

The Three Sons

by Lady Gregory

I'll tell you a story, says the old man who was bringing fish from the sea; and after that I'll be going on to Ballinrobe, to one that has a shop there and that was reared by my grandmother. It is likely he'll give me a tasty suit of clothes.

Working all my life I am, working with the flail in the barn, working with the spade at the potato tilling and the potato digging, breaking stones on the road. And four years ago the wife died, and it's lonesome to be housekeeping alone.

There was a King long ago in Ireland, and he had three sons, and one of them was something silly. There came a sickness on the King, and he called his three sons, and he said to them that he had knowledge the only thing would cure him was the apples from Burnett's orchard, and he bade them to go look for them, for that orchard was in some far-away place, and no one could tell where it was.

The three sons went then, and they caught their horses, and put on their bridles, and they set out, and went on till they came to three crossroads. There they stopped, and they settled among themselves that each one of them would take one of the roads and go searching for the apples, and they would meet at the same place at the end of a year and a day.

The youngest son, that was a bit silly, took the crossroad of the roads, and he went on till he came to a cottage by the roadside. He went in, and there was a withered old man in the house, and he said: "There is a great welcome before the King of Ireland's son!" The son was astonished at that because he thought no one could know him. He was well received there, and in the course of the evening he asked the old man did he know where was Burnett's garden. "I am a hundred years old," said the man, "and I never heard of such a place. But I have a brother," he said, "that is a hundred years older than I am, and it may be he would know," he said.

So in the morning he gave a canoe to the King's son, and it went on of itself without him turning or guiding it, till it brought him to the old man's brother, and he got a welcome there and good treatment, and in the course of the night he asked that old man did he know where was Burnett's orchard.

"I do not," said he: "though I am two hundred years old I never heard of it. But go on," he said, "to a brother I have that has a hundred years more than myself."

So in the morning, he went into the canoe, and it went on of itself till it came to where the third old man was, that was older again than the other two, and the King's son asked did he know where was Burnett's garden. "I do not," he said, "although I am three hundred years old; but I will tell you how you will know it," he said. "Go on till you come to shore, where you will see a Swan-Gander standing by the water, and he is the one that can tell you and can bring you to it," he said. "And ask him to bring you to that garden in the name of the Almighty God."

So the King's son went on in the canoe till he came where the Swan- Gander was standing on the shore. "Can you tell me," says he, "where can I get the apples that are in Burnett's orchard? And can you bring me there?" he said.

"Indeed," said the Swan-Gander, "I am in no way obliged to your leader, or to whoever it was sent you to me and gave you that teaching. And those apples are well minded," he said, "by wolves; and the only time they sleep is for three hours once in every seven years. And it chances they are asleep for those three hours at this time; and so I will bring you there," he said.

With that he stretched out his wings, and he bade the King's son to get on his back. And it was long before he could start flying with the weight that was on him; but at last he flew away, and he brought the King's son to Burnett's garden, and there was a high wall around it, but he flew over the wall, and put him down in the garden. The King's son filled his bag with the apples, and when he had done that he went looking around, and he came to a large cottage in the garden, and he went in, and there was no one in the house but a beautiful young girl, and she was asleep. So he went away; but he brought with him the gold rings and the gold garters that he saw there in the window.

He got up again on the back of the Swan-Gander, but it was hard for it to rise with the weight of the bag of apples. But it did rise at last, and it brought him to where the old man was that was three hundred years old. The King's son gave one of the apples to the old man, and no sooner did he eat it than his age left him, and he was like a boy of fifteen years.

He went on then to the two other old men, and gave an apple to both of them, and no sooner did they eat it than they were like young boys again.

Then the King's son went back to the crossroads, for it was the end of the year and a day, and he was the first to come there, and he fell asleep. The two brothers came and saw him there, and they stole the bag of apples from under his head and put in the place of it a bag of apples that were no use at all. Then they went on to their father's house, and they gave him the apples they had stolen, and he was cured on the moment; but they told him that what the youngest son was bringing to him was poison apples, that would bring him to his death.

The King was very angry when he heard that, and he went to his butler and said, "Go out to the wood where my son is, and shoot him, and bring his heart here with you on the top of a gun and throw it to the dogs at the door; for I will never have him, or anything belonging to him, brought into the house," he said.

So the butler got the gun, and went out to the wood; and when he saw the young man he was going to shoot him. "Why would you do that?" said he. So the butler told him all the father ordered him; and the young man said, "Do not shoot me, but save me. And this is what you will do. Go into the wood until you meet with a woodcock, and shoot it, and take the heart out of it, for that is most like the heart of a man. Bring the woodcock's heart to my father's house," he said, "and throw it to the dogs at the door."

So the butler did that, and spared him, and took the woodcock's heart and threw it to the dogs at the door.

It was a good while after that, a beautiful young lady came to the King's doorway in a coach and four, and stopped at the door. "Send out my husband to me here," she said. So the eldest son came out to her. "Was it you came to the garden for the apples?" says she. "It was," says he. "What things did you take notice of in the cottage where I was?" says she.

So he began telling of this thing and that thing that never was in it at all.

And when she heard that she gave him a clout that knocked his head as solid as any stone in the wall.

Then the second son came out, and she asked him the same question, and he told the same lies, and she gave him another clout that left his head as solid as any stone in the wall.

When the King heard all that, he knew they had deceived him, and that it was the youngest son who got the apples for his cure, and he began to cry after him and to lament that he was not living to come back again. "Would you like to know he is living yet?" says the butler. "I would sooner hear it than any word ever I heard," says the King.

"Well he is living yet, and is in the wood," says the butler.

When the young lady heard that, she bade the butler bring her to where he was, and they went together to the wood, and there they found him, where he had been living on the fruits of trees through the most of the year. When the young lady saw him, she said: "Was it you came to the house where I was in the garden?" "It was," says he.

"What things did you take notice of in it?"

"Here they are," says he. And he put his hand in his pocket, and brought out the gold rings and the golden garters, and the other signs he had brought away.

So she knew that he was the right one, and she married him, and they lived happy ever after, and there was great rejoicing in the King of Ireland's house.

Source:

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