

The Six Servants

Brothers Grimm

German

Intermediate

15 min read

In former times there lived an aged Queen who was a sorceress, and her daughter was the most beautiful maiden under the sun. The old woman, however, had no other thought than how to lure mankind to destruction, and when a wooer appeared, she said that whosoever wished to have her daughter, must first perform a task, or die. Many had been dazzled by the daughter's beauty, and had actually risked this, but they never could accomplish what the old woman enjoined them to do, and then no mercy was shown; they had to kneel down, and their heads were struck off. A certain King's son who had also heard of the maiden's beauty, said to his father, "Let me go there, I want to demand her in marriage."

"Never," answered the King; "if you were to go, it would be going to your death." On this the son lay down and was sick unto death, and for seven years he lay there, and no physician could heal him. When the father perceived that all hope was over, with a heavy heart he said to him, "Go thither, and try your luck, for I know no other means of curing you."

When the son heard that, he rose from his bed and was well again, and joyfully set out on his way.

And it came to pass that as he was riding across a heath, he saw from afar something like a great heap of hay lying on the ground, and when he drew nearer, he could see that it was the stomach of a man, who had laid himself down there, but the stomach looked like a small mountain. When the fat man saw the traveller, he stood up and said, "If you are in need of any one, take me into your service."

The prince answered, "What can I do with such a great big man?" "Oh," said the Stout One, "this is nothing, when I stretch myself out well, I am three thousand times fatter." "If that's the case," said the prince, "I can make use of thee, come with me." So the Stout One followed the prince, and after a while they found another man who was lying on the ground with his ear laid to the turf. "What art thou doing there?" asked the King's son. "I am listening," replied the man. "What art thou listening to so attentively?" "I am listening to what is just going on in the world, for nothing escapes my ears; I even hear the grass growing." "Tell me," said the prince, "what thou hearest at the court of the old Queen who has the beautiful daughter." Then he answered, "I hear the whizzing of the sword that is striking off a wooer's head."

The King's son said, "I can make use of thee, come with me." They went onwards, and then saw a pair of feet lying and part of a pair of legs, but could not see the rest of the body. When they had walked on for a great distance, they came to the body, and at last to the head also.

"Why," said the prince, "what a tall rascal thou art!"

"Oh," replied the Tall One, "that is nothing at all yet; when I really stretch out my limbs, I am three thousand times as tall, and taller than the highest mountain on earth. I will gladly enter your service, if you will take me."

"Come with me," said the prince, "I can make use of thee."

They went onwards and found a man sitting by the road who had bound up his eyes. The prince said to him, "Hast thou weak eyes, that thou canst not look at the light?"

"No," replied the man, "but I must not remove the bandage, for whatsoever I look at with my eyes, splits to pieces, my glance is so powerful. If you can use that, I shall be glad to serve you." "Come with me," replied the King's son, "I can make use of thee."

They journeyed onwards and found a man who was lying in the hot sunshine, trembling and shivering all over his body, so that not a limb was still. "How canst thou shiver when the sun is shining so warm?" said the King's

son. "Alack," replied the man, "I am of quite a different nature. The hotter it is, the colder I am, and the frost pierces through all my bones; and the colder it is, the hotter I am. In the midst of ice, I cannot endure the heat, nor in the midst of fire, the cold." "Thou art a strange fellow!" said the prince, "but if thou wilt enter my service, follow me." They travelled onwards, and saw a man standing who made a long neck and looked about him, and could see over all the mountains. "What art thou looking at so eagerly?" said the King's son. The man replied, "I have such sharp eyes that I can see into every forest and field, and hill and valley, all over the world." The prince said, "Come with me if thou wilt, for I am still in want of such an one."

And now the King's son and his six servants came to the town where the aged Queen dwelt. He did not tell her who he was, but said, "If you will give me your beautiful daughter, I will perform any task you set me." The sorceress was delighted to get such a handsome youth as this into her net, and said, "I will set thee three tasks, and if thou art able to perform them all, thou shalt be husband and master of my daughter." "What is the first to be?" "Thou shalt fetch me my ring which I have dropped into the Red Sea." So the King's son went home to his servants and said, "The first task is not easy. A ring is to be got out of the Red Sea. Come, find some way of doing it."

Then the man with the sharp sight said, "I will see where it is lying," and looked down into the water and said, "It is sticking there, on a pointed stone." The Tall One carried them thither, and said, "I would soon get it out, if I could only see it." "Oh, is that all!" cried the Stout One, and lay down and put his mouth to the water, on which all the waves fell into it just as if it had been a whirlpool, and he drank up the whole sea till it was as dry as a meadow.

The Tall One stooped down a little, and brought out the ring with his hand. Then the King's son rejoiced when he had the ring, and took it to the old Queen. She was astonished, and said, "Yes, it is the right ring. Thou hast safely performed the first task, but now comes the second. Dost thou see the meadow in front of my palace? Three hundred fat oxen are feeding there, and these must thou eat, skin, hair, bones, horns and all, and down below in my cellar lie three hundred casks of wine, and these thou must drink up as well, and if one hair of the oxen, or one little drop of the wine is left, thy life will be forfeited to me." "May I invite no guests to this repast?" inquired the prince, "no dinner is good without some company." The old woman laughed maliciously, and replied, "Thou mayst invite one for the sake of companionship, but no more."

The King's son went to his servants and said to the Stout One, "Thou shalt be my guest to-day, and shalt eat thy fill." Hereupon the Stout One stretched himself out and ate the three hundred oxen without leaving one single

hair, and then he asked if he was to have nothing but his breakfast. He drank the wine straight from the casks without feeling any need of a glass, and he licked the last drop from his finger-nails. When the meal was over, the prince went to the old woman, and told her that the second task also was performed.

She wondered at this and said, "No one has ever done so much before, but one task still remains," and she thought to herself, "Thou shalt not escape me, and wilt not keep thy head on thy shoulders! This night," said she, "I will bring my daughter to thee in thy chamber, and thou shalt put thine arms round her, but when you are sitting there together, beware of falling asleep. When twelve o'clock is striking, I will come, and if she is then no longer in thine arms, thou art lost."

The prince thought, "The task is easy, I will most certainly keep my eyes open." Nevertheless he called his servants, told them what the old woman had said, and remarked, "Who knows what treachery may lurk behind this. Foresight is a good thing— keep watch, and take care that the maiden does not go out of my room again." When night fell, the old woman came with her daughter, and gave her into the prince's arms, and then the Tall One wound himself round the two in a circle, and the Stout One placed himself by the door, so that no living creature could enter. There the two sat, and the maiden spake never a word, but the moon shone through the window on her face, and the prince could behold her wondrous beauty. He did nothing but gaze at her, and was filled with love and happiness, and his eyes never felt weary. This lasted until eleven o'clock, when the old woman cast such a spell over all of them that they fell asleep, and at the self-same moment the maiden was carried away.

Then they all slept soundly until a quarter to twelve, when the magic lost its power, and all awoke again. "Oh, misery and misfortune!" cried the prince, "now I am lost!" The faithful servants also began to lament, but the Listener said, "Be quiet, I want to listen." Then he listened for an instant and said, "She is on a rock, three hundred leagues from hence, bewailing her fate. Thou alone, Tall One, canst help her; if thou wilt stand up, thou wilt be there in a couple of steps."

"Yes," answered the Tall One, "but the one with the sharp eyes must go with me, that we may destroy the rock." Then the Tall One took the one with bandaged eyes on his back, and in the twinkling of an eye they were on the enchanted rock. The Tall One immediately took the bandage from the other's eyes, and he did but look round, and the rock shivered into a thousand pieces. Then the Tall One took the maiden in his arms, carried her back in a second, then fetched his companion with the same rapidity, and before it struck twelve they were all sitting as they had sat before, quite merrily and happily. When twelve struck, the aged sorceress came stealing

in with a malicious face, which seemed to say, "Now he is mine!" for she believed that her daughter was on the rock three hundred leagues off. But when she saw her in the prince's arms, she was alarmed, and said, "Here is one who knows more than I do!" She dared not make any opposition, and was forced to give him her daughter. But she whispered in her ear, "It is a disgrace to thee to have to obey common people, and that thou art not allowed to choose a husband to thine own liking."

On this the proud heart of the maiden was filled with anger, and she meditated revenge. Next morning she caused three hundred great bundles of wood to be got together, and said to the prince that though the three tasks were performed, she would still not be his wife until some one was ready to seat himself in the midst of the wood, and bear the fire. She thought that none of his servants would let themselves be burnt for him, and that out of love for her, he himself would place himself upon it, and then she would be free. But the servants said, "Every one of us has done something except the Frosty One, he must set to work," and they put him in the middle of the pile, and set fire to it. Then the fire began to burn, and burnt for three days until all the wood was consumed, and when the flames had burnt out, the Frosty One was standing amid the ashes, trembling like an aspen leaf, and saying, "I never felt such a frost during the whole course of my life; if it had lasted much longer, I should have been benumbed!"

As no other pretext was to be found, the beautiful maiden was now forced to take the unknown youth as a husband. But when they drove away to church, the old woman said, "I cannot endure the disgrace," and sent her warriors after them with orders to cut down all who opposed them, and bring back her daughter. But the Listener had sharpened his ears, and heard the secret discourse of the old woman. "What shall we do?" said he to the Stout One. But he knew what to do, and spat out once or twice behind the carriage some of the sea-water which he had drunk, and a great sea arose in which the warriors were caught and drowned. When the sorceress perceived that, she sent her mailed knights; but the Listener heard the rattling of their armour, and undid the bandage from one eye of Sharp-eyes, who looked for a while rather fixedly at the enemy's troops, on which they all sprang to pieces like glass. Then the youth and the maiden went on their way undisturbed, and when the two had been blessed in church, the six servants took leave, and said to their master, "Your wishes are now satisfied, you need us no longer, we will go our way and seek our fortunes."

Half a league from the palace of the prince's father was a village near which a swineherd tended his herd, and when they came thither the prince said to his wife, "Do you know who I really am? I am no prince, but a herder of swine, and the man who is there with that herd, is my father. We two shall have to set to work also, and help

him.”

Then he alighted with her at the inn, and secretly told the innkeepers to take away her royal apparel during the night. So when she awoke in the morning, she had nothing to put on, and the innkeeper’s wife gave her an old gown and a pair of worsted stockings, and at the same time seemed to consider it a great present, and said, “If it were not for the sake of your husband I should have given you nothing at all!” Then the princess believed that he really was a swineherd, and tended the herd with him, and thought to herself, “I have deserved this for my haughtiness and pride.”

This lasted for a week, and then she could endure it no longer, for she had sores on her feet. And now came a couple of people who asked if she knew who her husband was. “Yes,” she answered, “he is a swineherd, and has just gone out with cords and ropes to try to drive a little bargain.”

But they said, “Just come with us, and we will take you to him,” and they took her up to the palace, and when she entered the hall, there stood her husband in kingly raiment. But she did not recognize him until he took her in his arms, kissed her, and said, “I suffered much for thee, and now thou, too, hast had to suffer for me.”

And then the wedding was celebrated, and he who has told you all this, wishes that he, too, had been present at it.

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