

THE THREE CROWNS

There was once a king who had three beautiful daughters. He loved each one as much as the other, and couldn't bear to part with any of them. But, one day he did. One morning the servants informed him that, *all* three princesses had vanished in the night, and were nowhere to be found. At first the king didn't want to believe this terrible news, but after searching every corner of the palace himself, and calling for them everywhere throughout, he had to. They searched the city, and the surrounding countryside, but there was no sign of them anywhere. As the days went by, and there was still no news, the king became ever more worried, and finally issued a proclamation. He offered a reward. The man who could bring him news of his daughters, would receive a share of his kingdom, and one of his daughter's hand in marriage.

Now it happened that, in his kingdom there lived three brothers. When they heard the proclamation of the king, all three decided to set off together, and not return until they had found the princesses. Without further thought, they left immediately and searched until night came. They were now tired, hungry, and some distance from home, so their first thought was, no longer to find the princesses, but to find an inn for the night. But, the road they were on was empty of houses. Around every bend, there was only another long straight stretch of road, cutting through the woods. But, after the last turn, through the trees, they saw a large, dark building. Without considering who it might belong to, they made their way towards it, through the trees and up a small hill.

They found themselves standing in front of the an old castle. Its gates were open, so they entered the courtyard. There was nobody around to be seen, but the doors were wide open and, maybe, welcoming. The three brothers climbed the steps, walked through the doors, and into a wonderfully furnished hall. The table was even better decorated than the room — it was set with a magnificent dinner which would put a royal banquet to shame. Despite their hunger, the young men were polite, and waited patiently for the owner of the castle to arrive. They waited until their hunger wouldn't let them wait any longer. It was now clear that nobody else was coming, so they sat down and made themselves free with the food.

After they had eaten their fill, they looked around for places to sleep. They found that there were only two beds. The oldest, being the oldest, took one, and his two younger brothers took the other. In turns out that they slept well, but he didn't. At eleven o'clock, he was woken up by a little man — no bigger than his hand — pulling his ears and shaking his head. The little man kept pulling and shaking for a full hour, until the clock struck twelve. Then, as suddenly as he had arrived, he left, and the young man could finally get some sleep.

In the morning, when they arose, his two brothers were well rested. They praised how comfortable their bed was, and how peaceful the castle was. The older brother said nothing, but he thought to himself that they should find out for themselves how he had slept.

The brothers found the castle to be very comfortable and well provided, so they decided to remain there for a few days to properly prepare for their search. But, the older brother offered to change their sleeping arrangements. The next evening, he said to the second oldest "It's only fair that we each get to sleep well. I slept well last night, so tonight I'll share with our youngest brother, and you can take my bed." His brother agreed, and so the eldest brother slept well that night. The middle brother didn't.

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In the morning all three brothers spoke of how comfortable the beds were, how quiet the castle was, and how well they had slept. The two elder brothers said nothing about the little man, or anything else disturbing them, until the youngest happened to leave the room. Then, the second oldest asked his older brother if he had been disturbed by a little man pulling his ears and shaking his head for a full hour. The eldest admitted that he had, but they agreed to say nothing and let the youngest find out for himself.

That evening, his two older brothers told the youngest "It's only fair that we each get to sleep well. So tonight we'll share a bed, and you can sleep alone." He naturally agreed, and so, he happily had a bed to himself, until eleven o'clock. Then he found out why his brothers had let him do so. He was woken up by the little man pulling his ears and shaking his head. It was as if the little man was trying to force him out of the bed, and, having a different temperament to his brothers, became angry. He complained, cursed and finally spang out of bed and chased the little man. He chased him out of the castle and into the forest, but never got any nearer or, indeed, further away. They soon came to place where there was a deep pit with stairs leading down. The little man ran down the stairs, and the young man followed. Then the little man, and the stairs, vanished leaving the youngest brother stuck in deep, dark pit, with no way out.

For a few moments, he just stood there, shocked and frightened, but then he collected himself. It was very dark, but as he turned around, he saw a dim light. It was coming from a tiny window in the wall. He crept up to it, and looked inside. What he saw surprised him. In a little chamber sat three beautiful girls, each wearing a golden crown. But, in each of the girl's laps, rested the head of a sleeping dragon. The young man knew that he had found the three missing princesses, and now he must think of a plan to rescue them. As he was thinking, the three princesses saw him at the window. They beckoned to him, and pointed to the door so that he could enter the chamber. Quietly, he did so.

Once he was inside, the princesses smiled and said to him "You can free us only if you can kill all three of these dragons. But to do so, you will need to behead each one before another can attack. That isn't something you can do alone and unarmed, so it is best if you leave before they awake. Please go now,

before they kill you.” With these words, they hung their heads again, and sat silently in sorrow. The young man understood that alone he had no chance against the three creatures, and so he crept quietly out of the room. There, he thought of his two brothers, and how easy it would be for them together to kill the three sleeping monsters. But, he was still trapped at the bottom of the pit with no way of getting word to them, or even of freeing himself.

In the morning, as they awoke, the two older brothers were curious as to how well their younger brother had slept. But, they couldn’t find him anywhere in the castle. They now realised that it wasn’t such a harmless game with the little man after all, and that their brother could be in danger. After searching the castle, they went into the forest calling out for him. The soon heard his faint answer in the distance, and following his voice, found the pit. From below, he told them about the three princesses and the three dragons. The eldest told the others to wait, and he went back to the castle. He returned with a rope, and said to the middle brother “I’ll let you down on this rope, but because I’m the strongest, I’ll stay here to pull the princesses, you and our brother back up.” His brother agreed, and after he had tied the rope around his waist, the eldest carefully lowered him down.

The youngest was very happy to see his older brother safely down, and that there was now a means of escape. But, they still had to kill the three dragons, and rescue the ladies. As they started to plan, the little man appeared out of nowhere. He had with him, two full-sized double edged sabres, which the two brothers took up. Then he started addressing them, like a general giving them courage for the oncoming battle.

With only three heavy strokes, the heads of all three dragons lay on the chamber floor. The three princess immediately rose happily from their chairs and for a while couldn’t stop thanking the two brothers. Then, when all was quiet, two of them each approached a brother, offered their hands in marriage, and presented him with their crown as a promise. The two brothers readily accepted the gifts, and the offers of marriage, and then led all three princesses out of the chamber. They called up to their brother, who let down the rope and, one by one, brought the princesses to safety. But each time, he made the princess swear an oath that she should say that he, and he alone, had rescued her and her sisters. When the third princess had done so, they set off for the royal palace, leaving his brothers at the bottom of the pit.

When they arrived at the palace, the king was very happy to be able to once again hold his three daughters, and there was a great celebration. He let the story of their rescue be told many times over, both by the young man and by each of the princesses. And every time, everybody heard the same lies. Nobody spoke of the other two brothers, now trapped at the bottom of a deep pit in the forest. Even the two princesses, who had promised their hearts to their brave rescuers, forced themselves to remain silent and not show their sorrow. And, while the king believed that the young man alone had rescued all three of his daughters, he promised him the choice of his daughters in marriage, as well as

his entire kingdom. The young man agreed, and the wedding was to be the next day.

All day the two youngest brothers waited hopelessly at the bottom of the pit. Their older brother had betrayed and deserted them, and, above, there was nobody to be seen or heard. Then, much later, as they could see the evening sky getting dark, they heard footsteps. It was the little man again, who this time told them to take note of their surroundings and let a good chance go by. Looking around, they saw that the stairway had reappeared. The two brothers thanked the little man with all their hearts, and ran up the steps before they had a chance disappear again.

They made their way out of the forest as quickly as they could and took, what they hoped was, the way to the royal city. But it was already late, and getting very dark, so they stopped at the first house they came to. This was owned by a goldsmith, who wanted to turn them away when they asked to stay overnight. He told them "I can't have anybody in the house tonight, I won't even be sleeping myself. Tomorrow, one of the king's three daughters is getting married, and I will have to work all night to make three new crowns, because out of the three old identical ones, two have been lost. So, please find somewhere else to sleep and leave me to my work."

The two young men didn't let themselves be sent away so easily. Instead, they told him that they were also journeyman goldsmiths and if he let them stay, they could each make one crown. All he had to do was give them a room and the necessary tools. After a little thought, the tired goldsmith agreed and showed them to a room they could use, and provided them with all of the tools they could ask for, which were not very many. The goldsmith, of course, thought that they would already have most of what they needed, but the two young men only needed to pretend to work. One made a few taps and bangs with the hammer while the other slept a little, and then they changed places. So it went throughout the night, but in the morning they were still able to present the goldsmith with two finely crafted crowns.

The goldsmith, who still hadn't quite finished his crown, was astonished at their speed and craftsmanship, and quietly looked forward to the praise *he* would receive at court. In good time, he set off for the palace with all three finished crowns. When he arrived he was led to the princesses, and presented them with their beautifully crafted *new* crowns. They were more astonished than he was, because the crowns were not new. They were their own old crowns!

The goldsmith was surprised when they asked him if he had really made the crowns himself. When he answered that he had, they asked him again, saying "If you tell us the truth, you will still be richly rewarded even if you didn't make these two crowns"

The goldsmith saw that it was better to be honest, and so he told the princesses how two journeyman goldsmiths had come his house, and helped him by making two of the crowns . The two princesses understood, better than

he did, what had really happened and commanded the goldsmith to fetch the two journeymen and invite them, in their names, to the wedding.

When he returned, a short while later, the two princesses recognised the two brothers as the young men who had freed them from the dragons in the pit. They then brought them before their father the king to explain what had really happened. They told him how they had killed the dragons, and how their brother had left them at the bottom of the pit, to claim all the reward for himself. As they were speaking, the little man appeared again. He confirmed everything that the two brothers had said, and more. He told the king how the eldest brother had threatened to kill the princesses if they didn't swear an oath that they would say that only he had save them.

When he heard all this, the king became very angry, and ordered that the eldest brother should immediately be arrested and executed. Then, in a happier mood, he gave each of the other two brothers half of his kingdom, and the hands in marriage of his two daughters who had chosen them. They lived long and happily together but, from that day on the little man vanished and has never been seen again.