

The Three Princesses in the Blue Mountain

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Intermediate
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There were once upon a time a King and Queen who had no children, and they took it so much to heart that they hardly ever had a happy moment. One day the King stood in the portico and looked out over the big meadows and all that was his. But he felt he could have no enjoyment out of it all, since he did not know what would become of it after his time. As he stood there pondering, an old beggar woman came up to him and asked him for a trifle in heaven's name. She greeted him and curtsied, and asked what ailed the King, since he looked so sad.

"You can't do anything to help me, my good woman," said the King; "it's no use telling you."

"I am not so sure about that," said the beggar woman. "Very little is wanted when luck is in the way. The King is thinking that he has no heir to his crown and kingdom, but he need not mourn on that account," she said. "The Queen shall have three daughters, but great care must be taken that they do not come out under the open heavens before they are all fifteen years old; otherwise a snowdrift will come and carry them away."

When the time came the Queen had a beautiful baby girl; the year after she had another, and the third year she

also had a girl.

The King and Queen were glad beyond all measure; but although the King was very happy, he did not forget to set a watch at the Palace door, so that the Princesses should not get out.

As they grew up they became both fair and beautiful, and all went well with them in every way. Their only sorrow was that they were not allowed to go out and play like other children. For all they begged and prayed their parents, and for all they besought the sentinel, it was of no avail; go out they must not before they were fifteen years old, all of them.

So one day, not long before the fifteenth birthday of the youngest Princess, the King and the Queen were out driving, and the Princesses were standing at the window and looking out. The sun was shining, and everything looked so green and beautiful that they felt that they must go out, happen what might. So they begged and entreated and urged the sentinel, all three of them, that he should let them down into the garden. "He could see for himself how warm and pleasant it was; no snowy weather could come on such a day." Well, he didn't think it looked much like it either, and if they must go they had better go, the soldier said; but it must only be for a minute, and he himself would go with them and look after them.

When they got down into the garden they ran up and down, and filled their laps with flowers and green leaves, the prettiest they could find. At last they could manage no more, but just as they were going indoors they caught sight of a large rose at the other end of the garden. It was many times prettier than any they had gathered, so they must have that also. But just as they bent down to take the rose a big dense snowdrift came and carried them away.

There was great mourning over the whole country, and the King made known from all the churches that any one who could save the Princesses should have half the kingdom and his golden crown and whichever princess he liked to choose.

You can well understand there were plenty who wanted to gain half the kingdom, and a princess into the bargain; so there were people of both high and low degree who set out for all parts of the country. But there was no one who could find the Princesses, or even get any tidings of them.

When all the grand and rich people in the country had had their turn, a captain and a lieutenant came to the

Palace, and wanted to try their luck. The King fitted them out both with silver and gold, and wished them success on their journey.

Then came a soldier, who lived with his mother in a little cottage some way from the Palace. He had dreamt one night that he also was trying to find the Princesses. When the morning came he still remembered what he had dreamt, and told his mother about it.

“Some witchery must have got hold of you,” said the woman, “but you must dream the same thing three nights running, else there is nothing in it.” And the next two nights the same thing happened; he had the same dream, and he felt he must go. So he washed himself and put on his uniform, and went into the kitchen at the Palace. It was the day after the captain and the lieutenant had set out.

“You had better go home again,” said the King, “the Princesses are beyond your reach, I should say; and besides, I have spent so much money on outfits that I have nothing left to-day. You had better come back another time.”

“If I go, I must go to-day,” said the soldier. “Money I do not want; I only need a drop in my flask and some food in my wallet,” he said; “but it must be a good walletful—as much meat and bacon as I can carry.”

Yes, that he might have if that was all he wanted.

So he set off, and he had not gone many miles before he overtook the captain and the lieutenant.

“Where are you going?” asked the captain, when he saw the man in uniform.

“I’m going to try if I can find the Princesses,” answered the soldier.

“So are we,” said the captain, “and since your errand is the same, you may keep company with us, for if we don’t find them, you are not likely to find them either, my lad,” said he.

When they had gone awhile the soldier left the high road, and took a path into the forest.

“Where are you going?” said the captain; “it is best to follow the high road.”

“That may be,” said the soldier, “but this is my way.”

He kept to the path, and when the others saw this they turned round and followed him. Away they went further and further, far across big moors and along narrow valleys.

And at last it became lighter, and when they had got out of the forest altogether they came to a long bridge, which they had to cross. But on that bridge a bear stood on guard. He rose on his hind legs and came towards them, as if he wanted to eat them.

“What shall we do now?” said the captain.

“They say that the bear is fond of meat,” said the soldier, and then he threw a fore quarter to him, and so they got past. But when they reached the other end of the bridge, they saw a lion, which came roaring towards them with open jaws as if he wanted to swallow them.

“I think we had better turn right-about, we shall never be able to get past him alive,” said the captain.

“Oh, I don’t think he is so very dangerous,” said the soldier; “I have heard that lions are very fond of bacon, and I have half a pig in my wallet;” and then he threw a ham to the lion, who began eating and gnawing, and thus they got past him also.

In the evening they came to a fine big house. Each room was more gorgeous than the other; all was glitter and splendour wherever they looked; but that did not satisfy their hunger. The captain and the lieutenant went round rattling their money, and wanted to buy some food; but they saw no people nor could they find a crumb of anything in the house, so the soldier offered them some food from his wallet, which they were not too proud to accept, nor did they want any pressing. They helped themselves of what he had as if they had never tasted food before.

The next day the captain said they would have to go out shooting and try to get something to live upon. Close to the house was a large forest where there were plenty of hares and birds. The lieutenant was to remain at home and cook the remainder of the food in the soldier's wallet. In the meantime the captain and the soldier shot so much game that they were hardly able to carry it home. When they came to the door they found the lieutenant in such a terrible plight that he was scarcely able to open the door to them.

"What is the matter with you?" said the captain. The lieutenant then told them that as soon as they were gone a tiny, little man, with a long beard, who went on crutches, came in and asked so plaintively for a penny; but no sooner had he got it than he let it fall on the floor, and for all he raked and scraped with his crutch he was not able to get hold of it, so stiff and stark was he.

"I pitied the poor, old body," said the lieutenant, "and so I bent down to pick up the penny, but then he was neither stiff nor stark any longer. He began to belabour me with his crutches till very soon I was unable to move a limb."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! you, one of the king's officers, to let an old cripple give you a thrashing, and then tell people of it into the bargain!" said the captain. "Pshaw! to-morrow I'll stop at home, and then you'll hear another story."

The next day the lieutenant and the soldier went out shooting and the captain remained at home to do the cooking and look after the house. But if he fared no worse, he certainly fared no better than the lieutenant. In a little while the old man came in and asked for a penny. He let it fall as soon as he got it; gone it was and could not be found. So he asked the captain to help him to find it, and the captain, without giving a thought, bent down to look for it. But no sooner was he on his knees than the cripple began belabouring him with his crutches, and every time the captain tried to rise, he got a blow which sent him reeling. When the others came home in the evening, he still lay on the same spot and could neither see nor speak.

The third day the soldier was to remain at home, while the other two went out shooting. The captain said he must take care of himself, "for the old fellow will soon put an end to you, my lad," said he.

"Oh, there can't be much life in one if such an old crook can take it," said the soldier.

They were no sooner outside the door, than the old man came in and asked for a penny again.

“Money I have never owned,” said the soldier, “but food I’ll give you, as soon as it is ready,” said he, “but if we are to get it cooked, you must go and cut the wood.”

“That I can’t,” said the old man.

“If you can’t, you must learn,” said the soldier. “I will soon show you. Come along with me down to the woodshed.” There he dragged out a heavy log and cut a cleft in it, and drove in a wedge till the cleft deepened.

“Now you must lie down and look right along the cleft, and you’ll soon learn how to cut wood,” said the soldier. “In the meantime I’ll show you how to use the axe.”

The old man was not sufficiently cunning, and did as he was told; he lay down and looked steadily along the log. When the soldier saw the old man’s beard had got well into the cleft, he struck out the wedge; the cleft closed and the old man was caught by the beard. The soldier began to beat him with the axe handle, and then swung the axe round his head, and vowed that he would split his skull if he did not tell him, there and then, where the Princesses were.

“Spare my life, spare my life, and I’ll tell you!” said the old man. “To the east of the house there is a big mound; on top of the mound you must dig out a square piece of turf, and then you will see a big stone slab. Under that there is a deep hole through which you must let yourself down, and you’ll then come to another world where you will find the Princesses. But the way is long and dark and it goes both through fire and water.”

When the soldier got to know this, he released the old man, who was not long in making off.

When the captain and lieutenant came home they were surprised to find the soldier alive. He told them what had happened from first to last, where the Princesses were and how they should find them. They became as pleased as if they had already found them, and when they had had some food, they took with them a basket and as much rope as they could find, and all three set off to the mound. There they first dug out the turf just as the old man had told them, and underneath they found a big stone slab, which it took all their strength to turn over. They then began to measure how deep it was; they joined on ropes both two and three times, but they were no nearer the bottom the last time than the first. At last they had to join all the ropes they had, both the

coarse and fine, and then they found it reached the bottom.

The captain was, of course, the first who wanted to descend; "But when I tug at the rope you must make haste to drag me up again," he said. He found the way both dark and unpleasant, but he thought he would go on as long as it became no worse. But all at once he felt ice cold water spouting about his ears; he became frightened to death and began tugging at the rope.

The lieutenant was the next to try, but it fared no better with him. No sooner had he got through the flood of water than he saw a blazing fire yawning beneath him, which so frightened him that he also turned back.

The soldier then got into the bucket, and down he went through fire and water, right on till he came to the bottom, where it was so pitch dark that he could not see his hand before him. He dared not let go the basket, but went round in a circle, feeling and fumbling about him. At last he discovered a gleam of light far, far away like the dawn of day, and he went on in that direction.

When he had gone a bit it began to grow light around him, and before long he saw a golden sun rising in the sky and everything around him became as bright and beautiful as if in a fairy world.

First he came to some cattle, which were so fat that their hides glistened a long way off, and when he had got past them he came to a fine, big palace. He walked through many rooms without meeting anybody. At last he heard the hum of a spinning wheel, and when he entered the room he found the eldest Princess sitting there spinning copper yarn; the room and everything in it was of brightly polished copper.

"Oh, dear; oh, dear! what are Christian people doing here?" said the Princess. "Heaven preserve you! what do you want?"

"I want to set you free and get you out of the mountain," said the soldier.

"Pray do not stay. If the troll comes home he will put an end to you at once; he has three heads," said she.

"I do not care if he has four," said the soldier. "I am here, and here I shall remain."

"Well, if you will be so headstrong, I must see if I can help you," said the Princess.

She then told him to creep behind the big brewing vat which stood in the front hall; meanwhile she would

receive the troll and scratch his heads till he went to sleep.

“And when I go out and call the hens you must make haste and come in,” she said. “But you must first try if you can swing the sword which is lying on the table.” No, it was too heavy, he could not even move it. He had then to take a strengthening draught from the horn, which hung behind the door; after that he was just able to stir it, so he took another draught, and then he could lift it. At last he took a right, big draught, and he could swing the sword as easily as anything.

All at once the troll came home; he walked so heavily that the palace shook.

“Ugh, ugh! I smell Christian flesh and blood in my house,” said he.

“Yes,” answered the Princess, “a raven flew past here just now, and in his beak he had a human bone, which he dropped down the chimney; I threw it out and swept and cleaned up after it, but I suppose it still smells.”

“So it does,” said the troll.

“But come and lie down and I’ll scratch your heads,” said the Princess; “the smell will be gone by the time you wake.”

The troll was quite willing, and before long he fell asleep and began snoring. When she saw he was sleeping soundly, she placed some stools and cushions under his heads and went to call the hens. The soldier then stole into the room with the sword, and with one blow cut all the three heads off the troll.

The Princess was as pleased as a fiddler, and went with the soldier to her sisters, so that he could also set them free. First of all they went across a courtyard and then through many long rooms till they came to a big door.

“Here you must enter: here she is,” said the Princess. When he opened the door he found himself in a large hall, where everything was of pure silver; there sat the second sister at a silver spinning-wheel.

“Oh, dear; oh, dear!” she said. “What do you want here?”

“I want to set you free from the troll,” said the soldier.

“Pray do not stay, but go,” said the Princess. “If he finds you here he will take your life on the spot.”

“That would be awkward—that is if I don’t take his first,” said the soldier.

“Well, since you will stay,” she said, “you will have to creep behind the big brewing-vat in the front hall. But you must make haste and come as soon as you hear me calling the hens.”

First of all he had to try if he was able to swing the troll’s sword, which lay on the table; it was much larger and heavier than the first one; he was hardly able to move it. He then took three draughts from the horn and he could then lift it, and when he had taken three more he could handle it as if it were a rolling pin.

Shortly afterwards he heard a heavy, rumbling noise that was quite terrible, and directly afterwards a troll with six heads came in.

“Ugh, ugh!” he said as soon as he got his noses inside the door. “I smell Christian blood and bone in my house.”

“Yes, just think! A raven came flying past here with a thigh-bone, which he dropped down the chimney,” said the Princess. “I threw it out, but the raven brought it back again. At last I got rid of it and made haste to clean the room, but I suppose the smell is not quite gone,” she said.

“No, I can smell it well,” said the troll; but he was tired and put his heads in the Princess’s lap, and she went on scratching them till they all fell a-snoring. Then she called the hens, and the soldier came and cut off all the six heads as if they were set on cabbage stalks.

She was no less glad than her elder sister, as you may imagine, and danced and sang; but in the midst of their joy they remembered their youngest sister. They went with the soldier across a large courtyard, and, after walking through many, many rooms, he came to the hall of gold where the third sister was.

She sat at a golden spinning-wheel spinning gold yarn, and the room from ceiling to floor glistened and glittered till it hurt one’s eyes.

“Heaven preserve both you and me, what do you want here?” said the Princess. “Go, go, else the troll will kill us both.”

“Just as well two as one,” answered the soldier. The Princess cried and wept; but it was all of no use, he must and would remain. Since there was no help for it he would have to try if he could use the troll’s sword on the table in the front hall. But he was only just able to move it; it was still larger and heavier than the other two swords.

He then had to take the horn down from the wall and take three draughts from it, but was only just able to stir the sword. When he had taken three more draughts he could lift it, and when he had taken another three he swung it as easily as if it had been a feather.

The Princess then settled with the soldier to do the same as her sisters had done. As soon as the troll was well asleep she would call the hens, and he must then make haste and come in and put an end to the troll.

All of a sudden they heard such a thundering, rambling noise, as if the walls and roof were tumbling in.

“Ugh! Ugh! I smell Christian blood and bone in my house,” said the troll, sniffing with all his nine noses.

“Yes, you never saw the like! Just now a raven flew past here and dropped a human bone down the chimney. I threw it out, but the raven brought it back, and this went on for some time,” said the Princess; but she got it buried at last, she said, and she had both swept and cleaned the place, but she supposed it still smelt.

“Yes, I can smell it well,” said the troll.

“Come here and lie down in my lap and I will scratch your heads,” said the Princess. “The smell will be all gone when you awake.”

He did so, and when he was snoring at his best she put stools and cushions under the heads so that she could get away to call the hens. The soldier then came in in his stockinged feet and struck at the troll, so that eight of the heads fell off at one blow. But the sword was too short and did not reach far enough; the ninth head woke up and began to roar.

“Ugh! Ugh! I smell a Christian.”

“Yes, here he is,” answered the soldier, and before the troll could get up and seize hold of him the soldier struck him another blow and the last head rolled along the floor.

You can well imagine how glad the Princesses became now that they no longer had to sit and scratch the trolls’ heads; they did not know how they could do enough for him who had saved them. The youngest Princess took off her gold ring and knotted it in his hair. They then took with them as much gold and silver as they thought they could carry and set off on their way home.

As soon as they tugged at the rope the captain and the lieutenant pulled up the Princesses, the one after the other. But when they were safely up, the soldier thought it was foolish of him not to have gone up before the Princesses, for he had not very much belief in his comrades. He thought he would first try them, so he put a heavy lump of gold in the basket and got out of the way. When the basket was half-way up they cut the rope and the lump of gold fell to the bottom with such a crash that the pieces flew about his ears.

“Now we are rid of him,” they said, and threatened the Princesses with their life if they did not say that it was they who had saved them from the trolls. They were forced to agree to this, much against their will, and especially the youngest Princess; but life was precious, and so the two who were strongest had their way.

When the captain and lieutenant got home with the Princesses you may be sure there were great rejoicings at the palace. The King was so glad he didn’t know which leg to stand on; he brought out his best wine from his cupboard and wished the two officers welcome. If they had never been honoured before they were honoured now in full measure, and no mistake. They walked and strutted about the whole of the day, as if they were the cocks of the walk, since they were now going to have the King for father-in-law. For it was understood they should each have whichever of the Princesses they liked and half the kingdom between them. They both wanted the youngest Princess, but for all they prayed and threatened her it was of no use; she would not hear or listen to either.

They then asked the King if they might have twelve men to watch over her; she was so sad and melancholy since she had been in the mountain that they were afraid she might do something to herself.

Yes, that they might have, and the King himself told the watch they must look well after her and follow her wherever she went and stood.

They then began to prepare for the wedding of the two eldest sisters; it should be such a wedding as never was heard or spoken of before, and there was no end to the brewing and the baking and the slaughtering.

In the meantime the soldier walked and strolled about down in the other world. He thought it was hard that he should see neither people nor daylight any more; but he would have to do something, he thought, and so for many days he went about from room to room and opened all the drawers and cupboards and searched about on the shelves and looked at all the fine things that were there. At last he came to a drawer in a table, in which there lay a golden key; he tried this key to all the locks he could find, but there was none it fitted till he came to a little cupboard over the bed, and in that he found an old rusty whistle. "I wonder if there is any sound in it," he thought, and put it to his mouth. No sooner had he whistled than he heard a whizzing and a whirring from all quarters, and such a large flock of birds swept down, that they blackened all the field in which they settled.

"What does our master want to-day?" they asked.

If he were their master, the soldier said, he would like to know if they could tell him how to get up to the earth again. No, none of them knew anything about that; "But our mother has not yet arrived," they said; "if she can't help you, no one can."

So he whistled once more, and shortly heard something flapping its wings far away, and then it began to blow so hard that he was carried away between the houses like a wisp of hay across the courtyard, and if he had not caught hold of the fence he would no doubt have been blown away altogether.

A big eagle—bigger than you can imagine—then swooped down in front of him.

"You come rather sharply," said the soldier.

"As you whistle so I come," answered the eagle. So he asked her if she knew any means by which he could get away from the world in which they were.

"You can't get away from here unless you can fly," said the eagle, "but if you will slaughter twelve oxen for me,

so that I can have a really good meal, I will try and help you. Have you got a knife?"

"No, but I have a sword," he said. When the eagle had swallowed the twelve oxen she asked the soldier to kill one more for victuals on the journey. "Every time I gape you must be quick and fling a piece into my mouth," she said, "else I shall not be able to carry you up to earth."

He did as she asked him and hung two large bags of meat round her neck and seated himself among her feathers. The eagle then began to flap her wings and off they went through the air like the wind. It was as much as the soldier could do to hold on, and it was with the greatest difficulty he managed to throw the pieces of flesh into the eagle's mouth every time she opened it.

At last the day began to dawn, and the eagle was then almost exhausted and began flapping with her wings, but the soldier was prepared and seized the last hind quarter and flung it to her. Then she gained strength and brought him up to earth. When she had sat and rested a while at the top of a large pine-tree she set off with him again at such a pace that flashes of lightning were seen both by sea and land wherever they went.

Close to the palace the soldier got off and the eagle flew home again, but first she told him that if he at any time should want her he need only blow the whistle and she would be there at once.

In the meantime everything was ready at the palace, and the time approached when the captain and lieutenant were to be married with the two eldest Princesses, who, however, were not much happier than their youngest sister; scarcely a day passed without weeping and mourning, and the nearer the wedding-day approached the more sorrowful did they become.

At last the King asked what was the matter with them; he thought it was very strange that they were not merry and happy now that they were saved and had been set free and were going to be married. They had to give some answer, and so the eldest sister said they never would be happy any more unless they could get such checkers as they had played with in the blue mountain.

That, thought the King, could be easily managed, and so he sent word to all the best and cleverest goldsmiths in the country that they should make these checkers for the Princesses. For all they tried there was no one who could make them. At last all the goldsmiths had been to the palace except one, and he was an old, infirm man who had not done any work for many years except odd jobs, by which he was just able to keep himself alive. To

him the soldier went and asked to be apprenticed. The old man was so glad to get him, for he had not had an apprentice for many a day, that he brought out a flask from his chest and sat down to drink with the soldier. Before long the drink got into his head, and when the soldier saw this he persuaded him to go up to the palace and tell the King that he would undertake to make the checkers for the Princesses.

He was ready to do that on the spot; he had made finer and grander things in his day, he said. When the King heard there was some one outside who could make the checkers he was not long in coming out.

“Is it true what you say, that you can make such checkers as my daughters want?” he asked.

“Yes, it is no lie,” said the goldsmith; that he would answer for.

“That’s well!” said the King. “Here is the gold to make them with; but if you do not succeed you will lose your life, since you have come and offered yourself, and they must be finished in three days.”

The next morning when the goldsmith had slept off the effects of the drink, he was not quite so confident about the job. He wailed and wept and blew up his apprentice, who had got him into such a scrape while he was drunk. The best thing would be to make short work of himself at once, he said, for there could be no hope for his life; when the best and grandest goldsmiths could not make such checkers, was it likely that he could do it?

“Don’t fret on that account,” said the soldier, “but let me have the gold and I’ll get the checkers ready in time; but I must have a room to myself to work in,” he said. This he got, and thanks into the bargain.

The time wore on, and the soldier did nothing but lounge about, and the goldsmith began to grumble, because he would not begin with the work.

“Don’t worry yourself about it,” said the soldier, “there is plenty of time! If you are not satisfied with what I have promised you had better make them yourself.” The same thing went on both that day and the next; and when the smith heard neither hammer nor file from the soldier’s room the whole of the last day, he quite gave himself up for lost; it was now no use to think any longer about saving his life, he thought.

But when the night came on the soldier opened the window and blew his whistle. The eagle then came and asked what he wanted.

“Those gold checkers, which the Princesses had in the blue mountain,” said the soldier; “but you’ll want something to eat first, I suppose? I have two ox carcasses lying ready for you in the hay-loft yonder; you had better finish them,” he said. When the eagle had done she did not tarry, and long before the sun rose she was back again with the checkers. The soldier then put them under his bed and lay down to sleep.

Early next morning the goldsmith came and knocked at his door.

“What are you after now again?” asked the soldier. “You rush about enough in the day, goodness knows! If one cannot have peace when one is in bed, whoever would be an apprentice here?” said he.

Neither praying nor begging helped that time; the goldsmith must and would come in, and at last he was let in.

And then, you may be sure, there was soon an end to his wailing.

But still more glad than the goldsmith were the Princesses, when he came up to the palace with the checkers, and gladdest of all was the youngest Princess.

“Have you made them yourself?” she asked.

“No, if I must speak the truth, it is not I,” he said, “but my apprentice, who has made them.”

“I should like to see that apprentice,” said the Princess. In fact all three wanted to see him, and if he valued his life, he would have to come.

He was not afraid, either of women-folk or grand-folk, said the soldier, and if it could be any amusement to them to look at his rags, they should soon have that pleasure.

The youngest Princess recognised him at once; she pushed the soldiers aside and ran up to him, gave him her hand, and said:

“Good day, and many thanks for all you have done for us. It is he who freed us from the trolls in the mountain,” she said to the King. “He is the one I will have!” and then she pulled off his cap and showed them the ring she

had tied in his hair.

It soon came out how the captain and lieutenant had behaved, and so they had to pay the penalty of their treachery with their lives, and that was the end of their grandeur. But the soldier got the golden crown and half the kingdom, and married the youngest Princess.

At the wedding they drank and feasted both well and long; for feast they all could, even if they could not find the Princesses, and if they have not yet done feasting and drinking they must be at it still.

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