring himself in the great, gold-framed mirror.

Then he found a golden saddle, which he thought would be perfect for his horse. Taking it, and still wearing the golden clothes, he left the castle to find his horse in the courtyard. He quickly saddled the horse, mounted it and set off. The horse with the golden hindquarters ran as fast as the wind, and soon he was riding into the royal city. As he passed through the streets, everyone, old and young came out to watch. Nobody had ever seen such a wonderfully equipped, beautiful horse and finely dressed, handsome rider before.

He stopped for the night at an inn, where he gave himself out as a travelling musician. With the magic harp, he played all kinds of wonderful music for the other guests, who were even more astounded over his skill than his appearance. Everybody, whether old or young, rich or poor, noble or common, was enchanted by his music, and so his fame spread throughout the city. In a short time, word of the handsome musician even reached the princess in the court.

She begged her father to invite him to the palace, so that she might hear him play.

Her father couldn't resist, and so the young musician was invited to play before the royal court. Even as he arrived, his appearance and manners won the hearts of all who were present. But when he took up his harp, it seemed to everybody that angels were singing, and the heart of the princess melted like the snow in the first warmth of Spring. She felt that, from that day on, she could never be happy if the young man were not by her side.

The king invited the young musician to remain at the castle, not as an entertainer, but as an honoured guest. But, he did continue to play for the king, the princess, and their other guests. Before long, through both his demeanour and his skill, the young man had won the hearts of everybody in the palace, including the king, who agreed to his daughter taking the hand of the young man in marriage. A great wedding celebration, more magnificent than any before or since, was held to which they invited guests, rich and poor alike, from far and wide. The prince especially invited his parents, who couldn't believe their child's good fortune, until he told them every detail of the story about the giant, the twelve bears and twelve horses, and the other three giants. He also learned from them that, since he left with the giant, the village had never been troubled again.

After they were married, the prince and princess returned to his castle with its golden rooms and wonderful gardens, where they lived happily until, many years later, the old king passed his kingdom and throne onto the young prince. But, in all that time, the giant, who was the cause of all his good fortune, never visited.