

The Princesses with Hairy Hands

A fairy story from *Tales from the Wood* by Adrian Farrel – Copyright © 2015

There was once a King with five daughters, each more beautiful than the others. But the princesses had a curious affliction: every month, when the moon was full, they would sprout hair on their hands. This would last for three nights and the days in between, and no amount of shaving or ointment would make it go away, until the morning of the third day, when all traces of the hair would disappear.

Of course, this was very embarrassing and the girls had to wear gloves for those days or not leave the palace at all. Eventually, despite all the efforts of the royal family news of this situation got out and the princesses had to stay at home and hide their faces, not just at full moon, but all the time. This made them very sad, and indeed it was a great pity that their wonderful beauty was hidden from the world because of this affliction.

The King tried cures from every herbalist, alchemist, and philosopher, but nothing worked. After a while, the King realised that he was being tricked by quacks who sold him false promises and even more false remedies for a large amount of gold. So he made a proclamation: Any person who could cure his daughters of their hairy hands would be allowed to pick one as his wife; he would immediately be granted half the gold in the royal treasury; and when the King died, this person would be crowned as the new king. But, declared the King, any person who attempted the cure and failed would be put to death in the most horrible way: he would be slowly stretched out as long as possible, and then while he was still alive his insides would be pulled out and woven into a net, and then the net would be used to try to catch hungry fishes in the royal pond, so that anyone who failed to cure the princesses could depend upon being eaten alive from the inside outwards.

Well, of course the charlatans immediately found other ways to occupy their time. And even though many people were attracted by the possibilities of great wealth and power they did not dare take the challenge because no one knew for certain that they could effect the cure. Even those who had nothing left to live for were not inclined to risk such a terrible and painful death.

So for many years no one came to the King to offer to treat the princesses, and they lived their lives in seclusion, as beautiful as ever, but very lonely except for the company they gave each other.

One day a handsome young prince was riding through the kingdom. He was far from his own home and seeking adventure. Since he was tired, he went to the castle and asked for shelter for the night. Of course, he was immediately granted a suite of rooms and served a fine meal.

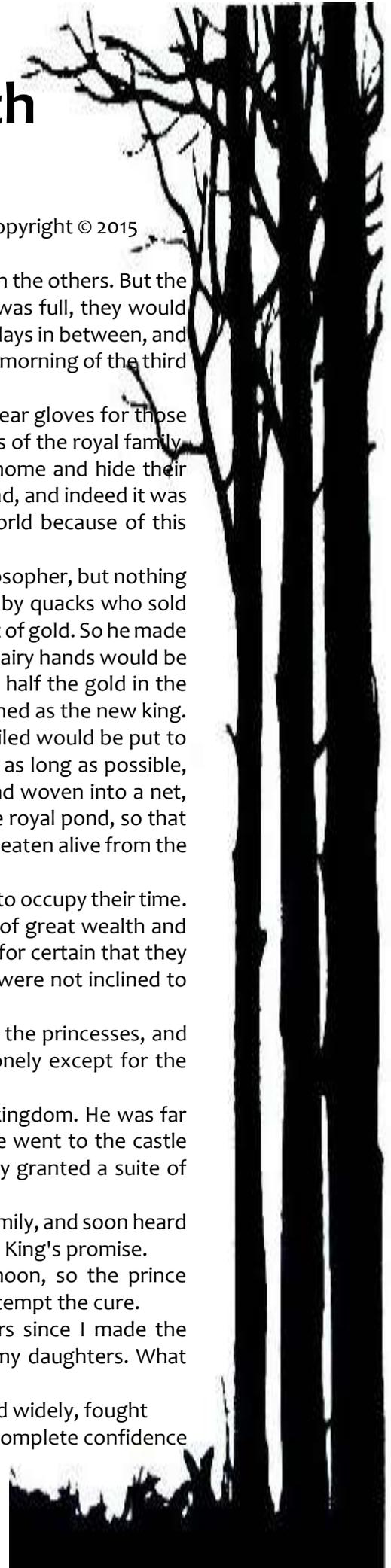
The prince asked his servants for details of the King and his family, and soon heard the story of the five beautiful princesses, their hairy hands, and the King's promise.

As luck would have it, it was the first night of the full moon, so the prince immediately sought an audience with the King to ask if he could attempt the cure.

The King was amazed. "Frankly," he said, "in the five years since I made the proclamation, no one has dared to risk their lives trying to cure my daughters. What gives you such great courage?"

"Nothing frightens me," declared the prince. "I have travelled widely, fought dragons and giants, and I have never felt the slightest fear. I have complete confidence in my capabilities to handle every situation."

"Let it be so," said the King in a solemn voice. "You have until dawn on the third day."



The prince wasted no time. And the princesses were very happy to see him. They had been shut away on their own for such a long time that the introduction of a good-looking young prince was a wonderful thing.

But much though the prince liked the company of beautiful young girls, he also had his priorities. "Plenty of time for socialising," he thought, "once I have worked out how to cure them."

He started at once by reading all of the accounts of all of the attempts that had been made before the King had set down his challenge. He read about potions, concoctions, broths, embrocations, lotions, balms, tinctures, and liniments. He read about massages and pressure points. He read about diets of fibre, diets of fowl, diets of fruit, and even diets of worms. And by the time the moon came up on the first night and the hair started to sprout on ten fine hands, the prince knew everything that would not work.

So on the first night he worked hard with precious metals, semi-precious metals, and base metals. He tried amulets and rings. He tried fine powders and pastes. And he tried shaving their hands with blades made of each different metal, and even combinations of the metals.

But when dawn broke on the first morning, the princesses' hands all had a fine pelt of hair, and the prince was exhausted. "Never mind," he said, "I will sleep through the day and I am sure I will find the cure tonight."

On the second night, the prince worked with light and fire. He tried shining moonlight, torchlight, candlelight, and firelight. He shone the light direct, via mirrors and through keyholes. He bent the light through crystals and glass prisms. He used shards of ice to refract the light, and he used the bright white light of heated steel. He even tried to singe the hair from the left hand of one princess by plunging it into the roaring fire in their bedroom.

But all to no avail. When dawn broke on the second morning, all ten hands were still covered in soft, golden fur, although one hand was also rather burnt and red. The prince was really tired, but "Never mind," he said, "a good sleep during today and I will awaken refreshed and ready to solve the puzzle tonight."

On the third night, the prince worked with sound. He sang lullabies and recited sonnets. He told fairy tales and uttered curses. He played the flute and the bagpipes. He had caged songbirds brought to the rooms, and purring cats. He himself roared like a lion and croaked like a frog.

As dawn approached, the prince became more and more frantic, trying all manner of sounds. He banged on pots from the kitchen and whistled through his teeth. He blew across the tops of bottles and scratched his nails down the windows. But not a hair withered or shrivelled, and when the King came into the room just before the sun rose, the five princesses displayed their forty hairy fingers and ten hairy thumbs as evidence that the prince had failed.

So the King had the prince dragged away to be executed, and his screams could be heard for several days until the fish finally finished him off. And the princesses lived out the rest of their days in seclusion.



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