

# **Icelandic Fairy Tales**

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## PREFACE



Fairy Tales seem scarcely to require any preface, but in publishing these quaint Norse legends, a few explanatory remarks may not be out of place.

In their original form, many of the stories are somewhat crude and rough for juvenile reading. This it has been the Editor's endeavour to ameliorate by eliminating all objectionable matter, while at the same time preserving the originality and local colouring which most of them possess.

It will be found that though some bear a similarity to the well-known standard fairy tales, which have been the delight of countless children for many generations, yet they all possess an originality peculiarly their own.

It is remarkable too that, whereas in most southern legends it is always the prince who delivers the princess and performs the heroic and valorous deeds, in these tales it is for the most part the young princess or peasant maiden who undergoes all the hardships and trials, and after countless dangers rescues the prince who has fallen under the ban of some wicked witch or giantess.

The story of the five brothers, one of the quaintest, is an exceedingly effective illustration of the old proverb of the bundle of sticks.

A strong moral tone runs more or less through all the tales, exhibiting the higher and better qualities of human nature. [7](#)

# ICELANDIC FAIRY TALES





## THE LEGEND OF THE KING'S THREE SONS

In olden days there once lived a king and a queen; they were wise and good, and their kingdom was known far and near as the happiest and best-governed country in the world. They had three sons—Osric, Edric, and Frithiof,—all handsome and brave and greatly beloved by their parents; but, having no daughter, the king had adopted his little orphan niece Isolde. She grew up with his sons, and was their best-loved playfellow, both the king and queen making no distinction between her and their own children.

As the princess grew older, she also grew fairer, till when she was sixteen years old there was no maiden in the land so beautiful and sweet as Isolde. All three brothers fell in love with her and wanted to marry her, each in turn asking his father for her hand in marriage.

Now the king was greatly puzzled what to do, for he loved his sons all equally well, so at length he decided that the princess should choose for herself, and select the one she liked best. He therefore sent for her, and told her that she was herself to choose as a husband whichever of his sons she liked best.

“It is my duty as well as my pleasure to obey you, dear father,” said Isolde; “but when you tell me to choose one of the princes as my husband, you give me a very difficult task, for they are all equally dear to me.”

When the king heard these words, he saw that his troubles were by no means at an end, so he thought for a long time how he could best find a way that would satisfy all parties, and at last decided to send all three sons away for a year. At the end of that time they

were to return, and whoever had succeeded in bringing back the most precious and valuable thing from his travels should receive the hand of Isolde as his reward.

The three princes were quite willing to accept these terms, and arranged among themselves that at the end of the year they would all meet at their hunting-lodge and thence go together to the king's palace with their gifts; so, bidding farewell to their parents and Isolde, they started off on their different journeys.

Osric, the eldest son, travelled from city to city, and explored various foreign countries, without finding anything precious enough to take home. At last, when he had almost given up all hope, he heard that, not very far from where he then was, there lived a princess who possessed a wonderful telescope, which was so powerful that one could see all over the world with it. No country was too distant, and not only could one see every town, but also every house and tree, and even people and animals inside the houses.

“Surely,” thought Osric, “no one could find a more precious or valuable thing than this glass, for nothing is hidden from it.” So, having arrived at the castle where the princess dwelt, he told her the object of his journey, and asked whether she would sell him her telescope.

At first the princess said she would not part with it, but when Osric told her how much depended on his taking back so valuable a gift, she consented to let him have it for a very large sum of money.

The prince did not mind this; he only thought the gold well spent, and hastened homewards, full of hope that he would secure the hand of Isolde.

Prince Edric fared much the same as his elder brother. He also travelled about in distant countries, seeking in vain for something rare and precious to bring home. At last, when the year was nearly at an end, he reached a large and populous town, and in the inn where he lodged he met a man who told him that in a cave outside the town there lived a curious little dwarf called Völund,<sup>1</sup> who was famed for his rare skill in all kinds of metal-work.

“Perhaps,” thought the prince, “he might be able to make me some rare and costly article worthy to take back.” So he went to the dwarf, but when he told him what he wanted, the dwarf said he was very sorry, but he had quite given up working in metals.

“The last thing I made was a shield,” he continued, “but that is many years ago now. I made it for myself, and am unwilling to part with it, for not only is it almost the finest bit of work I ever did, but it has also some very special properties.”

“And what are these special properties?” asked the prince.

“Well,” replied the dwarf, “it is not only a perfect safeguard in battle, as no ordinary sword or arrow can pierce it, but if you sit on it, it will carry you all over the world, through the air as well as across the water. But there are some old runes, or ancient letters, carved on the shield, which he who guides it must be able to read. But I will show it you.”

So saying, he went to the back of the cave and brought forth a beautiful shield, worked in gold, silver, and copper, the runic letters being all formed of precious stones.

When Edric saw the shield and heard of its wonderful properties, he thought it would not be possible to find anything more rare or

valuable. He therefore told the dwarf how much depended on his bringing back so precious a gift, and entreated him to let him purchase it; and he was so importunate and urged him so strongly that, although loth to part with it, when the dwarf heard how much depended on his securing so rare a gift, he agreed to sell it him for a large sum of money. He also taught him how to read the runes, and Edric, thanking him for consenting to part with his shield, started on his homeward journey, filled with hope and confidence that he must win the princess's hand.

Frithiof, the youngest son, was the last to start. He determined to travel through his own country first, so he wandered about from place to place, stopping in this town and that village, and wherever he met a merchant, or hoped to find anything rare or beautiful, he made most searching inquiries. All his efforts, however, proved fruitless. The greater part of the year had already passed, and he was still as far as ever from his goal, and he almost began to fear that no success would crown his efforts.

At length he arrived at a large and populous town, where a big market was being held, and numbers of people from all parts of the world came thronging in, some to buy and some to sell. So he followed the crowd, and then went on from stall to stall, and from one merchant to another, inspecting their wares and chatting and asking for news. But though there were many beautiful and many curious things, nothing specially struck his fancy.

At length, tired and thirsty, he sat down beside a large fruit stall. The merchant, seeing, as he thought, a likely customer, came forward asking if he would not buy something—offering him grapes, peaches, pineapples, and melons in turn.

But Frithiof shook his head; none of these tempted him, for on the very top shelf he saw a magnificent crimson apple, streaked with green and gold, lying on a bed of soft moss.

“I should like that apple,” said the prince, “and do not mind what I pay for it. It is the only thing that I fancy, though all your fruit is splendid.”

The merchant smiled, but shook his head.

“You have a quick eye,” he said to the prince, “for that apple is indeed the rarest and most valuable thing I have. But it is not for sale. It was given to one of my ancestors, who was a great doctor, by a geni, and has the peculiar power, that if it is placed in the right hand of any one who is sick, no matter how dangerous the illness, they recover at once—ay, even if they are at the point of death—and many a life it has saved.”

When the prince heard this, he wished more than ever to possess the apple. He felt he could not possibly find anything that the princess, who was so kind-hearted, would value more than the possession of this apple, which would enable her to do good to others. He therefore entreated the merchant to let him buy the apple, and when the man had heard his tale, and all that depended upon his bringing back such a rare and precious gift, he sold the apple to the prince, who, filled with hope, now wended his way homewards.

And so it happened that, as they had arranged, the three brothers arrived at the hunting-lodge, outside the capital, and after they had related their adventures, Osric, the eldest, said, “Now let us hasten to the palace, but before starting I should like to see what the princess is doing.”

He thereupon drew forth his telescope and looked in the direction of the palace, but no sooner had he done so, than an exclamation of terror escaped his lips, for there on her couch lay the princess, white and still as the driven snow, while beside her stood the king and queen and the chief of the courtiers in a sorrowful group, sadly awaiting the last breath of the fair Isolde.

When Osric beheld this grievous sight he was overwhelmed with grief, and when his brothers heard what he had seen, they too were overcome with sorrow. Gladly would each have given all they possessed to be back in time, at least to bid her farewell.

Then Prince Edric remembered his magic shield, which would at once carry them to the king's palace, and, bringing it forth, the three brothers seated themselves on it, and the shield rose up in the air and in a few seconds they had reached the palace, and hastened up to the princess's chamber, where they found all the court assembled, sadly awaiting the end.

Then Frithiof remembered his apple. Now was the time to test its power. Stepping softly up to the couch, he bent over the still white form of the princess and gently placed the apple in her right hand. Immediately a change was visible, it seemed as if a fresh stream of life passed through her body. The colour returned to her lips and cheeks, she opened her eyes, and after a few minutes she was able to sit up and speak.

The general rejoicing at the princess's wonderful and unexpected recovery, and at the happy and opportune return of the three princes, can be better imagined than described.

But as soon as she was quite well, the king, mindful of his promise, called together a great "Thing," or national assembly, at which the

brothers were to exhibit the treasures they had brought back, when judgment would be pronounced.

First came the eldest brother Osric, with his telescope. This was handed round for the people to see, while he explained its strange and marvellous properties, stating how by means of this glass he had saved the princess, for he had been able to see how ill she was. He therefore considered that he had earned the right to claim the princess's hand.

Then Edric, the second brother, stepped forth and showed the beautiful shield he had got from the dwarf, and explained its peculiar power. "Of what use would have been my brother's glass," he asked, "without this shield, which carried us hither in time to save her life? I claim, therefore, that it was really due to the power of my shield that the princess is not dead, and that I ought therefore to possess her hand in marriage."

And now it was Frithiof's turn to come forward with the apple. He said, "I fear that neither the telescope which first showed us that the princess was ill, nor the shield which so quickly brought us hither, would have sufficed to restore the Princess Isolde to life and health, had it not been for the magic power of my apple. For what good could our mere presence have done her? Our seeing her thus and unable to help her, would only have added to our grief and pain. It is due to my apple that the princess has been restored to us, and I therefore think my claim to her hand is the greatest."

Then there arose much questioning and reasoning in the "Thing" as to which of the three articles were of the greatest value, but as they could come to no satisfactory agreement, the judges declared that all three articles were of equal value, for they had all equally

contributed to restore the princess to life and health, for if one had been missing, the other two would have been valueless. So judgment was pronounced that, all three gifts being equally valuable, neither of the brothers could claim the princess's hand.

Then the king happily hit upon the idea of allowing his sons to shoot for the prize, and whoever was adjudged the best shot should wed the princess.

So a target was set up, and Osric, armed with bow and arrow, stepped forth first.

Taking careful aim, he drew his bow, and the arrow sped forth, but it fell some distance short of the mark.

Then Edric stepped forth. He too took careful aim, and his arrow fell nearer the mark.

And now it was Frithiof's turn. He too took a very careful aim, and all the people said his arrow went beyond the mark, and that he was the best shot, but when they came to look for it, behold, it could nowhere be found. In vain search was made in all directions, no sign of the arrow could be found. The king therefore decided that Edric had won the princess's hand. The wedding forthwith took place amid great splendour and rejoicing, and the princess and her husband then went to her own country, where they reigned long and happily. The eldest brother, Osric, greatly vexed that he had not been successful, started off on a long journey, and nothing more was heard of him. So only the youngest brother was left at home. But he was not at all satisfied with the way matters had turned out, for he had always been considered by far the best shot. He therefore searched every day in the field where the trial had taken place, looking for his arrow. At length, after many days, he



found it lodged in an oak tree, far beyond the mark. He brought witnesses to attest the truth of this, and though there could be no question that his arrow had gone the furthest, the king said it was now too late to go into the matter, for the princess was married and gone away.

Then Frithiof grew very restless. He thought he had been unfairly treated, and at length decided to go away, so he packed up his belongings, and, bidding his parents farewell, started off in search of adventures.

After passing along the wide plains that surrounded the capital, he climbed a high range of mountains, and from thence descended into a great forest. Here he wandered about for several days, but whichever way he turned, he could see nothing but trees all around him. The small store of food he had taken with him when he started was exhausted, and tired, hungry, and footsore, he sat down to rest on a large flat grey stone, unable to proceed any further. He thought the end of his days had surely come, when suddenly he heard the noise of horses' feet, and looking up he saw ten men mounted on horseback coming rapidly towards him. They were all richly dressed and well armed, the last one leading a finely caparisoned palfrey.

When they came to the prince, the leader dismounted, and, bowing low before him, begged him to honour them by mounting the steed they had brought with them.

Frithiof gratefully accepted this offer, and, mounting the horse, the party turned back the way they had come, riding rapidly on till they arrived at a large town. Before entering the gates they

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