

The Queen and Her Sons

By Robert Gardner

Once upon a time there was a queen who was good and just. She set a good example to her people, and she didn't tax them too much. Now this queen had three sons. She gave her children lavish clothing and expensive gifts, and the princes grew up selfish and spoiled. They cared for nothing but themselves, and were terrible to each other. Whenever their mother was not watching, they fought violently.

One day, their mother caught them fighting. Grieved by what she saw, the mother fell into an illness, for she had no hope that her young men would grow into good men. As she lay dying, the princes begged their mother for each of their inheritances. Each wanted a larger portion than the next. So the queen said this: "Let the kindest of you get the inheritance. I will make rich the one of you who I am certain has a good heart."

So the brothers set off separately.

The first brother entered the village and came upon a beggar sitting on the curb. Repulsed by the appearance of the ugly, smelly man, the prince took the smallest coin out of his pocket and threw it to the beggar. Without turning to see the reaction of the poor man, the prince briskly walked back to the castle.

The second brother entered the forest, thinking that helping some animal would suffice as a good deed. As he walked, he came upon a squirrel. "You foolish young man," said she, "no one will notice the deeds you do in here, for no one is in the forest save little birds and animals." So the prince left, and, unsure of where to go, went to find the first brother. The young man got lost in the dark forest, and couldn't find his way out and never returned home.

The third prince went the same route as the second, and entered the forest. The same squirrel greeted him. "You foolish young man; go out to the village where others will notice your good deeds." The prince almost listened, but considered that the creature was leading him astray. So he continued into the wood.

There he found a young child. "Please sir, help me," she said. "I've lost my father, and I don't know how to return to my home." Despite his immediate thought of laughing at and abandoning the child, the prince considered that helping her was a good deed. He agreed to help.

As they walked on, they found the girl's dog lying dead at the bottom of large tree. The young child wept for her friend and fell into the prince's arms. The prince was unmoved by the outburst, and felt no sympathy for the child.

They came upon the child's home. It was abandoned, and they could not find the father. But the prince considered his task complete, and began to walk away from the child. "Please sir," said the child, "do not leave alone. Help me find my father." The child began to cry again. The young man reluctantly walked back to the child and began searching for her father.

After a long time searching, they came upon the father. He was walking with a young woman. The child screamed his name and the man turned. The father, seeing his child, ran away from her with his lover. The girl was abandoned.

The poor child wept in the prince's arms. "Where will I go?" cried the girl. For the first time, the prince felt a tinge of sorrow for the girl. He then had an idea.

"You will come to the castle and live with the queen." The young man lifted the child into his arms and carried the lonely child all the way to the castle.

When they arrived, they found the queen had died. The young man wept for his mother, and the child comforted him.

The young man was then made aware of the fates of his brothers. The first had returned to the castle confident he had proven himself as "kind." But his mother was not convinced, and he received no reward. He stormed out of the castle, and left to travel the world.

The second brother, while lost in the wood, had come upon a young lady whom he fell madly in love with, and decided to marry the woman. He hadn't been seen since their small wedding in the village.

The third brother was now king.

At his coronation, the new king announced to the world, "I will be a good and just ruler, like my mother before me. And this child will be as my daughter and inherit the throne when I die."

Thus the king lived, and the people looked on him as a just ruler.