

The Three Ugly Brothers

The Three Ugly Brothers

A Fairy Tale

by

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**For
Wayne, Richard, and Mitchell
with thanks to
Joan and Laura
and
Judith, Suzanne, Cynthia, Louis, and Ruth**

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Cottage

ONCE UPON A TIME, two homely people met, fell in love, and were married. They had three little boys, one right after the other, each one as ugly as the one before. The two homely people adored their little boys and fussed over them as they grew into sturdy youngsters.

"Boy, are you ugly," the village children shouted as the boys walked home from school.

"Yes... we know," answered the boys cheerfully.

None of the other children would play with them, so they played at home by themselves. After their chores, they raced around the cottage and into the Woods. In the evening they made up games and told stories by the fire. But for an occasional oatmeal fight, they were perfect little gentlemen.

The years passed and the Three Ugly Brothers grew to be fine young men. Yet, their parents realized, none of the village maidens would want to marry their ugly sons. So they began to teach the boys how to care for themselves.

The eldest son learned to spin yarn and weave cloth, and to cut and sew cloth. They would never want for clothes.

The middle son learned to garden and cook, and to know the wild forest plants. They would never want for food and medicine.

The youngest son learned to hunt and shoot the bow and arrow, and to know the wild forest animals. They would never want for protection, game, and song.

The Three Ugly Brothers had no wives and no friends, but they had their family and their life together in their little cottage on the Western edge of the Woods.

Castle

IF THE THREE UGLY BROTHERS HAD MADE THEIR WAY EAST, on the other side of the Woods they would have found a great stone castle where lived a King, and a Queen, and Three Beautiful Princesses.

One fine spring evening the King called for his daughters.

“Children,” he announced proudly , “I have a wonderful surprise! All of you are of an age to be wed. I have sought near and far and found for you the perfect husbands -- tall, handsome, and rich -- and all princes! Next week you shall all be married!”

Six beautiful princess eyes went wide with shock. Six beautiful princess hands went to mouths agape. “Oh, Father, how could you?” they cried. “We want to choose our own husbands!”

They pleaded with their father for hours and hours and days and days, but he would not relent.

The night before the wedding, the princesses stayed up later than everyone else but the mice. Finally the youngest leapt to her feet.

“I’m *not* going to do this! I’m going to run away!”

“Me *too!*” said the middle sister.

“Me *three!*” said the eldest.

Quickly the princesses dressed. Quietly they crept down the great stone stairs, past the snoring guard, and out the castle gate. They ran over the bridge, across the lawn, and into the woods. The forest was dark and strange, and they soon lost their ways. Each found herself alone, wandering deeper into the Woods.

Quicksand

THE NEXT MORNING THE ELDEST UGLY BROTHER AROSE EARLY. Today he would go into the Woods to find berries to dye his cloth. Deep, deep in the Woods he found a patch of red berries by the edge of a swamp.

Suddenly, from the swamp, came a cry for help. A young woman was up to her neck in quicksand! He raced over and pulled her out just as she was about to sink forever beneath the sand. There before him, her golden hair spattered, her fair face smeared, was the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen.

"Boy, are you ugly!" she said, regretting the words even as she said them.

"Yes... I know," he answered cheerfully.

He gave her a piece of cloth to wipe mud from her face.

"Oh, what shall I do now? I'm lost, and I'm filthy, and my clothes are all ruined."

"You're not lost anymore!" said the Eldest Ugly Brother with a smile.

He led her to a nearby stream, and then he disappeared. She bathed in the cool water and washed her long, blond hair. Stepping from the stream, she found a dress glimmering in the sunlight, hanging from the bough of a tree. It fit perfectly! The Eldest Ugly Brother stepped from the woods.

"Where did you get this dress?" asked the maiden. *"This is the most beautiful dress I've ever seen, and I should know... after all, I'm a princess."*

"I made it myself," said the young man, both proud and shy.

"And who taught you to make such beautiful clothes?"

"My mother."

"Do you think she would teach me?"

"Yes," he answered, *"if you would really like to learn. You could come live with my family. We could find some space for you in the extra bedroom."*

The maiden agreed, so the Eldest Ugly Brother led the Eldest Beautiful Princess toward the little cottage at the Western edge of the Woods.

Feast

THE MIDDLE UGLY BROTHER, TOO, AROSE EARLY THAT MORNING to gather mushrooms. Deep, deep in the woods he found them growing in dark, dank shadows. Near to him, he heard the rustle of leaves. He looked and found -- half-hidden -- a huddled, forlorn figure. There before him, her dark hair tangled with leaves, her tan cheeks wet with tears, was the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen.

"Boy, are you ugly!" she said, regretting the words even as she said them.

"Yes... I know," he answered cheerfully.

She wiped away a tear. *"Last night I got lost in the forest. It was dark, and the night sounds frightened me. I covered myself with leaves and hid. Oh, what shall I do now? I'm lost, and I'm hungry."*

"You're not lost anymore!" said the Middle Ugly Brother with a smile.

He led the maiden to a nearby stream, and then he disappeared. She washed her hands and face, and picked the leaves from her curls. She turned to find a meal spread out for her on the riverbank. There was a salad of mushrooms and crisp wild lettuces, a dessert of nuts and berries and honey, and a cup of cool spring water. The princess savored every taste. The middle brother stepped from the woods.

"Where did this feast come from?" asked the maiden. *"This is the most delicious meal I have ever tasted, and I should know... after all, I'm a princess."*

"I made it myself," said the young man.

"And who taught you to make such delicious dishes?"

"My parents."

"Do you think they would teach me?"

"Yes," he answered, *"if you would really like to learn. You could come live with my family. We could find some space for you in the extra bedroom."*

The maiden agreed, so the Middle Ugly Brother led the Middle Beautiful Princess toward the little cottage at the Western edge of the Woods.

Bear

THE YOUNGEST UGLY BROTHER, TOO, AROSE EARLY THAT MORNING. He went deep, deep into the Woods tracking the footsteps of a bear that had been menacing the village. Finally, he heard a great roar! Across a clearing he saw a young woman scrambling up a great oak tree, a bear in rabid pursuit clawing up the bark behind her! The young man took aim and shot. His arrow plunged straight into the bear's heart. The bear crashed -- dead! -- on the forest floor.

The woman leapt down upon the bear, her fiery red hair flying as she danced in triumph. She was the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen.

"Boy, are you ugly!" she yelled.

"Not as ugly as that bear," he answered cheerfully.

"That was the best shooting I've ever seen, and I should know... after all, I'm a princess. I've seen all the best archers. Who taught you to shoot like that?"

"My father."

"Do you think he would teach me?"

"Yes, if you would really like to learn. You could come live with my family. We could find some space for you in the extra bedroom."

The maiden agreed, so the Youngest Ugly Brother led the Youngest Beautiful Princess toward the little cottage at the Western edge of the Woods.

Lessons

IT CERTAINLY WAS NOT EASY, but the Three Ugly Brothers finally found some space for the Three Beautiful Princesses in the extra bedroom. The sisters had to sleep all higgledy-piggledy in one little bed, but they were so happy to be together again in a safe place that they didn't even care.

The eldest brother and the eldest princess spent the mornings spinning and dying yarn, the afternoons weaving cloth, and the evenings sewing fine clothes. At first the eldest princess could see only how ugly the eldest brother was, but as each day passed she came to know how wise he was, and she grew to love him as much as he loved her.

The middle brother and the middle princess spent the mornings gardening, the afternoons learning the wild forest plants, and the evenings cooking new recipes. At first the middle princess could see only how ugly the middle brother was, but as each day passed she came to know how kind he was, and she grew to love him as much as he loved her.

The youngest brother and the youngest princess spent the mornings practicing archery, the afternoons learning the ways of the wild forest animals, and the evenings singing by their campfire. At first the youngest princess could see only how ugly the youngest brother was, but as each day passed she came to know how brave he was, and she grew to love him as much as he loved her.

Plan

THE KING SENT OUT SCOUTS FAR AND WIDE to find his daughters, but no one thought to inquire at the humble cottage at the Western edge of the Woods. The princesses were never found.

The seasons passed. Leaves fell, animals slept, and the land was covered with a quiet white blanket of snow. The great stone castle in the East was dark and cold and sad, but the little cottage in the West was full of warmth and good cheer. Then the days lengthened, and birds flew up from the South. They built their nests in the new green canopy of the leafing trees.

One fine spring evening the sisters gathered together around the hearth. "It is a year since we saw our parents" said the eldest. "I miss them, and they must think we are dead."

The sisters fell silent as their thoughts flew across the Woods to two old people in a cold, stone castle.

"I *won't* go back!" cried the youngest.

"I don't want to leave either," said the middle sister. "But I do miss our parents so."

The sisters longed to go home again, but they knew now that their hearts belonged to three brothers.

"Listen," said the eldest, "Father will never let us marry the Three Ugly Brothers. We must come up with a plan to win him over."

They talked together, the three of them -- and then six -- into the night.

Home

A MONTH LATER, AS THEY HAD PLANNED THAT LONG NIGHT BY THE HEARTH, the Three Ugly Brothers and the Three Beautiful Princesses entered the Woods at dawn. Their path led East deep, deep into the Woods, past a patch of red berries by the edge of a swamp, through a dark, dank place where mushrooms grew, and across a clearing beneath a great oak tree. They reached the Eastern edge of the Woods at nightfall. There before them rose a cold stone castle.

The three sisters left the brothers behind and ran out of the Woods, across the lawn, and over the bridge. They ran through the castle gate, past the snoring guard, and up the stone stairs. In the throne room they found the King and Queen, absent-mindedly staring into space, sadly thinking of their long-lost daughters. The princesses threw their arms around their startled parents. Everyone hugged and cried and hugged and cried and hugged and cried some more.

The Queen wiped away her tears and looked at her daughters carefully. "Children, you have grown up so much in a year!" she said.

"Daughters," said the teary-eyed King, "I have been a broken man. Your mother cried herself to sleep every night. I'm sorry I tried to make you marry against your will, and I forgive you for leaving. Please forgive me."

And so the King and Queen forgave their children, and the princesses forgave their parents, and everyone hugged and cried and hugged and cried again.

Finally, the eldest princess said, "We have good news, Father. We have chosen young men to marry, and we would like to present them to you for your consent."

"Who are they?" asked the King and Queen, looking at one another in confusion. "Where do they come from? How did you meet?"

"Let us present them to you," repeated the eldest daughter with a smile.

Celebration

A WEEK LATER THE CASTLE DINING HALL BUZZED with townsfolk come to celebrate the return of the Three Beautiful Princesses.

A fanfare of trumpets announced the arrival of the King and Queen. Draped over their golden thrones they found wonderful new robes embroidered with tales of the kingdom. The King placed the Queen's robe about her shoulders, and then put on his own. They turned so all could see. The crowd cheered!

"Mother and Father, these garments are a present from my beloved," said the Eldest Beautiful Princess proudly. "He spun, and dyed, and wove them. He designed, and pieced, and stitched their patterns."

"My child," answered the King, looking at his new robe in delight, "any man who can sew such a fine garment will surely make for you the finest of husbands. I give my blessing to your marriage. But where is he?"

"Wait," whispered the eldest princess in the king's ear.

The King and Queen took their seats, and proceeded to discuss the coming banquet. "Mystery meat, mushy peas, and mashed parsnips again, I bet," the King whispered his usual complaint to his wife. "The mice will feast tonight."

But the dishes served were not those that had been ordered. They were fresh and delicious, flavored with savory herbs. Dessert was raspberry tart with mounds of whipped cream. In all of the hall not a scrap of food remained on a single plate.

"Father and mother, this banquet is a present from my beloved," said the Middle Beautiful Princess proudly. "He created the recipes, and gathered the herbs, and cooked every dish!"

"My child," answered the King, patting his tummy in appreciation, "any man who can prepare such a fine feast will surely make for you the finest of husbands. I give my blessing to your marriage. But where is he?"

"Wait," whispered the middle princess in the king's ear.

Then the Youngest Beautiful Princess jumped to her feet. "The man I want to marry has a present too -- the best of all!" she said proudly. "To see it we must go outside."

When the King and Queen and all the townsfolk had assembled on the castle lawn, the youngest princess pointed to a distant figure clad in green, barely visible. "There," she said, "is the best archer in all the kingdom!"

Before anyone could say a word, she took from her pocket a small red apple, placed it upon her head, and nodded to the bowsman. He let fly his arrow. A gasp arose from the crowd. With a great *swoosh*, the apple was cleaved in two, an arrow lodged in its very core.

The Queen fainted. The King's knees shook. "My child," he said, "any man who can shoot an arrow so straight and true -- and any man who can please you so -- will make for you the finest of husbands. I give my blessing to your marriage. Bring him here!"

"Wait!" yelled the youngest princess in the king's ear.

That evening, in the quiet of the throne room, the Three Beautiful Princesses introduced the Three Ugly Brothers to the King and Queen.

"*Boy are you ugly,*" thought the King and Queen.

"*Yes... we know,*" thought the Three Ugly Brothers cheerfully -- *very* cheerfully.

Wedding

A WEEK LATER, ALL THE TOWNSFOLK GATHERED ON THE CASTLE LAWN. Two homely people from the Western edge of the Woods were in the crowd too, seated at the front.

The three princesses walked down the center aisle, accompanied by their parents.

Three young men waited for them, clad as bridegrooms.

One was tall and fair-haired.

One was short and dark.

One had hair as red as fire.

Each took the hand of his betrothed.

"My, aren't they *handsome*," thought the two homely people.

"*Boy are you ugly*," thought all the men of the town.

"*Boy are you ugly*," thought all the women of the town.

"Yes... we know," thought the three brothers cheerfully.

So the Three Ugly Brothers married the Three Beautiful Princesses.

The happy news spread to the North and the South and the East and the West --even to a little village on the other side of the Woods.

As the years passed the Six Happy People had many children, all as wise, and kind, and brave as their parents.

And they all lived happily ever after.

The End