

KATE CRACKERNUTS



Once upon a time, there was a king who had a daughter named Anne. His first wife died, so he married another, who already had a daughter named Kate. The two girls loved each other even more than sisters, but the queen was jealous because the king's daughter was prettier than her own. She asked the henwife to give her a charm to spoil the looks of the king's daughter. The henwife told her to send the girl to her and to make sure that she didn't eat anything beforehand.

The next morning, bright and early, the queen sent Anne to the henwife, telling her to fetch some eggs. Anne went as she was told, but before she left, she grabbed a crust of bread from the pantry to eat along the way. When she came to the henwife's, the henwife told her to lift the lid off the pot that was bubbling on the fire. Anne did as she was told, but nothing happened. The henwife sent her home with the eggs. "Tell your stepmother to mind her pantry door," the henwife said.

Anne went home and told the queen what the henwife had said, so the queen knew that Anne had found something to eat before she left and the charm couldn't work. The next day the queen made sure to lock the pantry door, then sent her stepdaughter off to the henwife's, the same as before. But this morning a farmer gave Anne a handful of peas when she passed by him on the road, and again the charm didn't work.

The third morning, the queen went along with the girl to the henwife's and made sure she didn't eat so much as a crumb before they got there. This time, when Anne lifted the lid off the henwife's pot, her own pretty head fell off, and a sheep's head jumped out of the pot to take its place.

The queen took the king's daughter back to the castle, satisfied. But when Kate saw what had happened to Anne, it broke her heart. She wrapped a fine linen cloth around her sister's head and took her hand, and together they left the castle and set off to seek their fortunes.

They walked for days and they walked for weeks, farther than anyone can say, until at last they came to a king's castle. Kate knocked at the door and asked if she and her sister could pass the night there. It turned out that this king had a son who was wasting away from a mysterious illness. No one knew what his trouble was, but every night the prince grew weaker and weaker. The king had promised a bag of silver to anyone who could sit with his son till morning came and find out what was sickening him.

Right away, Kate said that she would sit with the prince that night. She hid herself behind the door, in a place where she could see the prince sleeping but he couldn't see her, and she waited. Until midnight all went well, but when the clock struck twelve, the prince rose, dressed himself, and slipped downstairs. Quiet as a mouse, Kate followed him.

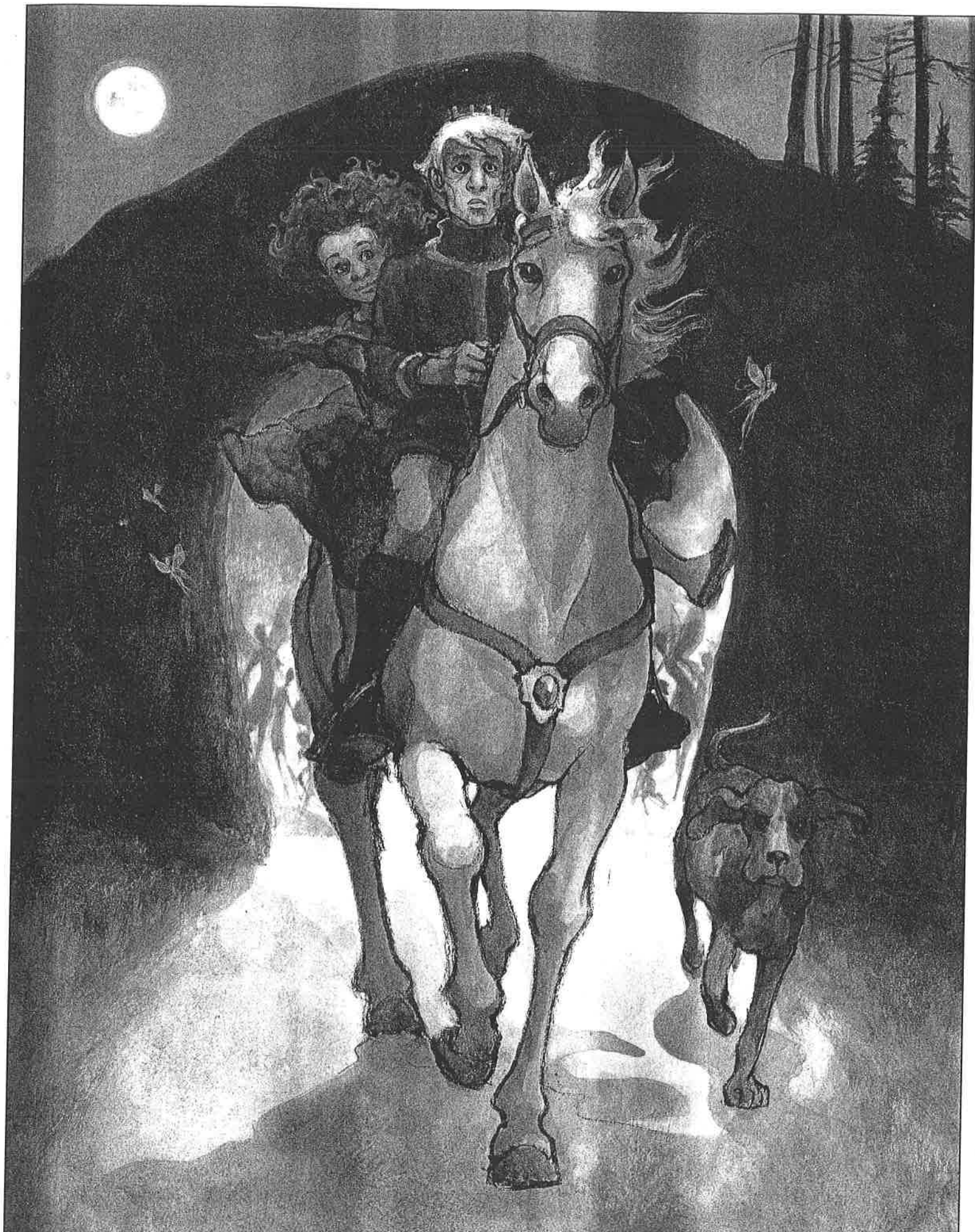
The prince went to the stable, saddled his horse, and called for his hound. As he leapt to the saddle, Kate leapt lightly up behind him — so lightly he didn't even notice she was there. Together they rode through the greenwood, and as they rode, Kate plucked nuts from the trees and filled her apron with them. They rode on and on until they came to a green hill. The prince drew up his horse and said, "Open, open, open, and let in the prince with his horse and his hound."

"And his lady behind him," added Kate very softly. A door appeared in the side of the green hill. Silently it swung open, and Kate and the prince passed through. They rode into a magnificent hall, lit bright as day by the fire of ten thousand candles. As soon as the prince came into the hall, many beautiful fairy women dressed in ball gowns of satin and velvet surrounded him and led him off to dance.

Unnoticed, Kate slid quietly into the shadows and seated herself by the door. There she watched the prince, who danced and danced until he could dance no more. Finally he fell to the floor with exhaustion, and the fairy women fanned him and gave him wine to drink, until he staggered to his feet again and continued dancing. So it went until at last the cock crowed to greet the dawn. Then the prince called for his horse. Kate jumped up lightly behind him again, and together they rode back through the greenwood. When the morning sun rose, the king and queen came in and found the prince asleep in his bed and Kate quietly cracking nuts by the fire.

Kate told them that the prince had had a good night. She agreed to sit up with him another night, but this time only if the king gave her a bag of gold.

The second night passed as the first. The prince woke up at midnight and rode away to the green hill, with Kate riding behind him, plucking nuts from the trees and putting



them in her apron. When he came into the great hall, the fairy women surrounded him as before and led him away to dance, while Kate hid herself by the door. From there she watched two little fairy babies, who were playing on the floor with a golden wand.

After a time, Kate heard some of the women talking. "If only Kate Crackernuts knew that three strokes of that wand would make her sick sister as pretty as she ever was," said one of the fairies to the others.

Kate waited until the fairy women went back to the dance. Then she began to roll her nuts across the floor toward the babies. The babies grew interested in the nuts. They forgot about playing with the wand and left it lying in the corner. Kate snatched it up and put it in her apron.

The cock crowed. The prince called for his horse and hound, and Kate leapt up behind him. Together they rode home to the castle, where the prince went back to bed. Kate ran right away to her sister's room and touched Anne's head three times with the fairy wand. The ugly sheep's head rolled right off, and Anne's pretty head reappeared in its place. So Kate went back to the prince's room and sat by the fire, cracking her nuts and eating them.

In the morning Kate told everyone that the prince had had a good night. She agreed to watch him a third night, but this time only if she could marry him. The king and queen agreed, and for the third time, Kate rode with the prince to the green hill, gathering nuts from the trees and putting them in her apron.

That night while the prince was dancing, Kate watched the fairy babies playing with a little birdie. By and by, she heard one of the fairy women say, "If only Kate Crackernuts knew that three bites of that birdie would make the prince well again."

Kate rolled all the nuts in her apron toward the fairy babies, and at last they forgot about the birdie and came to play with the nuts. Kate put the birdie in her pocket and waited for the prince until it was time to go back home.

When they got back to the castle, Kate plucked the birdie's feathers and cooked it over the fire. Soon the prince woke up and smelled the birdie cooking. "Oh," he said. "I wish I had a bite of that birdie!"

Kate gave him a bite, and as soon as he'd swallowed, some color came back into his cheeks. "If only I had another bite of that birdie!" the prince sighed again.

When Kate gave him a second bite, the prince sat right up in bed, and his eyes grew bright. "Oh, I do wish I had a third bite of that birdie," he said, strong and clear. So Kate gave him a third bite, and he rose, quite well, and dressed himself. When the king and queen came in that morning, they found Kate and the prince sitting happily by the fire, cracking nuts together.

So Kate married the prince, and her sister, Anne, married the prince's brother, and they all lived happily and died happily, and that's the end of the story of Kate Crackernuts.