The water of life

There was once a King who had an illness, and no one believed that he would come out of it with his life. He had three sons who were much distressed about it, and went down into the palace-garden and wept. There they met an old man who inquired as to the cause of their grief. They told him that their father was so ill that he would most certainly die, for nothing seemed to cure him. Then the old man said, "I know of one more remedy, and that is the water of life; if he drinks of it he will become well again; but it is hard to find." The eldest said, "I will manage to find it," and went to the sick King, and begged to be allowed to go forth in search of the water of life, for that alone could save him. "No," said the King, "the danger of it is too great. I would rather die." But he begged so long that the King consented. The prince thought in his heart, "If I bring the water, then I shall be best beloved of my father, and shall inherit the kingdom." So he set out, and when he had ridden forth a little distance, a dwarf stood there in the road who called to him and said, "Whither away so fast?" - "Silly shrimp," said the prince, very haughtily, "it is nothing to do with you," and rode on. But the little dwarf had grown angry, and had wished an evil wish. Soon after this the prince entered a ravine, and the further he rode the closer the mountains drew together, and at last the road became so narrow that he could not advance a step further; it was impossible either to turn his horse or to dismount from the saddle, and he was shut in there as if in prison. The sick King waited long for him, but he came not. Then the second son said, "Father, let me go forth to seek the water," and thought to himself, "If my brother is dead, then the kingdom will fall to me." At first the King would not allow him to go either, but at last he yielded, so the prince set out on the same road that his brother had taken, and he too met the dwarf, who stopped him to ask, whither he was going in such haste? "Little shrimp," said the prince, "that is nothing to thee," and rode on without giving him another look. But the dwarf bewitched him, and he, like the other, rode into a ravine, and could neither go forwards nor backwards. So fare haughty people.

As the second son also remained away, the youngest begged to be allowed to go forth to fetch the water, and at last the King was obliged to let him go. When he met the dwarf and the latter asked him whither he was going in such haste, he stopped, gave him an explanation, and said, "I am seeking the water of life, for my father is sick unto death." - "Dost thou know, then, where that is to be found?" - "No," said the prince. "As thou hast borne thyself as is seemly, and not haughtily like thy false brothers, I will give thee the information and tell thee how thou mayst obtain the water of life. It springs from a fountain in the courtyard of an enchanted castle, but thou wilt not be able to make thy way to it, if I do not give thee an iron wand and two small loaves of bread. Strike thrice with the wand on the iron door of the castle and it will spring open: inside lie two lions with gaping jaws, but if thou throwest a loaf to each of them, they will be quieted. Then hasten to fetch some of the water of life before the clock strikes twelve, else the door will shut again, and thou wilt be imprisoned." The prince thanked him, took the wand and the bread, and set out on his way. When he arrived, everything was as the dwarf had said. The door sprang open at the third stroke of the wand, and when he had appeased the lions with the bread, he entered the castle, and came to a large and splendid hall, wherein sat some enchanted princes whose rings he drew off their fingers. A sword and a loaf of bread were lying there, which he carried away. After this, he entered a chamber, in which was a beautiful maiden who rejoiced when she saw him, kissed him, and told him that he had delivered her, and should have the whole of her kingdom, and that if he would return in a year their wedding should be celebrated; likewise she told him where the spring of the water of life was, and that he was to hasten and draw some of it before the clock struck twelve. Then he went onwards, and at last entered a room where there was a beautiful newly-made bed, and as he was very weary, he felt inclined to rest a little. So he lay down and fell asleep. When he awoke, it was striking a quarter to twelve. He sprang up in a fright, ran to the spring, drew some water in a cup which stood near, and hastened away. But just as he was passing through the iron door, the clock struck twelve, and the door fell to with such violence that it carried away a piece of his heel. He, however, rejoicing at having obtained the water of life, went homewards, and again passed the
intended to poison him, and said that they had brought
brothers came, and accused the youngest of having
And as he was lamenting over this, the two eldest
salt sea-water than he became still worse than before.
be cured. But scarcely had he drunk a very little of the
the sick King in order that he might drink out of it, and
when they arrived home, the youngest took his cup to
the cup they poured salt sea-water. Now therefore,
found him fast asleep, then they poured the water of
which belongs to us, and he will rob us of all our
youngest has found the water of life and not we, for
passage, the two eldest conversed apart and said, "The
board a ship and sailed over the sea. During the
delivered three kingdoms, and after that they went on
war and famine reigned and each time the prince gave
his loaf and his sword, and the three brothers rode on.
where war and famine reigned, and the King already
thought he must perish, for the scarcity was so great.
Then the prince went to him and gave him the loaf,
wherewith he fed and satisfied the whole of his
prince's sword, and maintained their people with his
the three Kings who had slain their enemies with the
prince, however, went further into the forest. After
exchanged clothes, and the huntsman returned home;
Then the prince was shocked, and said, "Dear
prince said to him, "Dear huntsman, let me live; there, I give you my royal
garments; give me your common ones in their stead." Then the huntsman said, "I will willingly do that, indeed I
huntsman, let me live: there, I give you my royal
garments; give me your common ones in their stead." Then the prince said to him, "Dear huntsman, what ails you?"
The huntsman said, "I cannot tell you, and yet I ought." Then the prince said, "Say openly what it is, I
ought." Then the prince said, "Say openly what it is, I
will pardon you." - "Alas!" said the huntsman, "I am to
shoot you dead, the King has ordered me to do it."
Then the prince was shocked, and said, "Dear
huntsman, let me live; there, I give you my royal
garments; give me your common ones in their stead." Then the prince said to him, "Dear
huntsman, what ails you?" The huntsman said, "I cannot tell you, and yet I ought." Then the prince said, "Say openly what it is, I will pardon you." - "Alas!" said the huntsman, "I am to
shoot you dead, the King has ordered me to do it."
Then the prince was shocked, and said, "Dear
huntsman, let me live; there, I give you my royal
garments; give me your common ones in their stead." Then the prince said to him, "Dear huntsman, what ails you?"
The huntsman said, "I cannot tell you, and yet I
ought." Then the prince said, "Say openly what it is, I
will pardon you." - "Alas!" said the huntsman, "I am to
The old King was angry with his youngest son, and
thought he had plotted against his life. So he
summoned the court together and had sentence
pronounced upon his son, that he should be secretly
shot. And once when the prince was riding forth to the
chase, suspecting no evil, the King's huntsman had to
go with him, and when they were quite alone in the
forest, the huntsman looked so sorrowful that the
prince said to him, "Dear huntsman, what ails you?"
The huntsman said, "I cannot tell you, and yet I
ought." Then the prince said, "Say openly what it is, I
will pardon you." - "Alas!" said the huntsman, "I am to
shoot you dead, the King has ordered me to do it."
Then the prince was shocked, and said, "Dear
huntsman, let me live; there, I give you my royal
garments; give me your common ones in their stead." Then the prince said to him, "Dear huntsman, what ails you?"
The huntsman said, "I will willingly do that, indeed I
should not have been able to shoot you." Then they
exchanged clothes, and the huntsman returned home;
the prince, however, went further into the forest. After
a time three waggons of gold and precious stones came
to the King for his youngest son, which were sent by
the three Kings who had slain their enemies with the
prince's sword, and maintained their people with his
bread, and who wished to show their gratitude for it.
The old King then thought, "Can my son have been
innocent?" and said to his people, "Would that he were
still alive, how it grieves me that I have suffered him
to be killed!" - "He still lives," said the huntsman, "I
could not find it in my heart to carry out your
command," and told the King how it had happened.
Then a stone fell from the King's heart, and he had it
proclaimed in every country that his son might return
and be taken into favour again.
The princess, however, had a road made up to her
palace which was quite bright and golden, and told her
people that whosoever came riding straight along it to
her, would be the right wooer and was to be admitted,
and whoever rode by the side of it, was not the right
one, and was not to be admitted. As the time was now
close at hand, the eldest thought he would hasten to go
to the King’s daughter, and give himself out as her
deriverer, and thus win her for his bride, and the
kingdom to boot. Therefore he rode forth, and when he
arrived in front of the palace, and saw the splendid
golden road, he thought, it would be a sin and a shame
if he were to ride over that, and turned aside, and rode
on the right side of it. But when he came to the door,
the servants told him that he was not the right man,
and was to go away again. Soon after this the second
prince set out, and when he came to the golden road,
and his horse had put one foot on it, he thought, it
would be a sin and a shame to tread a piece of it off,
and he turned aside and rode on the left side of it, and
when he reached the door, the attendants told him he
was not the right one, and he was to go away again.
When at last the year had entirely expired, the third
son likewise wished to ride out of the forest to his
beloved, and with her forget his sorrows. So he set out
and thought of her so incessantly, and wished to be
with her so much, that he never noticed the golden
road at all. So his horse rode onwards up the middle of
it, and when he came to the door, it was opened and
the princess received him with joy, and said he was her
deriverer, and lord of the kingdom, and their wedding
was celebrated with great rejoicing. When it was over
she told him that his father invited him to come to him,
and had forgiven him. So he rode thither, and told him
everything; how his brothers had betrayed him, and
how he had nevertheless kept silence. The old King
wished to punish them, but they had put to sea, and
never came back as long as they lived.

* * *