

The Big Bird Dan

by Sir George Webbe Dasent
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Once on a time there was a king who had twelve daughters, and he was so fond of them they must always be at his side; but every day at noon, while the king slept, the Princesses went out to take a walk. So once, while the king was taking his noontide nap, and the Princesses had gone to take their walk, all at once they were missing, and worse, they never came home again. Then there was great grief and sorrow all over the land, but the most sorry of all was the king. He sent messengers out throughout his own and other realms, and gave out their names in all the churches, and had the bells tolled for them in all the steeples; but gone the Princesses were, and gone they stayed, and none could tell what was become of them. So it was as clear as day that they must have been carried off by some witchcraft.

Well, it wasn't long before these tidings spread far and wide, over land and town, aye, over many lands; and so the news came to a king ever so many lands off, who had twelve sons. So when these Princes heard of the twelve king's daughters, they asked leave of their father to go out and seek them. They had hard work to get his leave, for he was afraid lest he should never see them again, but they all fell down on their knees before the king, and begged so long, at last he was forced to let them go after all.

He fitted out a ship for them, and gave them Ritter Red, who was quite at home at sea, for a captain. So they sailed about a long, long time, landed on every shore they came to, and hunted and asked after the Princesses, but they could neither hear nor see anything of them. And now, a few days only were wanting to make up seven years since they set sail, when one day a strong storm rose, and such foul weather, they thought they should never come to land again, and all had to work so hard, they couldn't get a wink of sleep so long as the storm lasted. But when the third day was nearly over, the wind fell, and all at once it got as still as still could be. Now, they were all so weary with work and the rough weather, they fell fast asleep in the twinkling of an eye; all but the youngest Prince, he could get no rest, and couldn't go off to sleep at all.

So as he was pacing up and down the deck, the ship came to a little island, and on the island ran a little dog, and bayed and barked at the ship as if it wanted to come on board. So the Prince went to that side of the deck, and tried to coax the dog, and whistled and whistled to him, but the more he whistled and coaxed, the more the dog barked and snarled. Well, he thought it a shame the dog should run about there and starve, for he made up his mind that it must have come thither from a ship that had been cast away in the storm; but still he thought he should never be able to help it after all, for he couldn't put out the boat by himself, and as for the others, they all slept so sound, he wouldn't wake them for the sake of a dog. But then the weather was so calm and still; and at last he said to himself: 'Come what may, you must go on shore and save that dog', and so he began to try to launch the boat, and he found it far easier work than he thought. So he rowed ashore, and went up to the dog; but every time he tried to catch it, it jumped on one side, and so it went on till he found himself inside a great grand castle, before he knew where he was. Then the dog, all at once, was changed into a lovely Princess; and there, on the bench, sat a man so big and ugly, the Prince almost lost his wits for fear.

'YOU'VE NO NEED TO BE AFRAID', said the man--but the Prince, to tell you the truth, got far more afraid when he heard his gruff voice-- 'for I know well enough what you want. There are twelve Princes of you, and you are looking for the twelve Princesses that are lost. I know, too, very well whereabouts they are; they're with my lord and master, and there they sit, each of them on her chair, and comb his hair; for he has twelve heads. And now you have sailed seven years, but you'll have to sail seven years more before you find them. As for you, you might stay here and welcome, and have my daughter; but you must first slay him, for he's a hard master to all of us, and we're all weary of him, and when he's dead I shall be King in his stead; but first try if you can brandish this sword'.

Then the King's son took hold of a rusty old sword which hung on the wall, but he could scarce stir it.

'Now you must take a pull at this flask', said the Troll; and when he had done that he could stir it, and when he had taken another he could lift it, and when he had taken a third he could brandish the sword as easily as if it had been his own.

'Now, when you get on board', said the Troll Prince, 'you must hide the sword well in your berth, that Ritter Red mayn't set eyes on it; he's not man enough to wield it, but he'll get spiteful against you, and try to take your life. And when seven years are almost out all but three days', he went on to say, 'everything will happen just as now; foul weather will come on you, with a great storm, and when it is over you'll all be sleepy. Then you must take the sword and row ashore, and so you'll come to a castle where all sorts of guards will stand--wolves, and bears, and lions; but you needn't be afraid of them, for they'll all come and crouch at your feet. But when you come inside the castle, you'll soon see the Troll; he sits in a splendid chamber in grand attire and array; twelve heads he has of his own, and the Princesses sit round them, each on her chair, and comb his heads, and that's a work you may guess they don't much like. Then you must make haste, and hew off one head after the other as quick as you can; for if he wakes and sets his eyes on you, he'll swallow you alive'.

So the King's son went on board with the sword, and he bore in mind what he had come to know. The others still lay fast asleep and snored, and he hid the sword in his berth, so that neither Ritter Red nor any of the rest got sight of it. And now it began to blow again, so he woke up the others and said he thought they oughtn't to sleep any longer now when there was such a good wind. And there was none of them that marked he had been away. Well, after the seven years were all gone but three days, all happened as the Troll had said. A great storm and foul weather came on that lasted three days, and when it had blown itself out, all the rest grew sleepy and went to rest; but the youngest King's son rowed ashore, and the guards fell at his feet, and so he came to the castle. So when he got inside the chamber, there sat the King fast asleep as the Troll Prince had said, and the twelve Princesses sat each on her chair and combed one of his heads. The king's son beckoned to the Princesses to get out of the way; they pointed to the Troll, and beckoned to him again to go his way as quick as ever he could, but he kept on making signs to them to get out of the way, and then they understood that he wanted to set them free, and stole away softly one after the other, and as fast as they went, he hewed off the Troll King's heads, till at last the blood gushed out like a great brook. When the Troll was slain he rowed on board and hid his sword. He thought now he had done enough, and as he couldn't get rid of the body by himself, he thought it only fair they should help him a little. So he woke them all up, and said it was a shame they should be snoring there, when he had found the Princesses, and set them free

from the Troll. The others only laughed at him, and said he had been just as sound asleep as they, and only dreamt that he was man enough to do what he said; for if any one was to set the Princesses free, it was far more likely it would be one of them. But the youngest King's son told them all about it, and when they followed him to the land and saw first of all the brook of blood, and then the castle, and the Troll, and the twelve heads, and the Princesses, they saw plain enough that he had spoken the truth, and now the whole helped him to throw the body and the heads into the sea. So all were glad and happy, but none more so than the Princesses, who got rid of having to sit there and comb the Troll's hair all day. Of all the silver and gold and precious things that were there, they took as much as the ship could hold, and so they went on board altogether Princes and Princesses alike.

But when they had gone a bit out on the sea, the Princesses said they had forgotten in their joy their gold crowns; they lay behind in a press, and they would be so glad to have them. So when none of the others was willing to fetch them, the youngest King's son said:

'I have already dared so much, I can very well go back for the gold crowns too, if you will only strike sail and wait till I come again.'

Yes, that they would do. But when he had gone back so far that they couldn't see him any longer, Ritter Red, who would have been glad enough to have been their chief, and to have the youngest Princess, said, 'it was no use their lying there still waiting for him, for they might know very well he would never come back; they all knew, too, how the king had given him all power and authority to sail or not as he chose; and now they must all say 'twas he that had saved the Princesses, and if any one said anything else, he should lose his life'.

The Princes didn't dare to do anything else than what Ritter Red willed, and so they sailed away.

Meanwhile the youngest King's son rowed to land, went up to the castle, found the press with gold crowns in it, and at last lugged it down to the boat, and shoved off; but when he came where he ought to have seen the ship, lo! it was gone. Well, as he couldn't catch a glimpse of it anywhere, he could very soon tell how matters stood. To row after them was no good, and so he was forced to turn about and row back to land. He was rather afraid to stay alone in the castle all night, but there was no other house to be got, so he plucked up a heart,

locked up all the doors and gates fast, and lay down in a room where there was a bed ready made. But fearful and woeful he was, and still more afraid he got when he had lain a while and something began to creak and groan and quake in wall and roof, as if the whole castle were being torn asunder. Then all at once down something plunged close by the side of his bed, as if it were a whole cartload of hay. Then all was still again; but after a while he heard a voice, which bade him not to be afraid, and said:

Here am I the Big Bird Dan Come to help you all I can.

'But the first thing you must do when you wake in the morning, will be to go to the barn and fetch four barrels of rye for me. I must fill my crop with them for breakfast, else I can't do anything'.

When he woke up, sure enough there he saw an awfully big bird, which had a feather at the nape of his neck, as thick and long as a half-grown spruce fir. So the King's son went down to the barn to fetch four barrels of rye for the Big Bird Dan, and when he had crammed them into his crop he told the King's son to hang the press with the gold crowns on one side of his neck, and as much gold and silver as would weigh it down on the other side, and after that to get on his back and hold fast by the feather in the nape of his neck. So away they went till the wind whistled after them, and so it wasn't long before they outstripped the ship. The King's son wanted to go on board for his sword, for he was afraid lest any one should get sight of it, for the Troll had told him that mustn't be; but Bird Dan said that mustn't be either.

'Ritter Red will never see it, never fear; but if you go on board, he'll try to take your life, for he has set his heart on having the youngest Princess; but make your mind quite easy about her, for she lays a naked sword by her side in bed every night.'

So after a long, long time, they came to the island where the Troll Prince was; and there the King's son was welcomed so heartily there was no end to it. The Troll Prince didn't know how to be good enough to him for having slain his Lord and Master, and so made him King of the Trolls, and if the King's son had been willing he might easily have got the Troll King's daughter, and half the kingdom. But he had so set his heart on the youngest of the twelve Princesses, he could take no rest, but was all for going after their ship time after time. So the Troll

King begged him to be quiet a little longer, and said they had still nearly seven years to sail before they got home. As for the Princess the Troll said the same thing as the Big Bird Dan.

'You needn't fret yourself about her, for she lays a naked sword by her side every night in bed. And now if you don't believe what I say', said the Troll, 'you can go on board when they sail by here, and see for yourself, and fetch the sword too, for I may just as well have it again.'

So when they sailed by another great storm arose, and when the king's son went on board they all slept, and each Princess lay beside her Prince; but the youngest lay alone with a naked sword beside her in the bed, and on the floor by the bedside lay Ritter Red. Then the king's son took the sword and rowed ashore again, and none of them had seen that he had been on board. But still the King's son couldn't rest, and he often and often wanted to be off, and so at last when it got near the end of the seven years, and only three weeks were left, the Troll King said:

'Now you may get ready to go since you won't stay with us; and you shall have the loan of my iron boat, which sails of itself, if you only say:

Boat, boat, go on!

'In that boat there is an iron club, and that club you must lift a little when you see the ship straight a-head of you, and then they'll get such a rattling fair breeze, they'll forget to look at you; but when you get alongside them, you must lift the club a little again, and then they'll get such a foul wind and storm, they'll have something else to do than to stare at you; and when you have run past them, you must lift the club a third time, but you must always be sure and lay it down carefully again, else there'll be such a storm both you and they will be wrecked and lost. Now, when you have got to land, you've no need to bother yourself at all about the boat; just turn it about, and shove it off, and say:

Boat, boat, go back home!

When he set out they gave him so much gold and silver, and so many other costly things, and clothes and linen which the Troll Princess had

sewn and woven for him all that long time, that he was far richer than any of his brothers.

Well, he had no sooner seated himself in the boat, and said,

Boat, boat, go on!

than away went the boat, and when he saw the ship right ahead he lifted up the club, and then they got such a fair breeze, they forgot to look at him. When he was alongside the ship, he lifted the club again, and then such a storm arose and such foul weather, that the white foam flew about the ship, and the billows rolled over the deck, and they had something else to do than to stare at him; and when he had run past them he lifted the club the third time, and then the storm and the wind rose so, they had still less time to look after him, and to make him out. So he came to land long, long before the ship; and when he had got all his goods out of the boat, he shoved it off again, and turned it about and said:

Boat, boat, go back home!

And off went the boat.

Then he dressed himself up as a sailor--whether the Troll king had told him that, or it was his own device, I'm sure I can't say--and went up to a wretched hut where an old wife lived, whom he got to believe that he was a poor sailor who had been on board a great ship that was wrecked, and that he was the only soul that had got ashore. After that he begged for house-room for himself and the goods he had saved.

'Heaven mend me!' said the old wife, 'how can I lend any one house-room? look at me and mine, why, I've no bed to sleep on myself, still less one for any one else to lie on.'

Well, well, it was all the same, said the sailor; if he only got a roof over his head, it didn't matter where he lay. So she couldn't turn him out of the house, when he was so thankful for what there was. That afternoon he fetched up his things, and the old wife, who was very eager to hear a bit of news to run about and tell, began at once to ask who he was, whence he came, whither he was bound, what it was he had with him, what his business was, and if he hadn't heard anything of the twelve Princesses who had been away the Lord knew how

many years. All this she asked and much more, which it would be waste of time to tell. But he said he was so poorly and had such a bad headache after the awful weather he had been out in, that he couldn't answer any of her questions; she must just leave him alone and let him rest a few days till he came to himself after the hard work he'd had in the gale, and then she'd know all she wanted.

The very next day the old wife began to stir him up and ask again, but the sailor's head was still so bad he hadn't got his wits together, but somehow he let drop a word or two to show that he did know something about the Princesses. Off ran the old wife with what she had heard to all the gossips and chatterboxes round about, and soon the one came running after the other to ask about the Princesses, 'if he had seen them', 'if they would soon be there', 'if they were on the way', and much more of the same sort. He still went on groaning over his headache after the storm, so that he couldn't tell them all about it, but so much he told them, unless they had been lost in the great storm they'd make the land in about a fortnight or before perhaps; but he couldn't say for sure whether they were alive or no, for though he had seen them, it might very well be that they had been cast away in the storm since. So what did one of these old gossips do but run up to the Palace with this story, and say that there was a sailor down in such and such an old wife's hut, who had seen the Princesses, and that they were coming home in a fortnight or in a week's time. When the King heard that he sent a messenger down to the sailor to come up to him and tell the news himself.

'I don't see how it's to be', said the sailor, 'for I haven't any clothes fit to stand in before the King.'

But the King said he must come; for the King must and would talk with him, whether he were richly or poorly clad, for there was no one else who could bring him any tidings of the Princesses. So he went up at last to the Palace and went in before the King, who asked him if it were true that he had seen anything of the Princesses.

'Aye, aye', said the sailor, 'I've seen them sure enough, but I don't know whether they're still alive, for when I last caught sight of them, the weather was so foul we in our ship were cast away; but if they're still alive they'll come safe home in a fortnight or perhaps before.'

When the King heard that he was almost beside himself for joy; and when the time came that the sailor had said they would come, the King drove down to the strand to meet them in a great state; and there was joy and gladness over the whole land, when the ship came sailing in with the Princes and Princesses and Ritter Red. But no one was gladder than the old King, who had got his daughters back again. The eleven eldest Princesses too, were glad and merry, but the youngest who was to have Ritter Red, who said that he had set them all free and slain the Troll, she wept and was always sorrowful. The King took this ill, and asked why she wasn't cheerful and merry like the others; she hadn't anything to be sorry for now when she had got out of the Troll's clutches, and was to have such a husband as Ritter Red. But she daredn't say anything, for Ritter Red had said he would take the life of any one who told the truth how things had gone.

But now one day, when they were hard at work sewing and stitching the bridal array, in came a man in a great sailor's cloak with a pedlar's pack on his back, and asked if the Princesses wouldn't buy something fine of him for the wedding; he had so many wares and costly things, both gold and silver. Yes, they might do so perhaps, so they looked at his wares and they looked at him, for they thought they had seen both him and many of his costly things before.

'He who has so many fine things', said the youngest Princess, 'must surely have something still more precious, and which suits us better even than these.'

'Maybe I have', said the Pedlar.

But now all the others cried 'Hush', and bade her bear in mind what Ritter Red had said he would do.

Well, some time after the Princesses sat and looked out of the window, and then the King's son came again with the great sea-cloak thrown about him, and the press with the gold crowns at his back; and when he got into the palace hall he unlocked the press before the Princesses, and when each of them knew her own gold crown again, the youngest said:

'I think it only right that he who set us free should get the meed that is his due; and he is not Ritter Red, but this man who has brought us our gold crowns. He it is that set us free.'

Then the King's son cast off the sailor's cloak, and stood there far finer and grander than all the rest; and so the old King made them put Ritter Red to death. And now there was real right down joy in the palace; each took his own bride, and there just was a wedding! Why, it was heard of and talked about over twelve kings' realms.