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The Green Boy and the Three Witches

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

There was a Prince who went out one day to hunt, and as he rode out in the wood he lost his way, and evening came on almost before he knew. He got off his horse and led it after him through the trees. At last he became aware of a light, and he made for that. It turned out to be a poor little cottage where there were an old man and an old woman. He asked them if they could either show him his way or house him for the night. Yes, that they could, both the one and the other; but he had much better stay the night there, if he could put up with the simple fare, and in the morning they would help him to get out of the forest. So the woman got him supper, and the old people gave up their own bed and lay, for that night, on some straw by the stove. Next morning the old man said they would go together to church, for it was Sunday, and then come home and have some kail for dinner and after that he could set off.

And so it was settled; but when the Prince got to the churchyard, he saw an open grave, and he went off and looked down into it.

"Why isn't that grave filled in?" he said; "it looks to me like an old grave."

"Why," says the man, "that's because we have a law here in these parts that when a poor man dies and leaves a debt behind him, the earth mustn't be cast on him until the debt is paid; and besides, the body must be taken up once a year and whipped, until that's done."

"That's an ugly sort of law," said the Prince. "Can't it be altered? Can't this here grave be filled in?"

"No," said the man, "for there's no one who'll pay his debt."

"Well I should like to have a word with the people who have any claim on him."

It so happened that they were at church, and he got hold of them and asked how much the debt was. "If you got the half of it, mightn't the earth be cast on him and a proper funeral done, like anywhere else?" "Yes," they said, "they would be satisfied with that." So the Prince paid, and the priest cast the earth on the body, and the grave was filled in, and everything was settled and done with that same day.

Then he went home with the old man, and had bacon and kail to his dinner. After that he put him on the right way out of the forest; and there was a path that went along by the edge of the wood, and he kept along that.

There he met a boy in green. "Where are you off to, my boy?" says the Prince. "I'm coming with you; for I know you've set your mind on finding the most beautiful Princess in the world, and I can guide you to her."

Well, to be sure, the Prince would like to find her, so off they set at once, the boy running and the Prince riding. On towards evening they came to a castle. "And there," says the boy, "you'd better stay the night." "And what's to become of you?" says the Prince. "I can easily get a lodging, for I have an uncle here in the village." The boy took his horse and led it into the stable, foddered it, and laid himself down in an empty stall on some straw. When it was midnight, or a little past, he went out to a hill a little outside the village, and knocked on it. The Hillman came out and asked, "What do you want, my lad?" "You've got a cloak, and when anyone puts it on they become invisible; I want it." "You can't have that, my lad, for I can't do without it."

"Yes I will have it, and if I don't get it I shall break up your hill into little bits."

"You're a very fierce boy. Will you threaten a man out of what he can't do without? Well, there it is then."

So home he went and lay down in his empty stall. In the morning, down comes the Prince, to look to his horse. "If you've fed him, my boy, we'll set off now." Yes he had, and they started to go as they did the day before. They went on all day till late on at night, and then they came to another castle.

"We'd best stay here, for we can't get lodgings anywhere else," says the boy; and he took the horse and looked after it. "What's to become of you?" says the Prince. "I've got an uncle here, too, I can stay here for certain."

He lay down in an empty stall, and when it was a little past midnight, he went out of the village to a hill where another Hillman lived.

"What do you want, my boy?"

"I don't want anything of you but a club. It can't be seen, and when you hold it out, whatever it touches, sticks to it. That club you've got, and that I will have."

"You won't get it, for I can't do without it."

"Yes, have it I will, or I'll break your hill into little bits."

"What a horrid boy you are; will you threaten a man out of what he can't spare? Well, there it is then."

So he went back to the castle and lay down in the empty stall near the horse. In the morning the Prince came and asked if the horse had been fed, for if so, they would make a start. Yes, sure enough it had, and everything was ready.

Towards the middle of the afternoon they came once more to a castle. "We'd better sleep here to-night," says the boy. "It's too early," said the Prince; "we can ride a bit further yet."

"No, we must stay here," says the boy, "for here is the Princess you're looking for. Now you can just go in and see if you can get speech of her; but you mustn't pledge yourself to anything with her, before letting me know." "But what's to become of you all this time?" "You needn't trouble about me," said the boy. "I've got an uncle here in the village, and I can stay with him as long as there's any need."

So the boy led his horse into the stable and saw to it. In the morning the Prince came down to him and said, "Yes, I've seen her now, and I fancy her well enough if only I can get her; but that's not an easy matter, to be sure." "Oh yes, that'll go well enough, but you must see about proposing to her if you get an opportunity."

When they had finished dinner, he proposed to her. But she answered that that could not be unless he could accomplish three things she would set him to do. "The first thing shall be, that you shall bring me my gold ring which I have here on my finger to-morrow when dinner is over; and yet I'm to keep the ring myself." So he went down to the boy, and he said: "No, I shall never get her, for now she's set it down that I'm to do three things for her, and the first thing is, that I'm to bring her her gold ring to-morrow at dinner time, and yet she's to keep it herself; I can't do that, for she can certainly hide it so that I can't find it."

"I shall get it right enough," said the boy; "but take care that you don't have too much to do with her at first without letting me know; for she's in league with three witches, and it's not a very easy job to deal with them."

In the evening, the boy took his cloak and his club—so that he became invisible—and went into the Princess's room to hear what the other witches would talk about. When she was just going to get into bed she said: "Ah, by the way, where shall I hide my ring, so that I can be sure he won't find it? I'll put it in my drawer and leave the key under my pillow."

When she was safe in bed, the witches came. "You've got a suitor," said they, "and you've said 'yes' to him; you're not faithful to us."

"Well, it's only on conditions," said she. "He's got to do three things for me, and I can make them so hard that it'll be impossible for him."

So she told them the first thing she had asked for, and where she had hidden the key. "No, that won't do," they said; "let us others have the ring, we'll hide it fast enough." So the witches took the ring and went off with it, and the boy after them. When they got to the seashore they got aboard a little boat and sailed out a stage. Then one of them said: "Take soundings." They sounded, and made it five fathoms of water. "Just throw the ring out!" And as one of them threw the ring the boy thrust his club at it and drew it up to him. They sailed back to land and the boy went home and lay down in his stall. Next morning the Prince came, very dismal.

"Here's the ring for you," says the boy.

"You *are* a good boy. I'll remember you for that." When dinner was over, the Princess said: "Might I ask for my ring?"

"Yes, if you please, here it is, provided it's the right one." "Yes!" She made the other ladies look at it, and it was plain enough that it was the right one, for the Princess's name was on it. So now he must have the second task set him.

"Now, to-morrow, when we've finished dinner, you shall bring me my necklace; and yet I'll keep it myself."

He went off, down to the boy, and told him. "That I can't do; it's wholly impossible for me."

"Oh yes we can, sure enough; I shall get it all right," says the boy.

When it was evening he went again to the Princess's bedroom, with his cloak and his cap, which made him invisible. As she was going to bed she said: "Ah yes, now I'll hide it in my box and put the key under my pillow."

All of a sudden, here came the three witches again. "Well, how did it go?" said they. "Yes, how did it go indeed?" says she, a little peevish. "I should do best to ask you that." "What do you mean?" said they.

"Why! You're in league with him; so he came with my ring right enough."

"What's the meaning of that?" said they. "Is he a tall man?" "Why, I don't know—a tall one? He's the same height as men usually are."

They couldn't understand it. "But what have you set him to do now?"

She told them, and said where she'd hidden the necklace. "We can't trust to that," they said; "let us have it and keep it. We'll sail out so far with it that he can't wade out to it."

So they went down and got aboard a ship, but the boy was with them, you may be sure. When they had got a tremendous long stage out, one of them said, "Take soundings." When they had sounded, they made it ten fathoms of water. "Well, we must go further out yet. If he could wade out to five fathoms depth, and find the ring, he can surely wade out to ten." So they sailed out till they got to five and twenty fathoms of water, and threw the necklace out there. But the boy thrust his club at it and pulled it in to him. They sailed back to land, and he went and lay down in the stall.

Next morning the Prince came and asked how it had gone with him. "Why, it had gone very well, and here is the necklace." "You really are a wonderful boy; if I hadn't got you, what would have become of me? But things aren't right with me, for my money's going. I hadn't provided myself for such a long journey. Can you help me about that?"

"Yes, I can get money from my uncle for certain, but you must manage to keep yourself till to-morrow."

When they had finished dinner, the Princess wanted her gold chain. "Here it is," says he, "provided it is the right one." "Yes," she thought it was; and she made the other ladies look at it. "It is the one, for the Princess's name is on it." So she must set him the third thing. "Now then, to-morrow when we've finished dinner, you must give me the head of the person that's painted here, on a silver dish." And with that, she handed him a portrait.

So down he went to the boy, and said: "Well, the worst is left to do." "Why, what's that then?"

With that he took the picture out of his pocket. "Look here." "Ugh! a—ah! did you do that yourself?" "No, it's a portrait,

and that head I've got to bring her on a silver dish. I've never seen such a horrible face in all my days, but how ever can I get it for her?"

"Yes, that phiz I know well enough," says the boy. "That's the old witch's head, that is; the thing's not worth crying about." "But the silver dish, too! I can't borrow a silver dish at the court." "That can be managed too," says the boy.

When it was evening he went out to the Hillman and knocked.

"What do you want now, my boy?" says the Hillman.

"I only want you to lend me a big silver dish you've got."

"No, you can't have that; I won't lend out things like that." "Well, but I'll give it you back, and if I don't get it, I'll break up you and your hill into bits."

"You're a dreadful fierce boy, threatening a man like that, but—well, there, you can have it."

So home he went with it, and set off to the Princess with his cloak and his club.

They hadn't gone to bed yet, but at last the Princess went to bed, and he went with her into the room and stowed himself under the stove while she was getting ready. Immediately after, came all the three witches.

"Well, how went it to-day?" said they.

"Yes, how went it? You know well enough, seeing he's one of your company. He brought the chain all right."

"Why! what a fearful creature he is," said they; "he must be a giant."

"No, he's no bigger than people usually are," said she. "Well, we can't understand that. The first time we sailed out to five fathoms, and the second time to five and twenty fathoms. You ought not to have said 'yes' to him."

"No," she was sorry she had, herself. But seeing he was as high in rank as she was, she couldn't bring herself to give him his dismissal straight off. But that was why she had set him things to do which she thought he couldn't possibly manage. "And no more he could have, if you hadn't helped him."

Well, but they hadn't.

"And now I've set him to do something which will show plain enough whether he's with you or against you. What he's got to do is to bring me your old mother's head on a silver dish."

"O ho! O ho!" said they. "Let's get off, let's get off. What a horrid dreadful thing for you to hit upon." They clawed off out of the house as quick as ever they could, but when they'd got a little way out of the town, the two younger ones ran away from the old one. She couldn't keep up with them, and they were afraid he would catch them too. So the boy stayed alone with the old one till he got a chance to snip the head off her; and the body he threw into a ditch, but the head he took home with him, and lay down himself in the empty stall till day.

Then the Prince came and asked him how things had gone. "They went well; here's the face." He could tell that it was the right one, though he had never seen it before. "But how am I to bring it in?" "This time I'll come with you and put myself under the table while you're at dinner, and then when she asks for it, you've only to reach your hand down and take it from me," says the boy.

Well, when dinner was over, she says, "Come now, have you done the third thing, and can you produce that head?" "Yes, here it is."

"Ugh! a—ah! Take it away; put it out of my sight," she screamed, and made as if she was really ill. "Why, then I'm bound to you," said she, "and we must see about arranging for the wedding."

In the afternoon, the Prince came out and had a talk with the boy about all this. "Yes, well, you can just let them go and make ready, but you mustn't be with her just at the first, for though the old witch is out of the way, there are still the two of them left." "Oh, by the by," says the Prince; "did you get me any money?" "No, I forgot about that, I was so busy last night; but you shall have some to-morrow."

In the evening he went out to the hill and knocked. Out came the Hillman: "What do you want, my boy?"

"Here's your silver dish, and thanks for the loan of it, but you've got a leather purse which the money never runs out of; I want that, and that I must have."

"No, you won't get that, for I can't do without it," says the Hillman. "Yes, you can do without it, perfectly well, but I can't, and if I don't get it, I shall break up your hill now."

"You are the worst boy I've ever had to do with in all my days; but there it is for you." So he went home and lay down in the stall.

In the morning he gave the purse to the Prince. "You needn't be afraid to spend money now; it'll last you out, for however much you take, there's always enough left."

So they got all the wedding affairs ready, and on the day when the marriage was to be, the boy said to the Prince when he came and told him of it: "Yes, now you can let them marry you to her, but when you have to go to the bride chamber, you must take care to lay yourself on the outside, so that she lies next to the wall, and for my sake take care you don't fall asleep, but let her go to sleep as soon as she can. The minute you notice she's asleep, you must get up and go into another room, for then the witches will come, but I shall come with you right enough, and meet them, and go out after them."

So that's what happened. As soon as he saw her asleep, he got up and went through the other door, and then the witches came. She woke up, and they began to talk to her.

"So you've been married to-day?" said they.

"Yes, we have, but talk low, for he's asleep."

They felt about after him, but there was no one but her in the bed. "Well, he must be in this room, for he came in here, and got into bed too."

They felt after him, all round, but couldn't find him.

"Ah, stop, hush!" says one; "here he is under the stove." But there, he was gone again. They could feel him, but they couldn't see him. Once again they found him in the room, but yet they couldn't get hold of him. All at once they said, "We won't have anything to do with him. We've lost our mother by his means; we won't stay here." And they rushed out of the door, and the boy after them. When they got outside the town, they went along talking about him; such a person they never had known the like of. About that time, the boy stole up and gave one of them a good whack with his club across the shin. "Ow!" says she to the other, "what did you kick me for, like that?" "I never kicked you," says she. Then the boy gave the other just as good a whack over the shin. "You said I kicked you, I promise you you kicked me proper that time. Phew! Fie! how it did hurt."

They kept on like that, until at last they began to fight, and they tumbled over, both of them, and lay there kicking about a long time. Then the boy ran up and snipped the heads off them as they lay there, and threw their bodies down to the rest of the mess where the old woman lay in the ditch, and there was an end of all three. Meanwhile, the Prince had gone back to his Princess and slept quietly till morning; and in the morning he came down and asked how things had gone.

"Oh, I had very good luck. The three of them won't do you any more harm now, they're all out of the way."

"Well, now we shall have to pay a visit at home to my parents in a few days' time," said the Prince. "You'll come too?"

Yes, he would. And the two of them, the Prince and Princess, set off riding, but the boy ran. They stayed at each of the

places where they had been on the way out, and at last they came to the dyke by the wood, where the boy had come to him.

"Well, my boy, here it was that we two came into company," said the Prince.

"Yes, so it was."

"And now you shall come home with me to my palace and be received as my own son for as long as you live."

"No, I will not," said he; "but all the same I thank the Prince over and over again."

"Yes, indeed you must, for you have done me so great service that this is the very least I can do for you." "No, I cannot, for here I must part from you. The truth is, I am the spirit of that man whom you cared for to have the earth cast on his body; and that is why I came to guide you on your dangerous journey, and now I bid you farewell."

And with that, they saw no more of the boy. The Prince and his wife rode home to his father's palace, and a little while after they had come, the old King died, and so the Prince was proclaimed King of the country, and so excellent a King and Queen there have hardly ever been found in the world.

Transcriber's note:

The edition used as base for this book contained the following error, which has been corrected:

Page 73: A paragraph break was seemingly omitted and has now been inserted between the following two sentences:

"No, you can't have that; I won't lend out things like that."

"Well, but I'll give it you back, and if I don't get it, I'll break up you and your hill into bits."

[End of *The Green Boy and the Three Witches* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]