



The Dragon's Strength - The Story of the Youngest Prince Who Killed the Sparrow

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*Intermediate
5 min read*

There was once a King who had three sons. One day the oldest son went hunting and when night fell his huntsmen came riding home without him.

“Where is the prince?” the King asked.

“Isn’t he here?” the huntsmen said. “He left us in midafternoon chasing a hare near the Old Mill up the river. We haven’t seen him since and we supposed he must have come home alone.”

When he hadn’t returned the following day his brother, the second prince, went out to search for him.

“I’ll go to the Old Mill,” he said to the King, “and see what’s become of him.”

So he mounted his horse and rode up the river. As he neared the Old Mill a hare crossed his path and the

second prince being a hunter like his brother at once gave chase. His attendant waited for his return but waited in vain. Night fell and still there was no sign of the second prince.

The attendant returned to the palace and told the King what had happened. The King was surprised but not unduly alarmed and the following day when the Youngest Prince asked to go hunting alone the King suggested that he go in the direction of the Old Mill to find out if he could what was keeping his brothers.

The Youngest Prince who had listened carefully to what his brothers' attendants had reported decided to act cautiously. So when a hare crossed his path as he approached the Old Mill, instead of giving it chase, he rode off as though he were hunting other game. Later he returned to the Old Mill from another direction.

He found an old woman sitting in front of it.

"Good evening, granny," he said in a friendly tone, pulling up his horse for a moment's chat. "Do you live here? You know I thought the Old Mill was deserted."

The old woman looked at him and shook her head gloomily.

"Deserted indeed! My boy, take an old woman's advice and don't have anything to do with this old mill! It's an evil place!"

"Why, granny," the Prince said, "what's the matter with it?"

The old woman peered cautiously around and when she saw they were alone she beckoned the Prince to come near. Then she whispered:

"A dragon lives here! A horrible monster! He takes the form of a hare and lures people into the mill. Then he captures them. Some of them he kills and eats and others he holds as prisoners in an underground dungeon. I'm one of his prisoners and he keeps me here to work for him."

"Granny," the Youngest Prince said, "would you like me to rescue you?"

"My boy, you couldn't do it! You have no idea what a strong evil monster the dragon is."

“If you found out something for me, granny, I think I might be able to overcome the dragon and rescue you.”

The old woman was doubtful but she promised to do anything the Youngest Prince asked.

“Well then, granny, find out from the dragon where his strength is, whether in his own body or somewhere else. Find out to-night and I’ll come back to-morrow at this same hour to see you.”

So that night when the dragon came home, after he had supped and when she was scratching his head to make him drowsy for bed, the old woman said to him:

“Master, I think you’re the strongest dragon in the world! Tell me now, where does your strength lie—in your own beautiful body or somewhere else?”

“You’re right, old woman,” the dragon grunted: “I am pretty strong as dragons go. But I don’t keep my strength in my own body. No, indeed! That would be too dangerous. I keep it in the hearth yonder.”

At that the old woman ran over to the hearth and, stooping down, she kissed it and caressed it.

“O beautiful hearth!” she said, “where my master’s strength is hidden! How happy are the ashes that cover your stones!”

The dragon laughed with amusement.

“That’s the time I fooled you, old woman! My strength isn’t in the hearth at all! It’s in the tree in front of the mill.”

The old woman at once ran out of the mill and threw her arms about the tree.

“O tree!” she cried, “most beautiful tree in the world, guard carefully our master’s strength and let no harm come to it!”

Again the dragon laughed.

"I've fooled you another time, old woman! Come here and scratch my head some more and this time I'll tell you the truth for I see you really love your master."

So the old woman went back and scratched the dragon's head and the dragon told her the truth about his strength.

"I keep it far away," he said. "In the third kingdom from here near the Tsar's own city there is a deep lake. A dragon lives at the bottom of the lake. In the dragon there is a wild boar; in the boar a hare; in the hare a pigeon; in the pigeon a sparrow. My strength is in the sparrow. Let any one kill the sparrow and I should die that instant. But I am safe. No one but shepherds ever come to the lake and even they don't come any more for the dragon has eaten up so many of them that the lake has got a bad name. Indeed, nowadays even the Tsar himself is hard put to it to find a shepherd. Oh, I tell you, old woman, your master is a clever one!"

So now the old woman had the dragon's secret and the next day she told it to the Youngest Prince. He at once devised a plan whereby he hoped to overcome the dragon. He dressed himself as a shepherd and with crook in hand started off on foot for the third kingdom. He traveled through villages and towns, across rivers and over mountains, and reached at last the third kingdom and the Tsar's own city. He presented himself at the palace and asked employment as a shepherd.

The guards looked at him in surprise and said:

"A shepherd! Are you sure you want to be a shepherd?"

Then they called to their companions: "Here's a youth who wants to be a shepherd!" And the word went through the palace and even the Tsar heard it.

"Send the youth to me," he ordered.

"Do you really want to be my shepherd?" he asked the Youngest Prince.

The Youngest Prince said yes, he did.

"If I put you in charge of the sheep, where would you pasture them?"

“Isn’t there a lake beyond the city,” the Prince asked, “where the grazing is good?”

“H’m!” said the Tsar. “So you know about that lake, too! What else do you know?”

“I’ve heard the shepherds disappear.”

“And still you want to try your luck?” the Tsar exclaimed.

Just then the Tsar’s only daughter, a lovely Princess, who had been looking at the young stranger, slipped over to her father and whispered:

“But, father, you can’t let such a handsome young man as that go off with the sheep! It would be dreadful if he never returned!”

The Tsar whispered back:

“Hush, child! Your concern for the young man’s safety does credit to your noble feelings. But this is not the time or the place for sentiment. We must consider first the welfare of the royal sheep.”

He turned to the Youngest Prince:

“Very well, young man, you may consider yourself engaged as shepherd. Provide yourself with whatever you need and assume your duties at once.”

“There is one thing,” the Youngest Prince said; “when I start out to-morrow morning with the sheep I should like to take with me two strong boarhounds, a falcon, and a set of bagpipes.”

“You shall have them all,” the Tsar promised.

Early the next morning when the Princess peeped out of her bedroom window she saw the new shepherd driving the royal flocks to pasture. A falcon was perched on his shoulder; he had a set of bagpipes under his arm; and he was leading two powerful boarhounds on a leash.

“It’s a shame!” the Princess said to herself. “He’ll probably never return and he’s such a handsome young man, too!” And she was so unhappy at thought of never again seeing the new shepherd that she couldn’t go back to

sleep.

Well, the Youngest Prince reached the lake and turned out his sheep to graze. He perched the falcon on a log, tied the dogs beside it, and laid his bagpipes on the ground. Then he took off his smock, rolled up his hose, and wading boldly into the lake called out in a loud voice:

“Ho, dragon, come out and we’ll try a wrestling match! That is, if you’re not afraid!”

“Afraid?” bellowed an awful voice. “Who’s afraid?”

The water of the lake churned this way and that and a horrible scaly monster came to the surface. He crawled out on shore and clutched the Prince around the waist. And the Prince clutched him in a grip just as strong and there they swayed back and forth, and rolled over, and wrestled together on the shore of the lake without either getting the better of the other. By midafternoon when the sun was hot, the dragon grew faint and cried out:

“Oh, if I could but dip my burning head in the cool water, then I could toss you as high as the sky!”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” the Prince said. “If the Tsar’s daughter would kiss my forehead, then I could toss you twice as high!”

After that the dragon slipped out of the Prince’s grasp, plunged into the water, and disappeared. The Prince waited for him but he didn’t show his scaly head again that day.

When evening came, the Prince washed off the grime of the fight, dressed himself carefully, and then looking as fresh and handsome as ever drove home his sheep. With the falcon on his shoulder and the two hounds at his heels he came playing a merry tune on his bagpipes.

The townspeople hearing the bagpipes ran out of their houses and cried to each other:

“The shepherd’s come back!”

The Princess ran to her window and, when she saw the shepherd alive and well, she put her hand to her heart and said:

“Oh!”

Even the Tsar was pleased.

“I’m not a bit surprised that he’s back!” he said. “There’s something about this youth that I like!”

The next day the Tsar sent two of his trusted servants to the lake to see what was happening there. They hid themselves behind some bushes on a little hill that commanded the lake. They were there when the shepherd arrived and they watched him as he waded out into the water and challenged the dragon as on the day before.

They heard the shepherd call out in a loud voice:

“Ho, dragon, come out and we’ll try a wrestling match! That is, if you’re not afraid!”

And from the water they heard an awful voice bellow back:

“Afraid? Who’s afraid?”

Then they saw the water of the lake churn this way and that and a horrible scaly monster come to the surface. They saw him crawl out on shore and clutch the shepherd around the waist. And they saw the shepherd clutch him in a grip just as strong. And they watched the two as they swayed back and forth and rolled over and wrestled together without either getting the better of the other. By midafternoon when the sun grew hot they saw the dragon grow faint and they heard him cry out:

“Oh, if I could only dip my burning head in the cool water, then I could toss you as high as the sky!”

And they heard the shepherd reply:

“Don’t talk nonsense! If the Tsar’s daughter would kiss my forehead, then I could toss you twice as high!”

Then they saw the dragon slip out of the shepherd’s grasp, plunge into the water, and disappear. They waited but he didn’t show his scaly head again that day.

So the Tsar’s servants hurried home before the shepherd and told the Tsar all they had seen and heard. The Tsar was mightily impressed with the bravery of the shepherd and he declared that if he killed that horrid

dragon he should have the Princess herself for wife!

He sent for his daughter and told her all that his servants had reported and he said to her:

“My daughter, you, too, can help rid your country of this monster if you go out with the shepherd to-morrow and when the time comes kiss him on the forehead. You will do this, will you not, for your country’s sake?”

The Princess blushed and trembled and the Tsar, looking at her in surprise, said:

“What! Shall a humble shepherd face a dragon unafraid and the daughter of the Tsar tremble!”

“Father,” the Princess cried, “it isn’t the dragon that I’m afraid of!”

“What then?” the Tsar asked.

But what it was she was afraid of the Princess would not confess. Instead she said:

“If the welfare of my country require that I kiss the shepherd on the forehead, I shall do so.”

So the next morning when the shepherd started out with his sheep, the falcon on his shoulder, the dogs at his heels, the bagpipes under his arm, the Princess walked beside him.

Her eyes were downcast and he saw that she was trembling.

“Do not be afraid, dear Princess,” he said to her. “Nothing shall harm you—I promise that!”

“I’m not afraid,” the Princess murmured. But she continued to blush and tremble and, although the shepherd tried to look into her eyes to reassure her, she kept her head averted.

This time the Tsar himself and many of his courtiers had gone on before and taken their stand on the hill that overlooked the lake to see the final combat of the shepherd and the dragon.

When the shepherd and the Princess reached the lake, the shepherd put his falcon on the log as before and tied the dogs beside it and laid his bagpipes on the ground. Then he threw off his smock, rolled up his hose, and wading boldly into the lake called out in a loud voice:

“Ho, dragon, come out and we’ll try a wrestling match! That is, if you’re not afraid!”

“Afraid?” bellowed an awful voice. “Who’s afraid?”

The water of the lake churned this way and that and the horrible scaly monster came to the surface. He crawled to shore and clutched the shepherd around the waist. The shepherd clutched him in a grip just as strong and there they swayed back and forth and rolled over and wrestled together on the shore of the lake without either getting the better of the other. The Princess without the least show of fear stood nearby calling out encouragement to the shepherd and waiting for the moment when the shepherd should need her help.

By midafternoon when the sun was hot, the dragon grew faint and cried out:

“Oh, if I could but dip my burning head in the cool water, then I could toss you as high as the sky!”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” the shepherd said. “If the Tsar’s daughter would kiss my forehead then I could toss you twice as high!”

Instantly the Princess ran forward and kissed the shepherd three times. The first kiss fell on his forehead, the second on his nose, the third on his mouth. With each kiss his strength increased an hundredfold and taking the dragon in a mighty grip he tossed him up so high that for a moment the Tsar and all the courtiers lost sight of him in the sky. Then he fell to earth with such a thud that he burst.

Out of his body sprang a wild boar. The shepherd was ready for this and on the moment he unleashed the two hounds and they fell on the boar and tore him to pieces.

Out of the boar jumped a rabbit. It went leaping across the meadow but the dogs caught it and killed it.

Out of the rabbit flew a pigeon. Instantly the shepherd unloosed the falcon. It rose high in the air, then swooped down upon the pigeon, clutched it in its talons, and delivered it into the shepherd’s hands.

He cut open the pigeon and found the sparrow.

“Spare me! Spare me!” squawked the sparrow.

“Tell me where my brothers are,” the shepherd demanded with his fingers about the sparrow’s throat.

“Your brothers? They are alive and in the deep dungeon that lies below the Old Mill. Behind the mill there are three willow saplings growing from one old root. Cut the saplings and strike the root. A heavy iron door leading down into the dungeon will open. In the dungeon you will find many captives old and young, your brothers among them. Now that I have told you this are you going to spare my life?”

But the shepherd wrung the sparrow’s neck for he knew that only in that way could the monster who had captured his brothers be killed.

Well, now that the dragon was dead the Tsar and all his courtiers came down from the hill and embraced the shepherd and told him what a brave youth he was.

“You have delivered us all from a horrid monster,” the Tsar said, “and to show you my gratitude and the country’s gratitude I offer you my daughter for wife.”

“Thank you,” said the shepherd, “but I couldn’t think of marrying the Princess unless she is willing to marry me.”

The Princess blushed and trembled just as she had blushed and trembled the night before and that morning, too, on the way to the lake. She tried to speak but could not at first. Then in a very little voice she said:

“As a Princess I think it is my duty to marry this brave shepherd who has delivered my country from this terrible dragon, and—and I think I should want to marry him anyway.”

She said the last part of her speech in such a very low voice that only the shepherd himself heard it. But that was right enough because after all it was intended only for him.

So then and there beside the lake before even the shepherd had time to wash his face and hands and put on his smock the Tsar put the Princess’s hand in his hand and pronounced them betrothed.

After that the shepherd bathed in the lake and then refreshed and clean he sounded his bagpipes and he and the Princess and the Tsar and all the courtiers returned to the city driving the sheep before them.

All the townspeople came out to meet them and they danced to the music of the bagpipes and there was great rejoicing both over the death of the dragon and over the betrothal of the Princess and the brave shepherd.

The wedding took place at once and the wedding festivities lasted a week. Such feasting as the townspeople had! Such music and dancing!

When the wedding festivities were ended, the shepherd told the Tsar who he really was.

“You say you’re a Prince!” the Tsar cried, perfectly delighted at this news. Then he declared he wasn’t in the least surprised. In fact, he said, he had suspected as much from the first!

“Do you think it likely,” he asked somewhat pompously, “that any daughter of mine would fall in love with a man who wasn’t a prince?”

“I think I’d have fallen in love with you whatever you were!” whispered the Princess to her young husband. But she didn’t let her father hear her!

The Prince told the Tsar about his brothers’ captivity and how he must go home to release them, and the Tsar at once said that he and his bride might go provided they returned as soon as possible.

They agreed to this and the Tsar fitted out a splendid escort for them and sent them away with his blessing.

So the Prince now traveled back through the towns and villages of three kingdoms, across rivers and over mountains, no longer a humble shepherd on foot, but a rich and mighty personage riding in a manner that befitted his rank.

When he reached the deserted mill, his friend the old woman was waiting for him.

“I know, my Prince, you have succeeded for the monster has disappeared.”

“Yes, granny, you are right: I have succeeded. I found the dragon in the lake, and the boar in the dragon, and the rabbit in the boar, and the pigeon in the rabbit, and the sparrow in the pigeon. I took the sparrow and killed it. So you are free now, granny, to return to your home. And soon all those other poor captives will be free.”

He went behind the mill and found the three willow saplings. He cut them off and struck the old root. Sure enough a heavy iron door opened. This led down into a deep dungeon which was crowded with unfortunate prisoners. The Prince led them all out and sent them their various ways. He found his own two brothers among them and led them home to his father.

There was great rejoicing in the King’s house, and in the King’s heart, too, for he had given up hope of ever seeing any of his sons again.

The King was so charmed with the Princess that he said it was a pity that she couldn’t marry his oldest son so that she might one day be Queen.

“The Youngest Prince is a capable young man,” the King said, “and there’s no denying that he managed this business of killing the dragon very neatly. But he is after all only the Youngest Prince with very little hope of succeeding to the kingdom. If you hadn’t married him in such haste one of his older brothers might easily have fallen in love with you.”

“I don’t regret my haste,” the Princess said. “Besides he is now my father’s heir. But that doesn’t matter for I should be happy with the Youngest Prince if he were only a shepherd.”

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