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The Dragon and His Grandmother

Brothers Grimm

There was once a long war, and the King had so many soldiers and paid them so little that they could hardly live on it. Three of them put their heads together and decided to desert.

"If they catch us, they'll hang us," said one. "How do we get away?"

"See that big cornfield?" said another. "If we hide in there, nobody will find us. The army can't march through it, and tomorrow it moves on."

They crept into the corn. But the army didn't move on. It camped right around them. For two days and two nights the three men sat in the corn, so hungry they thought they would die. Stepping out meant certain death.

"What was the use of deserting?" they said at last. "We'll starve here."

Just then a fiery dragon came flying through the air. It hovered over them and asked what they were doing hidden in the corn.

"We're three soldiers," they said. "We deserted because the pay was too small. If we stay, we starve, and if we step out, we'll hang."

"Serve me for seven years," said the Dragon, "and I'll carry you through the middle of the army without anyone catching you."

"We have no choice," they said. So the Dragon seized them in his claws, flew over the army, and set them down far away.

He gave them a little whip. "Crack it, and as much money as you want will leap up in front of you. You can live like lords, keep horses, ride in carriages. But after seven years, you're mine." Then he put a book in front of them and made all three sign it. "I'll give you a riddle," he said. "If you can guess it, you go free."

Off he flew. The soldiers walked on with their little whip. They had all the money they wanted, wore splendid clothes, and traveled the world in style, eating and drinking and having a grand time (though they did no harm to anyone).

The seven years went by quickly. As they drew to an end, two of the soldiers grew pale with worry. The third only laughed. "Don't be afraid, brothers. I wasn't born yesterday. I'll guess the riddle."

They sat down in a field, and the two glum ones looked glummer than ever. An

old woman came by and asked what was wrong.

"What's it to you? You can't help us."

"Who knows?" she said. "Tell me your trouble."

So they told her: that they were the Dragon's servants, that he had given them money by the handful, but that unless they could guess his riddle when seven years were up, they belonged to him.

"If you want help," said the old woman, "one of you must go into the wood. There he'll find a tumbledown house of rocks. Inside, he'll find help."

The two sad ones thought, *That won't save us,* and stayed where they were. But the cheerful one jumped up and went into the wood until he found the rocky hut. Inside sat a very old woman: the Dragon's grandmother. She asked what he wanted, and he told her the whole story. She liked him, and she took pity.

She lifted a big stone off the cellar. "Hide down there. You'll hear everything said in this room. Stay still. When the Dragon comes, I'll ask him about the riddle. He tells me everything. Listen carefully."

At midnight the Dragon flew in and asked for supper. His grandmother set the table, and they ate and drank together. Then she asked how his day had gone and how many souls he had caught.

"Not much luck today," he said, "but I've got three soldiers in my grip."



"Three soldiers!" she said. "And they can't escape you?"

"They're mine," said the Dragon, scornfully. "I'll only give them one riddle, and they'll never guess it."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you. In the North Sea lies a dead sea-cat. That will be their roast. A whale's rib will be their silver spoon. And a dead horse's hollow hoof will be their wineglass."

When the Dragon had gone to bed, his grandmother lifted the stone and let the soldier out.

"Did you catch everything?"

"Every word," he said. "I can look after myself now."

He slipped out through the window and hurried back to his comrades. He told

them how the Dragon had been outwitted by his own grandmother, and how he'd heard the answer straight from the Dragon's mouth.

They were overjoyed. They took out the whip and cracked it, and money came jumping out of the ground. When the seven years were up, the Fiend arrived with his book, pointed at their signatures, and said, "I'll take you underground. You shall have a meal there. If you can tell me what you'll get for your roast, you go free, and you can keep the whip."

The first soldier said, "In the North Sea lies a dead sea-cat. That's our roast."

The Dragon scowled and hummed and hawed. "And what's your spoon?" he asked the second.

"A whale's rib. That's our silver spoon."

The Dragon made a face and growled, "Hum, hum, hum," three times. "And your wineglass?" he asked the third.

"An old horse's hoof."

With a loud shriek, the Dragon flew away. He had no more power over them. The three soldiers kept the little whip, cracked it whenever they needed money, and lived happily to the end of their days.

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