

The Little King

by Charles McLean Redding

Once upon a time, there was a young boy who wanted to be a king.

He had no crown, no sword, and no steed, and he knew from his father's stories that he needed all of these things to be a king. So he set out into the village in search of these things, and to become a king.

After walking for a long time through the village streets, he came across a hatmaker's shop.

"Hatmaker!" the boy commanded, "I need a crown so I can be a king."

The hatmaker laughed, and said, "Well what kind of a king would you be? Would I be rewarded for making you this crown?"

"If I become king, with a crown, and a sword, and a steed, I'll make you the wealthiest hatmaker in the kingdom." The boy said earnestly.

The hatmaker smiled, and crafted a crown out of felt and leather, and placed it upon the boy's head. The boy thanked him and formalized his promise with a handshake and a bow.

The boy went on to the edge of the village, where he heard a clanging sound. He followed it and came across a blacksmith at an anvil. The blacksmith was a forger of tools and horseshoes, not of weapons or armor.

The boy said, "Blacksmith! I am to be a king, and thus I need a sword!"

The blacksmith said, "Well I see you have a crown, aren't you a king already?"

"No," the boy said, earnestly, "I cannot be a king without a sword and a steed as well."

"Well," the blacksmith said, "I don't know about a horse, but for a would-be king, I can make you a sword. Am I to be rewarded for my efforts?"

"Of course" said the boy. "That's the kind of king I will be. I'll make you the royal blacksmith, and you'll make weapons and armor for my armies."

The blacksmith laughed, and said, "Very well my liege, you sound like you will be a very wise king."

The sword he forged was not a true sword, of course, for it was dull and brittle, and would break if it were used too roughly. But to the boy, it was the equal of any kingly weapon.

With his sword and his crown, he set off once more, leaving the village and following the road.

He came at last to a woman traveling on horseback.

"Good lady," he said, "I am to be a king, but first I must have a horse. If you give me yours, I will see you rewarded handsomely when I am recognized."

The woman laughed at him.

"And when will that be?" she asked.

"As soon as I have a steed, I imagine." the boy responded, earnestly.

"Well I'm sorry, but I will not give you my horse."

"Well," the boy said, "by any chance do you know where I might find someone more generous?"

The woman was annoyed at the little king, but she said, "I believe I saw a horse running free in the woods not far from here."

And she gave him directions to a dark place in the woods where she had seen such a horse. The boy thanked her with a kingly bow and she rode on, quickly forgetting the encounter.

The boy followed the traveler's directions, until he came to a very dark place in the woods.

He wore his crown, but he did not feel kingly. He carried his sword, but he did not feel brave.

He came to the side of a pond, and from the trees behind him emerged a fine horse.

"*And what brings you to my home?*" the horse asked. The boy was startled, for he hadn't expected that a horse could talk.

"I am to be a king," he said, earnestly. "I have a crown, and a sword, but I require a steed."

"*Do you?*" said the horse, revealing teeth that seemed to grow sharper and sharper.

"*Well As it just so happens, I am a horse, looking for a king!*"

"Really?" the boy asked.

"*Oh yes. I know of a whole kingdom suffering terribly. It needs a good strong king to rule it. Climb on my back and I will take you there.*"

The horse was grong closer and closer, without seeming to move, and its grin got wider and wider.

"I'm not sure." the boy said, "Now that you talk about ruling a kingdom, it seems like a lot of work. My crown is only felt and leather after all."

"*Oh no,*" the horse said, "*It won't be any trouble. It's a very small kingdom. Perfect for a king your size.*"

The boy had started backing up, but now his feet were in the pond.

"Does this kingdom have many enemies? Because my sword is very dull. It's not really a very good sword at all."

"*Oh, hardly any.*" The horse said, looming over the boy, taller and taller than the trees now. "*In fact,*" The horse said, "*There is only one problem plaguing my kingdom, and I'm certain you'd be perfect to resolve it.*"

The boy could see now that what he thought was fur was rather more like scales, and the hooves were looking more and more like claws.

He summoned all his kingly might, which wasn't much, and said, earnestly, "And what problem is that?"

"*Hunger.*" the dragon answered.

The little boy ran. He threw down the iron sword, and it splashed into the pond. He ran as fast as he could out of the dark part of the woods, never looking back, and his crown snagged on a branch, so he left it behind.

The sky was dark now. He ran down the road where there were no travelers. He ran past the smithy where the blacksmith was sleeping, and he ran past the hatmaker's shop that was closed. He never stopped until he reached his home.

He ran, crying into his fathers arms.

"Whats the matter, boy?" his father asked, "Weren't you able to find your crown, and your sword, and your steed? Aren't you a King yet?"

"Yes, father, I found a crown. It was a fine crown of gold. And I found the sword, it was given to me by a weaponsmith and was made of shining steel, sharp enough to cut stone."

"And what about the steed?" The father asked.

"Well, I found a steed, father, but it was a rather boring and plain looking animal, so I decided that perhaps being a king is not for me after all."

And so the boy became a farmer instead. when he was grown, and had children of his own, he never told them stories about kings, and crowns, and swords.

And he certainly didn't talk about noble steeds.