

1812

GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES

THE FOUR SKILFUL BROTHERS

Jacob Ludwig Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm

Grimm, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) - German philologists whose collection "Kinder- und Hausmarchen," known in English as "Grimm's Fairy Tales," is a timeless literary masterpiece. The brothers transcribed these tales directly from folk and fairy stories told to them by common villagers. The Four Skilful Brothers (1812) - A poor man's four sons go out into the world to learn trades. They return home four years later and demonstrate their great new skills by rescuing a princess from a dragon.

THE FOUR SKILFUL BROTHERS

THERE WAS once a poor man who had four sons, and when they were grown up, he said to them, "My dear children, you must now go out into the world, for I have nothing to give you, so set out, and go to some distance and learn a trade, and see how you can make your way." So the four brothers took their sticks, bade their father farewell, and went through the town-gate together.

When they had traveled about for some time, they came to a cross-way which branched off in four different directions. Then said the eldest, "Here we must separate, but on this day in four years, we will meet each other again at this spot, and in the meantime we will seek our fortunes." Then each of them went his way, and the eldest met a man who asked him where he was going, and what he was intending to do. "I want to learn a trade," he replied. Then the other said, "Come with me, and be a thief." "No," he answered, "that is no longer regarded as a reputable trade, and the end of it is that one has to swing on the gallows." "Oh," said the man, "you need not be afraid of the gallows; I will only teach you to get such things as no other man could ever lay hold of, and no one will ever detect you." So he allowed himself to be talked into it, and while with the man became an accomplished thief, and so dexterous that nothing was safe from him if he once desired to have it.

The second brother met a man who put the same question to him—what he wanted to learn in the world. “I don’t know yet,” he replied. “Then come with me, and be an astronomer; there is nothing better than that, for nothing is hid from you.” He liked the idea, and became such a skilful astronomer that when he had learnt everything, and was about to travel onwards, his master gave him a telescope and said to him, “With that you can see whatsoever takes place either on earth or in heaven, and nothing can remain concealed from you.” A huntsman took the third brother into training, and gave him such excellent instruction in everything which related to huntsmanship, that he became an experienced hunter. When he went away, his master gave him a gun and said, “It will never fail you; whatsoever you aim at, you are certain to hit.” The youngest brother also met a man who spoke to him, and inquired what his intentions were. “Would you not like to be a tailor?” said he. “Not that I know of,” said the youth; “sitting doubled up from morning till night, driving the needle and the goose backwards and forwards, is not to my taste.” “Oh, but you are speaking in ignorance,” answered the man; “with me you would learn a very different kind of tailoring, which is respectable and proper, and for the most part very honorable.” So he let himself be persuaded, and went with the man, and learnt his art from the very beginning. When they parted, the man gave the youth a needle, and said, “With this you can sew together whatever is given you, whether it is as soft as an egg or as hard as steel; and it will all become one piece of stuff, so that no seam will be visible.” When the appointed four years were over, the four brothers arrived at the same time at the cross-roads, embraced and kissed each other, and returned home to their father. “So now,” said he, quite delighted, “the wind has blown you back again to me.” They told him of all that had happened to them, and that each had learnt his own trade. Now they were sitting just in front of the house under a large tree, and the father said, “I will put you all to the test, and see what you can do.” Then he looked up and said to his second son, “Between two branches up at the top of this tree, there is a chaffinch’s nest, tell me how many eggs there are in it.” The astronomer took his glass, looked up, and said, “There are five.” Then the father said to the eldest, “Fetch the eggs down without disturbing the bird which is sitting hatching them.” The skilful thief climbed up and took the five eggs from beneath the bird, which never observed what he was doing, and remained quietly sitting where she was, and brought them down to his father. The father took them, and put one of them on each corner of the table, and the fifth in the middle, and said to the huntsman,

“With one shot you shall shoot me the five eggs in two, through the middle.” The huntsman aimed, and shot the eggs, all five as the father had desired, and that at one shot. He certainly must have had some of the powder for shooting round corners. “Now it’s your turn,” said the father to the fourth son; “you shall sew the eggs together again, and the young birds that are inside them as well, and you must do it so that they are not hurt by the shot.” The tailor brought his needle, and sewed them as his father wished. When he had done this the thief had to climb up the tree again, and carry them to the nest, and put them back again under the bird without her being aware of it. The bird sat her full time, and after a few days the young ones crept out, and they had a red line round their necks where they had been sewn together by the tailor.

“Well,” said the old man to his sons, “I begin to think you are worth more than green clover; you have used your time well, and learnt something good. I can’t say which of you deserves the most praise. That will be proved if you have but an early opportunity of using your talents.” Not long after this, there was a great uproar in the country, for the King’s daughter was carried off by a dragon. The King was full of trouble about it, both by day and night, and caused it to be proclaimed that whosoever brought her back should have her to wife. The four brothers said to each other, “This would be a fine opportunity for us to show what we can do!” and resolved to go forth together and liberate the King’s daughter. “I will soon know where she is,” said the astronomer, and looked through his telescope and said, “I see her already, she is far away from here on a rock in the sea, and the dragon is beside her watching her.” Then he went to the King, and asked for a ship for himself and his brothers, and sailed with them over the sea until they came to the rock. There the King’s daughter was sitting and the dragon was lying asleep on her lap. The huntsman said, “I dare not fire, I should kill the beautiful maiden at the same time.” “Then I will try my art,” said the thief, and he crept thither and stole her away from under the dragon, so quietly and dexterously, that the monster never remarked it, but went on snoring. Full of joy, they hurried off with her on board ship, and steered out into the open sea; but the dragon, who when he awoke had found no Princess there, followed them, and came snorting angrily through the air. Just as he was circling above the ship, and about to descend on it, the huntsman shouldered his gun, and shot him to the heart. The monster fell down dead, but was so large and powerful that his fall shattered the whole ship. Fortunately, however, they laid hold of a couple of planks, and swam about the wide sea. Then again they

were in great peril, but the tailor, who was not idle, took his wondrous needle, and with a few stitches sewed the planks together, and they seated themselves upon them, and collected together all the fragments of the vessel. Then he sewed these so skilfully together, that in a very short time the ship was once more seaworthy, and they could go home again in safety.

When the King once more saw his daughter, there were great rejoicings. He said to the four brothers, "One of you shall have her to wife, but which of you it is to be you must settle among yourselves." Then a warm contest arose among them, for each of them preferred his own claim. The astronomer said, "If I had not seen the Princess, all your arts would have been useless, so she is mine." The thief said, "What would have been the use of your seeing, if I had not got her away from the dragon? So she is mine." The huntsman said, "You and the Princess, and all of you, would have been torn to pieces by the dragon if my ball had not hit him, so she is mine." The tailor said, "And if I, by my art, had not sewn the ship together again, you would all of you have been miserably drowned, so she is mine." Then the King uttered this saying, "Each of you has an equal right, and as all of you cannot have the maiden, none of you shall have her, but I will give to each of you, as a reward, half a kingdom." The brothers were pleased with this decision, and said, "It is better thus than that we should be at variance with each other." Then each of them received half a kingdom, and they lived with their father in the greatest happiness as long as it pleased God.

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