

THE THREE CROWS

There came a time when a rich and powerful king, who ruled over many lands and their people, lay upon his deathbed. He called his son to him and, with his dying breath, told him "My son, I am not long for this world, and you will soon have to rule without a father's guidance. But do not be afraid, my cleverest advisor will continue to serve you. As long as you follow the advice of my faithful Counsel, you shall not go wrong. Trust him, in everything."

And so it was that the prince became king and ruled over the lands of his father, under the advice of the wise Counsel. But, this did not please his mother, the old queen who wanted the kingdom, and its riches, for herself. So, she said to her son "You are still very young and have much to learn, and it would be good for you to see more of the world before you settle into government. While you are away, I can act as regent and protector of the kingdom." When the young king then sought the advice of Counsel, the wise counsellor cautiously agreed that such a journey might be advisable, if he accompanied the king.

It was decided, and the preparations were made for the two to set off into the world. But, if truth be told, the queen was not too keen on the idea of her own son, and his too clever advisor, returning. She prepared a special potion, which she decanted into a small crystal flask, which she gave to her son. As she did so, she told him "One never knows what hardships one will encounter on a long journey. Take this strengthening potion for when you are fatigued after a long journey. It will immediately make all the difference to your constitution." The young king gratefully accepted the gift.

After taking leave of the queen and her council, the young king and his Counsel set off on their journey. Before long they entered a great forest which never seemed to come to an end. At the end of two days and two nights, they were still deep in the woods, very tired and hungry, and there was no sign of an inn or other place to rest. The king soon thought of the potion, and was about to refresh himself, when his clever advisor stopped him. "My lord," said Counsel "wouldn't it be better to give the potion to the horses first, they have more need of it. They have done, and must continue to do, all the work while we sit comfortably in the carriage."

This suggestion made sense to the young king, and so he gave the little bottle to his counsellor. Counsel then climbed out of the carriage and gave one of the horses a few drops of the special potion. It fell down, dead.

Counsel unhitched the poisoned horse and, tired and hungry, they drove on slowly, with the other three horses doing the work of four. As he looked back at the dead horse, Counsel saw that three crows had flown down from the trees, and had already started to peck at its corpse. As soon as they did so, they also dropped dead. He stopped the carriage, ran back, and collected the dead birds. Then they drove on, even deeper into the forest.

Eventually, they came to a solitary house, a little way from the road, and turned their horses to it. As their carriage pulled up, an old woman came out hurriedly, telling them “Please don’t stop here! This is not an inn, it is a robbers’ den. When the twelve villains return, nothing can save you.”

This shocked the young king, and was about to climb back in the carriage when Counsel stopped him. He whispered to him “Do not be afraid, my lord. Just do as I do.” Then, he told the old woman “I’m afraid that we don’t have a choice. We have lost one horse, and the others can take us no further. We are also very tired and hungry ourselves, but, we won’t impose too much on your hospitality. Can you prepare something for us to eat from these birds while we rest a little.”

The two weary travellers then went into the house, while the old woman took the three crows into the kitchen. Not too long afterwards, a band of men came in, demanding something to eat and drink. Counsel didn’t show that he knew that they were twelve vicious robbers, and made merry with them. The young man with him followed his lead, not letting on who he was. After a while, the old woman brought in the steaming stew she had made for the strangers. It smelled delicious, and Counsel invited the twelve to eat with them. They didn’t need telling twice. The pot was empty before the king and Counsel could even pick up their spoons, and — twelve robbers lay dead on the floor.

After a somewhat healthier meal, and resting a while, the two travellers continued their journey. The forest slowly became lighter, and before long they were out of it. Ahead of them, they saw a magnificent city in the distance and made their way towards it. When they entered the city, the travellers stopped at the first respectable inn they found. After arranging accommodation for themselves and their horses, they joined the other guests in the bar. Over drinks and refreshment, Counsel asked around for news and information about the area.

One local guest answered, intriguingly, “Oh, everything hereabouts is just as it has always been. Even the princess is up to her usual tricks.”

“What do you mean?” asked Counsel.

“Doesn’t everybody know?” replied the other “For years, she has refused to marry anyone who can’t answer one of her riddles, but if anybody can, however rich or poor, he or she will give him her hand and her kingdom. Since then, the city has been overrun with strangers wanting to try their wits. But none has ever succeeded, despite the consequences of failing.”

“What consequences?” asked Counsel’s young companion.

“Well,” continued the other “when — not if — a suitor fails to solve the riddle, she often has him dressed like a fool and has him driven through the streets

with whips. Other times, he is put on a donkey, and all the street urchins can pelt him with rotten food and other waste.”

Counsel, sat quietly for a while, thinking. It would be good for both kingdoms if he could effect a union, and even better if, in doing so, both young people could learn something. The next day, he led the young king to the palace to present him as a suitor to the princess. But before, she could give them her riddle, Counsel turned the matter on its head. He said “Your highness, it is well known that you are an expert in solving riddles. Surely it would be no easy matter for my lord to set you riddle which you cannot solve?”

The princess agreed that she was, indeed, such an expert who could solve any riddle presented to her, especially by such a pair of vagabonds.

Counsel then continued “Then, allow me humbly to suggest that this time we give you a riddle. If you cannot solve it, then you will take my companion as your husband. I am sure that such a one as clever as you could have no objection.” The princess reluctantly agreed, but with the condition that she would first give her answer three days afterwards. She intended to use this time to search her library and consult with all her own consellers.

Counsel's question was: “One brings death to three, three bring death to twelve. What is it?”

While the young king and Counsel retired to their inn for the next three days, the princess sought to solve the riddle. She worked through all the riddles she had set for other suitors, and then through all the others she could remember, but she had no answer. Then she searched through all the books in her library, but there was no answer to be found. Finally she consulted all of her ministers, advisors, and even her old teachers, but none could answer the question. At the end of the three days, she had no choice, but to keep her promise and marry the young vagabond. Word went out into the city, and everybody celebrated with a wedding party which lasted another three days.

Counsel never left the side of the young king, and became his most loyal and trusted minister. But, he wasn't so happy with the queen. He found her to be just as proud and arrogant as before, and he saw that held her husband in obvious contempt. As things were, this could never be a happy marriage, so he came up with a plan. One day, he rode off with the young king and didn't return for many days. When they did, the queen appeared to be happy, until she asked her husband where he had been. His answer annoyed her. “We went to a palace in the forest, where I played cards with some other gentlemen.” he said, “It went very well, and I only lost a few hundred thousand guilders.”

After a long argument, he stormed off with his loyal minister, to play himself into a better mood. When he came back, he told her that he had again lost a large sum, and another argument ensued. And, so it went on, until one day he came back, and stormed into her chamber shouting “It's all over! I have lost

everything! Your whole kingdom, its lands and its dominions — gone! We have to leave now, to escape the shame and even worse consequences.”

Before the queen could gather her thoughts, she was bundled, with the minister Counsel, by her husband into a carriage pulled by six horses. It flew, as fast of the wind, out of the city, and didn't slow down until it was halfway to the king's homeland. As they entered the capital, the carriage stopped, and Counsel hurried ahead while it moved on slowly. Soon they came to another stop, in a filthy back lane next to a poor, run-down cottage. The former queen was shocked to see an old woman, bent nearly double, come out and happily greeted her long-lost son. He escorted them both into the rotting house, where then told his wife “My dear, we are now in my home, and must make the best of it. We will both need to work so that we don't go hungry, so I will return to my old trade as a journeyman mason. You will have to do what you can.”

The young man went everyday into the city to work, but not as a builder as his wife thought. Instead, he was at the palace, working with his ministers and counsellors, including the wise Counsel, on the administration of the kingdom. The old queen, his real mother, had died shortly before his return. The young queen, remained in the poor cottage, and made do with the little money he brought back as his daily wages. She had tried to take on piecework to earn a few extra pennies, but didn't really have the skill or experience. Every item of knitting or crochet, which she sent out, came back with the comment “Nobody will buy something so coarse or poorly made.”

When she tearfully told her husband this, he replied “My dear wife, if you can't manage this, we will have to find another way for you to earn a few pennies. I'll try to borrow a little capital, so you can buy crockery which you can resell on the marketplace.” He then went out, and came back with some money.

They used the money to buy imported dishes, plates, cups, and saucers, and on the next morning found her sat on the cobbles in the marketplace surrounded by them. It was a long day, but a few pennies did land in her lap. She went again the next day, and everyday onwards until disaster struck. One day, a finely dressed man, not unlike her husband, on a white horse, came riding through the market. Without looking, and without stopping, he rode straight on, scattering all her wares, shattering most of them. She had lost everything, not just her property, but all her hopes, and cried bitterly as she made her way home. Worse still, her husband blamed her for her carelessness and lack of attention. Totally dejected, she silently accepted his criticism, and he slowly softened. At the end he said to her “There is nothing that we can do, what is gone is gone, and nothing will bring it back. But, tomorrow I have a good job, in the royal palace. I will have to stay all day, and won't be able to get away. So can you bring me my food to me. If you ask the porter at the gate, he will tell you where to find me.”

Late the next day, the poor woman arrived at the palace carrying a pot of stew and a dumpling for her husband. Because she didn't want to be seen carrying it through the streets, she kept it hidden inside her apron. When she arrived at the gate, and asked for the journeyman mason, the gatekeeper told her "Just go up these stairs into the kitchens, and ask again. Somebody will point you in the right direction."

She climbed the stairs wearily, and opened the door to the kitchen. The cook saw her, and said "Good, you can help me. Take this dish up to the dining hall. You don't need to go in, one of the servants will do that. Then, when you come back down, I'll direct you to your husband."

Keeping her own pot inside her apron, the woman silently took the serving dish and carried it to the dining hall, but, when she got there, there was no servant to take it from her. Cautiously she opened the door a little, and looked into the hall. As soon as she did, music started playing and finely dressed lord pulled her inside. The music played even louder, and she was forced to dance with him. They waltzed faster and faster, and as she spun around the pot flew out of her apron, throwing the dumpling in on direction and spraying the stew in another. She had never been so ashamed, and covered her fiery red face with her hands that nobody should see her tears. Her husband made sign with his hand and the instruments fell silent. Taking her arm, he led her to the throne, and said to his assembled guests "My lords and ladies, please allow me to present to you my beloved wife, and your queen." Then, after a trumpet blast and a drum roll, the music started again.

While the music was playing, the king led his queen into another room in which a beautiful golden dress was laid out for her. There he explained how, under the advice of his good Counsel, he had tested her to discover her true nature, and whether she loved him. Afterwards, they returned to the banquet, and again celebrated their marriage. The royal couple lived long and happily, and the queen in particular was loved and respected for her humility and compassion to those less fortunate than herself. And as for minister Counsel, both kingdoms, and their people, prospered under his good advice which he continued to provide until well into his old age.