

The Three Heads Of The Well

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Once upon a time there reigned a King in Colchester, valiant, strong, wise, famous as a good ruler.

But in the midst of his glory his dear Queen died, leaving him with a daughter just touching woman's estate; and this maiden was renowned, far and wide, for beauty, kindness, grace. Now strange things happen, and the King of Colchester, hearing of a lady who had immense riches, had a mind to marry her, though she was old, ugly, hook-nosed, and ill-tempered; and though she was, furthermore, possessed of a daughter as ugly as herself. None could give the reason why, but only a few weeks after the death of his dear Queen, the King brought this loathly bride to Court, and married her with great pomp and festivities. Now the very first thing she did was to poison the King's mind against his own beautiful, kind, gracious daughter, of whom, naturally, the ugly Queen and her ugly daughter were dreadfully jealous.

Now when the young Princess found that even her father had turned against her, she grew weary of Court life, and longed to get away from it; so, one day, happening to meet the King alone in the garden, she went down on her knees, and begged and prayed him to give her some help, and let her go out into the world to seek her fortune. To this the King agreed, and told his consort to fit the girl out for her enterprise in proper fashion. But the jealous woman only gave her a canvas bag of brown bread and hard cheese, with a bottle of small-beer.

Though this was but a pitiful dowry for a King's daughter, the Princess was too proud to complain; so she took it, returned her thanks, and set off on her journey through woods and forests, by rivers and lakes, over mountain and valley.

At last she came to a cave at the mouth of which, on a stone, sate an old, old man with a white beard.

"Good morrow, fair damsel," he said; "whither away so fast?"

"Reverend father," replies she, "I go to seek my fortune."

"And what hast thou for dowry, fair damsel," said he, "in thy bag and bottle?"

"Bread and cheese and small-beer, father," says she, smiling. "Will it please you to partake of either?"

"With all my heart," says he, and when she pulled out her provisions he ate them nearly all. But

once again she made no complaint, but bade him eat what he needed, and welcome.

Now when he had finished he gave her many thanks, and said:

“For your beauty, and your kindness, and your grace, take this wand. There is a thick thorny hedge before you which seems impassable. But strike it thrice with this wand, saying each time, ‘Please, hedge, let me through,’ and it will open a pathway for you. Then, when you come to a well, sit down on the brink of it; do not be surprised at anything you may see, but, whatever you are asked to do, that do!”

So saying the old man went into the cave, and she went on her way. After a while she came to a high, thick thorny hedge; but when she struck it three times with the wand, saying, “Please, hedge, let me through,” it opened a wide pathway for her. So she came to the well, on the brink of which she sate down, and no sooner had she done so, than a golden head without any body came up through the water, singing as it came:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on a bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

“Certainly,” she said, pulling out her silver comb. Then, placing the head on her lap, she began to comb the golden hair. When she had combed it, she lifted the golden head softly, and laid it on a primrose bank to dry. No sooner had she done this than another golden head appeared, singing as it came:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on a bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

“Certainly,” says she, and after combing the golden hair, placed the golden head softly on the primrose bank, beside the first one.

Then came a third head out of the well, and it said the same thing:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on a bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

“With all my heart,” says she graciously, and after taking the head on her lap, and combing its golden hair with her silver comb, there were the three golden heads in a row on the primrose bank. And she sate down to rest herself and looked at them, they were so quaint and pretty; and as she rested she cheerfully ate and drank the meagre portion of the brown

bread, hard cheese, and small-beer which the old man had left to her; for, though she was a king's daughter, she was too proud to complain.

Then the first head spoke. "Brothers, what shall we weired for this damsel who has been so gracious unto us? I weired her to be so beautiful that she shall charm every one she meets."

"And I," said the second head, "weired her a voice that shall exceed the nightingale's in sweetness."

"And I," said the third head, "weired her to be so fortunate that she shall marry the greatest King that reigns."

"Thank you with all my heart," says she; "but don't you think I had better put you back in the well before I go on? Remember you are golden, and the passers-by might steal you."

To this they agreed; so she put them back. And when they had thanked her for her kind thought and said good-bye, she went on her journey.

Now she had not travelled far before she came to a forest where the King of the country was hunting with his nobles, and as the gay cavalcade passed down the glade she stood back to avoid them; but the King caught sight of her, and drew up his horse, fairly amazed at her beauty.

"Fair maid," he said, "who art thou, and whither goest thou through the forest thus alone?"

"I am the King of Colchester's daughter, and I go to seek my fortune," says she, and her voice was sweeter than the nightingale's.

Then the King jumped from his horse, being so struck by her that he felt it would be impossible to live without her, and falling on his knee begged and prayed her to marry him without delay.

And he begged and prayed so well that at last she consented. So, with all courtesy, he mounted her on his horse behind him, and commanding the hunt to follow, he returned to his palace, where the wedding festivities took place with all possible pomp and merriment. Then, ordering out the royal chariot, the happy pair started to pay the King of Colchester a bridal visit: and you may imagine the surprise and delight with which, after so short an absence, the people of Colchester saw their beloved, beautiful, kind, and gracious princess return in a chariot all gemmed with gold, as the bride of the most powerful King in the world. The bells rang out, flags flew, drums beat, the people huzzaed, and all was gladness, save for the ugly Queen and her ugly daughter, who were ready to burst with envy and

malice; for, see you, the despised maiden was now above them both, and went before them at every Court ceremonial.

So, after the visit was ended, and the young King and his bride had gone back to their own country, there to live happily ever after, the ugly ill-natured princess said to her mother, the ugly Queen:

“I also will go into the world and seek my fortune. If that drab of a girl with her mincing ways got so much, what may I not get?”

So her mother agreed, and furnished her forth with silken dresses and furs, and gave her as provisions sugar, almonds, and sweetmeats of every variety, besides a large flagon of Malaga sack. Altogether a right royal dowry.

Armed with these she set forth, following the same road as her step-sister. Thus she soon came upon the old man with a white beard, who was seated on a stone by the mouth of a cave.

“Good morrow,” says he. “Whither away so fast?”

“What’s that to you, old man?” she replied rudely.

“And what hast thou for dowry in bag and bottle?” he asked quietly.

“Good things with which you shall not be troubled,” she answered pertly.

“Wilt thou not spare an old man something?” he said.

Then she laughed. “Not a bite, not a sup, lest they should choke you: though that would be small matter to me,” she replied, with a toss of her head.

“Then ill luck go with thee,” remarked the old man as he rose and went into the cave.

So she went on her way, and after a time came to the thick thorny hedge, and seeing what she thought was a gap in it, she tried to pass through; but no sooner had she got well into the middle of the hedge than the thorns closed in around her so that she was all scratched and torn before she won her way. Thus, streaming with blood, she went on to the well, and seeing water, sate on the brink intending to cleanse herself. But just as she dipped her hands, up came a golden head singing as it came:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on the bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

“A likely story,” says she. “I’m going to wash myself.” And with that she gave the head such a bang with her bottle that it bobbed below the water. But it came up again, and so did a second head, singing as it came:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on the bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

“Not I,” scoffs she. “I’m going to wash my hands and face and have my dinner.” So she fetches the second head a cruel bang with the bottle, and both heads ducked down in the water.

But when they came up again all draggled and dripping, the third head came also, singing as it came:

“Wash me, and comb me, lay me on the bank to dry

Softly and prettily to watch the passers-by.”

By this time the ugly princess had cleansed herself, and, seated on the primrose bank, had her mouth full of sugar and almonds.

“Not I,” says she as well as she could. “I’m not a washerwoman nor a barber. So take that for your washing and combing.”

And with that, having finished the Malaga sack, she flung the empty bottle at the three heads.

But this time they didn’t duck. They looked at each other and said, “How shall we weird this rude girl for her bad manners?” Then the first head said:

“I weird that to her ugliness shall be added blotches on her face.”

And the second head said:

“I weird that she shall ever be hoarse as a crow and speak as if she had her mouth full.”

Then the third head said:

“And I weird that she shall be glad to marry a cobbler.”

Then the three heads sank into the well and were no more seen, and the ugly princess went on her way. But, lo and behold! when she came to a town, the children ran from her ugly blotched face screaming with fright, and when she tried to tell them she was the King of Colchester's daughter, her voice squeaked like a corn-crake's, was hoarse as a crow's, and folk could not understand a word she said, because she spoke as if her mouth was full!

Now in the town there happened to be a cobbler who not long before had mended the shoes of a poor old hermit; and the latter, having no money, had paid for the job by the gift of a wonderful ointment which would cure blotches on the face, and a bottle of medicine that would banish any hoarseness.

So, seeing the miserable, ugly princess in great distress, he went up to her and gave her a few drops out of his bottle; and then understanding from her rich attire and clearer speech that she was indeed a King's daughter, he craftily said that if she would take him for a husband he would undertake to cure her.

"Anything! Anything!" sobbed the miserable princess.

So they were married, and the cobbler straightway set off with his bride to visit the King of Colchester. But the bells did not ring, the drums did not beat, and the people, instead of huzzaing, burst into loud guffaws at the cobbler in leather, and his wife in silks and satins.

As for the ugly Queen, she was so enraged and disappointed that she went mad, and hanged herself in wrath. Whereupon the King, really pleased at getting rid of her so soon, gave the cobbler a hundred pounds and bade him go about his business with his ugly bride.

Which he did quite contentedly, for a hundred pounds means much to a poor cobbler. So they went to a remote part of the kingdom and lived unhappily for many years, he cobbling shoes, and she spinning the thread for him.

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