There was once a king in Erin, and he had an only son. While this son was a little child his mother died.

After a time the king married and had a second son.

The two boys grew up together; and as the elder was far handsomer and better than the younger, the queen became jealous, and was for banishing him out of her sight.

The king's castle stood near the shore of Loch Erne, and three swans came every day to be in the water and swim in the lake. The elder brother used to go fishing; and once when he sat at the side of the water, the three swans made young women of themselves, came to where he sat, and talked to the king's son.

The queen had a boy minding cows in the place, and when he went home that night he told about what he had seen,—that there were three young women at the lake, and the king's son was talking to the three that day. Next morning the queen called the cowboy to her, and said: "Here is a pin of slumber; and do you stick it in the
clothes of the king's son before the young women come, and when they go away, take out the pin and bring it back to me.”

That day when the cowboy saw the three young women coming, he went near and threw the pin, which stuck in the clothes of the king's son. That instant he fell asleep on the ground.

When the young women came, one of them took a towel, dipped it in the cold water of the lake, and rubbed his face; but she could not rouse him. When their time came to go, they were crying and lamenting because the young man was asleep; and one of the three put a gold pin in his bosom, so that when he woke up he would find it and keep her in mind.

After they had gone a couple of hours, the cowboy came up, took out the sleeping-pin, and hurried off. The king's son woke up without delay; and finding the gold pin in his bosom, he knew the young woman had come to see him.

Next day he fished and waited again. When the cowboy saw the young women coming out of the lake, he stole up a second time, and threw the pin, which stuck in his clothes, and that moment he was drowsy and fell asleep. When the young women came he was lying on the ground asleep. One of them rubbed him with a towel dipped in the water of the lake; but no matter what she did, he slept on, and when they had to go, she put a gold ring in his bosom. When the sisters were leaving the lake, and had put on their swan-skins and become swans, they all flew around him and flapped their wings in his face to know could they rouse him; but there was no use in trying.

After they had gone, the cowboy came and took out the sleeping-pin. When the king's son was awake he put his hand in his bosom, found the keepsake, and knew that the sisters had come to him.

When he went fishing the third day, he called up the cowboy and said: “I fall asleep every day. I know something is done to me. Now do you tell me all. In time I'll reward you well. I know my stepmother sends something by you that takes my senses away.”

“I would tell,” said the cowboy, “but I'm in dread my mistress might kill or banish me.”

“She will not, for I'll put you in the way she'll not harm you. You see my fishing-bag here? Now throw the pin, which I know you have, towards me, and hit the bag.”
The cowboy did as he was told, and threw the pin into the fishing-bag, where it remained without harm to any one. The cowboy went back to his cattle, and the prince fished on as before. The three swans were out in the middle of the lake swimming around for themselves in the water, and the prince moved on, fishing, till he came to a bend in the shore. On one side of him a tongue of land ran out into the lake. The swans came to the shore, leaving the piece of land between themselves and the prince. Then they took off their swan-skins, were young women, and bathed in the lake.

After that they came out, put on the dress of young women, and went to where the king's son was fishing.

He spoke to them, and asked where were they from, in what place were they born, and why were they swans.

They said: “We are three sisters, daughters of the king of the East, and we have two brothers. Our mother died, and our father married again, and had two other daughters; and these two are not so good looking nor so well favored as we, and their mother was in dread they wouldn't get such fine husbands as we, so she enchanted us, and now we are going about the world from lake to lake in the form of swans.”

Then the eldest of the three sisters said to the king's son: “What kind are you, and where were you born?”

“I was born in Erin,” said he; “and when I was a little boy my mother died, my father married again and had a second son, and that son wasn't to the eye what I was, and my stepmother was for banishing me from my father's house because she thought her own son was not so good as I was, and I am fishing here every day by the lake to keep out of her sight.”

“Well,” said the eldest sister, “I thought you were a king's son, and so I came to you in my own form to know could we go on in the world together.”

“I don't know yet what to do,” said the king's son.

“Well, be sure of your mind to-morrow, for that will be the last day for me here.”

When the cowboy was going home, the king's son gave him the sleeping-pin for the stepmother. When he had driven in the cattle, the cowboy told the queen that the young man had fallen asleep as on the two other days.

But there was an old witch in the place who was wandering about the lake that day. She saw everything, went to the queen, and told her how the three swans had made young women of themselves, and talked with her
When the queen heard the old witch, she fell into a terrible rage at the cowboy for telling her a lie, and banished him out of her sight forever. Then she got another cowboy, and sent him off with the sleeping-pin next day. When he came near the lake, the king's son tried to drive him off; but the cowboy threw the sleeping-pin into his clothes, and he fell down near the edge of the water without sight or sense.

The three sisters came, and found him sleeping. They rubbed him, and threw water on his face, but they could not wake him. And the three were lamenting sorely, for they had brought a swan's skin with them that day, so the king's son might make a swan of himself and fly away with them, for this was their last day at that place; but they could do nothing now, for he lay there dead asleep on the ground before them.

The eldest sister pulled out her handkerchief, and the falling tears dropped on it. Then she took a knife, and cut one of the nipples from her breast. The second sister wrote on the handkerchief: “Keep this in mind till you get more account from us.” They put it in his bosom and went away.

As soon as the sisters had gone, the cowboy came, drew out the pin, and hurried away. The stepmother was always trying to banish the king's son, hoping that something might happen to him, and her own son be the heir. So now he went off and wandered away through Erin, always inquiring for the eldest sister, but never could find her.

At the end of seven years he came home, and was fishing at the side of Loch Erne again, when a swan flew up to him and said: “Your love is lying on her death-bed, unless you go to save her. She is bleeding from the breast, and you must go to her now. Go straight to the East!”

The king's son went straight to the East, and on the way there rose up storm and fog against him; but they did not stop him. He was going on always, and when he was three weeks' journey from his father's castle he stumbled one dark, misty day and fell over a ditch. When he rose up there stood on the other side of the ditch before him a little horse, all bridled and saddled, with a whip on the saddle. The horse spoke up and said: “If you are the king's son, I was sent here to meet you, and carry you to the castle of the king of the East. There is a young woman at the castle who thinks it long till she sees you. Now ask me no questions, for I'm not at liberty to talk to you till I bring you to the East.”
“I suppose we are to be a long time going?” said the king’s son.

“Don’t trouble yourself about the going; I’ll take you safely. Sit on my back now, and be sure you’re a good rider, and you’ll not be long on the road. This is my last word.”

They went on, and were going always; and as he travelled, the prince met the wind that was before him, and the wind that blew behind could not come up with him. When he was hungry the pommel of the saddle opened, and he found the best of eating inside.

They went on sweeping over the world for two weeks, and when they were near the East the horse said: “Get down from my back now, for it’s tired I am.”

“How far are we from the castle?” asked the king’s son.

“Five days’ journey,” answered the horse. “When you come to the castle, don’t stop a moment till you ask where the young woman is lying; and tell them to be sure to give good stabling and food to the horse. Come and see me yourself every day. If you don’t, there will be nothing for me but fasting; and that’s what I don’t like.”

When the king’s son came to the castle it was evening. The two younger sisters welcomed him. (These were two of the swans at the lake in Erin, and now at home by the enchantment of their stepmother. They were swans in the daytime, and women only at night, so as not to be under the eye of young men when these came to see the stepmother’s own daughters.) They said: “Our sister is on an island, and we’ll go to her.” They got a boat for the young man, and went with him to where their sister was lying. They said to her: “The son of the king of Erin is here.”

“Let him come in, that I may look at him,” said she.

The king’s son went in, and when she saw him she was glad. “Have you anything that belongs to me?” asked she.

“I have.”

“Then throw it on my breast.”

He threw the handkerchief on her breast and went away. Next day she rose from the bed as well as ever. On the third day after his arrival, the son of the king of Erin married the eldest daughter of the king of the East, and the stepmother’s enchantment was destroyed; and there was the grandest wedding that ever was seen in that
The king's son, thinking only of his bride, forgot all about the horse that had brought him over the long road. When at last he went to see him, the stable was empty; the horse had gone. And neither his father in Erin nor the stepmother came to his mind, he was living so pleasantly in the East. But after he had been there a long time, and a son and a daughter had been born to him, he remembered his father. Then he made up his mind not to let the stepmother's son be heir to the kingdom in place of himself. So taking his wife and children, he left the East and travelled to Erin. He stopped on the road, and sent word to the father that he was coming.

When the stepmother heard the news, a great weakness came on her. She fell into a fit and died.

The king's son waited in a convenient place till the funeral was over, and then he came to the castle and lived with his father. He was not long in the place when he sent messengers to know could they find the cowboy that the stepmother banished for telling about the sleeping-pin. They brought the cowboy to the castle, and the king made him his coachman.

The cowboy was not twelve months in his new place before he married. Then the king's son gave him a fine piece of land to live on, with six cows and four horses. There was not a happier man in the kingdom than the cowboy. When the father died, the king's son became king in Erin himself.

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