

FOUR GALLANT SISTERS

by Eric A. Kimmel

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ONCE upon a time, four gallant sisters lived with their mother. On the day their mother died, the oldest sister gathered the others around and said to them, "Now we must make our own way in the world. Life is difficult for women alone. Let us therefore disguise ourselves as men and go forth to learn a trade. Then we can support ourselves and need not be dependent on anyone."

The four sisters cut off their hair, put away their dresses, and attired themselves in men's clothing. They kissed each other goodbye and set out into the wide world, promising to return in seven years.

The oldest sister apprenticed herself to a tailor. For seven years she studied the tailor's art. At the end of that time, the tailor gave her a parting gift: a needle that could sew anything, no matter how hard or soft, with a seam so fine that it was invisible.

The second sister apprenticed herself to a hunter. For seven years she roamed the fields and forests, learning the hunter's art. At the end of that time, her master also gave her a parting gift: a bow with arrows that never missed their mark.

The third sister fell in with a thief. She stayed with him for seven years and in that time became as clever a thief as ever lifted a purse. When her apprenticeship was over, her master gave her a parting gift, too: a magic belt that had the power to make her invisible.

As for the fourth sister, she traveled on until she came to a tall tower. A stargazer stood at the top, gazing at the sky through a telescope. "Where are you going, young gentleman?" he called down.

"I seek a trade to earn my fortune," the fourth sister replied.

"Destiny has brought you here," the stargazer said. "I will teach you the stargazer's art. You will be as clever a stargazer as ever looked on heaven."

The fourth sister remained in the stargazer's tower for seven years. At the end of that time, he gave her a parting gift as well: a telescope from which nothing was hidden.

The four gallant sisters had grown wise and skilled. The oldest was a master tailor, the second was a master hunter, the third was a master thief, and the fourth was a master stargazer. But when they returned home, they found that the roof of their old house had fallen in. Weeds and briars were growing on their mother's grave.

“There is nothing here for us,” said the oldest sister. “Where will we go now?”

The second sister said, “I have heard that the old king has died. Perhaps the young king would take us into his service.”

The sisters approved of this idea, for then they could stay together. So they traveled to the city, where they came before the young king and asked to be admitted into his service.

“Before I accept you as my servants, I must first see if you are as skilled as you claim to be.” The king turned to the stargazer. “A bronze weather vane stands atop my castle. A stork has built her nest on it. Quickly, tell me how many eggs are in it.”

The stargazer looked through her telescope. “There are five.”

“Can you bring them down without disturbing the mother bird?” the king asked the thief.

“I can.” The thief buckled the magic belt around her waist and, quick as a cat, climbed the castle walls and towers until she reached the weather vane. She stole the eggs from under the mother bird without ruffling a feather, and brought them down without cracking one. The king took the eggs and set them on a table; one egg in each corner, with the fifth one in the middle. Then he said to the hunter, “Can you split these eggs with one shot?”

“I can.” The hunter aimed her bow and split all the eggs neatly in two with a single arrow.

“Now, can you sew them back together again?” the king asked the tailor. The tailor took her needle and sewed up each egg with an invisible seam. The thief carried them back to the nest. When the baby storks hatched a few days later, each one had a thin red line around its body, for the tailor had used a red thread.

The king’s satisfaction knew no bounds. He accepted the four gallant sisters as his servingmen. But the king’s mother was not nearly so pleased.

“They are women, not men,” she told her son.

“I do not believe you. How could mere women possess such skill?”

“I will prove it. Set a table with meat and cheese. Then invite your servants to eat. If they fill their own plates, they are men. But if they serve each other first, they are women.”

The king arranged for the test. However, the third sister, the master thief, sensed something amiss. “Fill your own plates,” she warned her sisters. They did so, then sat down to eat. “You see, they are men,” the king told his mother.

“They are not men, but they are clever,” the old woman said. She arranged a second test. She scattered ashes on the floor. If the four servants walked through them, paying no attention, they were men. But if they paused to sweep them up, they were women.

“Ignore the ashes,” the master thief warned her sisters. They did so, tracking soot all over the carpet. “They are obviously men,” the king said.

“They are women,” his mother insisted. “One day you will see I am right.”

But the king had no time for further tests. A messenger arrived with dreadful news. The beautiful princess, the young king’s promised bride, and her four brothers had been kidnapped on their way to the castle for the wedding. A fiery dragon had swooped down from the sky, plucked them from the middle of the procession, and flown away—no one knew where!

“Can you find them?” the distraught king asked the stargazer.

The stargazer looked through her telescope. “I see them. The dragon has taken them to a rocky island in the middle of the sea. Give us a ship and we will rescue them.”

The king gave the four gallant sisters a sailing ship, and they sailed for seven days upon the sea. Then the stargazer said, “We are nearing the island. I see the dragon asleep. The princess and her four brothers lie helpless in its coils.”

The hunter raised her bow, then lowered it. “I cannot shoot the dragon for fear of injuring them.”

“I will steal them away,” the thief said as she buckled on her magic belt. She took the ship’s boat and rowed to the island. There she deftly plucked the princess and her four brothers from the dragon’s grasp. Together, with all possible speed, they rowed back to the ship.

The dragon awoke with a roar. Spewing blasts of fire and smoke, it spread its wings and launched itself after the rescuers. The hunter waited until the last moment, then drew her bow. The arrow struck the monster through the heart, and the dragon dropped into the sea, raising a giant wave that smashed the ship to pieces. All would have been lost had it not been for the tailor, who sewed the ship’s fragments together so fast and so cleverly that not one drop of water seeped in between them. The four gallant sisters hoisted sail and set course for home.

The king greeted them with joy. “My gallant servingmen have delivered my bride!”

“They are not men, but women,” his mother insisted.

“We wish they were women. We would marry them at once,” said the princess’s four brothers.

“Which one would you marry?” the princess asked. Her brothers answered:

“I would marry the stargazer, who discovered the island.”

“I would marry the thief, who freed us from the dragon.”

“I would marry the hunter, who slew the dragon.”

“And I would marry the tailor, who sewed up the ship and saved us from drowning.”

“You have chosen your brides, if they will have you,” the princess said.

“We will!” the four gallant sisters exclaimed.

The king was astonished. “How did you know they were women?” he asked the princess.

“It was obvious,” she replied. “Who but women would undertake such trials without asking for a reward.”

Thus the young king married the princess, and the four gallant sisters married her brothers. And they all lived together happily ever after. But happiest of all was the king’s mother.

For she had been right all along.