

LITTLE BEEKEEPER

By Vivian French

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ONCE in the time of wizards there was a wizard who had three sons and one daughter. The daughter was the youngest, and no one thought very much about her. All day long she washed the clothes and cooked the meals and cleaned the house, and every evening she ran up to the apple orchard to talk to the bees in their hives. When she came back to the house she sat and stitched and sewed in a corner of the kitchen and said almost nothing at all. Her brothers called her Little Beekeeper, and the wizard fell into the habit of doing the same.

The wizard's sons were fine and strong and handsome, but they hadn't an ounce of wizardry among them. They could cut down a tree with one swing of an axe, but they couldn't send thunderbolts hurling across the sky. They could carry enough logs on one shoulder to keep a grandmother warm all winter, but they couldn't turn the smallest prince into a toad. They could split branches into matchsticks with one hand tied behind their back, but they couldn't see faraway places in a bowl of magic water—all they could see was their own reflections, and very good-looking they thought themselves.

"Oh, dearie, dearie me!" said the wizard, and he looked at his three fine sons in despair. "Whatever will you do in life? I'm a wizard, and my father was a wizard...and I don't know anything about anything else!" And he went up into his tall tower room to think. Little Beekeeper ran to the apple orchard where the beehives were, and whispered and whispered at the door of each hive:

*"My brothers are so strong and tall,
My father can't see me at all.
Bees, dear bees, I beg of you,
Tell me now what I must do!"*

“Zzzzz! Zzzzz! Zzzzz!” buzzed the bees, and Little Beekeeper nodded and ran back home. She picked up her broom and began sweeping the hallway.

The wizard sat in his tower room with his head in his hands. He had made enchantments and experiments and magic of every kind; he was worn out by mixing and stirring and drawing secret signs at midnight in the sand of the forest floor. Nothing had worked; his three sons remained fine and strong and handsome, but nothing more.

The wizard sighed. “I’m growing old, and my magic is fading away. There’s nothing more that I can do. They must go out into the world and seek their fortunes.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! There was a loud knocking. The wizard jumped up and hurried down the stairs. He pushed past Little Beekeeper and opened the door. Outside was a messenger dressed all in black, and when he saw the wizard he bowed low and handed him a letter.

“From the palace,” he said, “to every household in the land.”

Little Beekeeper stopped sweeping and listened.

The wizard took the letter eagerly, pulled his spectacles from his pocket and began to read.

*Whosoever can find their way to the Royal Castle
and fill the Great Hall
COMPLETELY AND ENTIRELY
with whatsoever they pick and choose, leaving no
nook or chink or cranny unfilled, shall rule the kingdom for
ever and a day. BEWARE—those who fail will be
thrown into the Deepest Darkest Dungeon*

“Dearie, dearie me,” he said to himself as he read. “The queen growing old and feeble? Dear, dear. And no prince or princess to rule the kingdom afterwards! Goodness gracious. And a competition—a competition to find a new king or queen from among the people...Well, well, well! Now, let me see...”

The wizard rubbed his hands together. “My boys are fine and strong and handsome. They could never fail.” He folded up the letter and put it in his pocket as he

went back up the stairs. Little Beekeeper went on sweeping the hallway, and she sang as she swept.

“Silence!” shouted the wizard from his tower room. Little Beekeeper stopped singing, but she smiled as she began to dust and polish.

When the three sons came rolling back from their game of skittles, the wizard told them about the competition.

“You are all strong and can work hard,” he said. “Surely one of you can fill the queen’s hall and become king of all the land? And then your brothers will be princes, and you will all live happily ever after.”

Little Beekeeper listened as she stitched away at a pile of holey socks but she said nothing. Her three brothers laughed and joked and banged each other on the back.

“No one is as strong as us!” they boasted. “One of us will become king before the week is out!” Then they began to argue about which of them should go first, and what they would do as soon as they were made king. They argued so loudly and for so long that at last the wizard called up all his strength and sent a thunderbolt to silence them.

“I know!” shouted the youngest son as he picked himself up from the floor. “We’ll ask Little Beekeeper who should go first!” And he pointed to his sister, sitting and sewing in her corner.

“She knows nothing about anything!” said the middle son. “Why, she’s good for nothing but looking after the bees!”

“Then let her ask the bees which of us should go first!” said the oldest son, and he pulled Little Beekeeper out of her corner and pushed her out of the door. Up to the apple orchard she ran, and whispered and whispered at the door of each hive:

*“Bees, dear bees, I beg of you,
Tell me now what I should do!”*

“Zzzzz! Zzzzz! Zzzzz!” buzzed the bees. Little Beekeeper nodded. Then she hurried back to the kitchen.

“Well?” shouted her brothers. Little Beekeeper pointed at the oldest.

“I said she was good for nothing,” grumbled the middle brother.

“She’s good for nothing at all,” complained the youngest, but the oldest was already pulling on his coat.

The wizard’s oldest son marched along the road to the queen’s castle. As he went he swung his axe round and round his head and thought about how he would soon be king.

“I shall play skittles every day,” he said to himself, “and my skittles will be made of silver.” And he laughed as he strode up the steps to the castle door and banged on the knocker as loudly as he could.

The door was opened by a little old woman dressed all in black.

The oldest son looked her up and down. “When I live here,” he announced, “I shall have soldiers dressed in red and purple to answer the door.” And he pushed past the old woman and stared rudely about him.

“I’ve come to be king, old leatherface,” he said. “Show me the hall, and I’ll fill it!”

The old woman smiled, and her little black eyes glittered and shone.

“Come this way, my young and foolish boy,” she said, and she led the oldest son along a dark and winding corridor. At the end she threw open a heavy door studded with iron nails. The oldest son strode through, and then stopped. He was standing in the most enormous hall he had ever seen. It was truly vast. The soaring arched roof rose up and up and up above the dirty and flaking walls, and the blackened floor stretched away and away in front of him. The tall windows were coated with dust and laced with spiders’ webs, and the light that came in was dim and grey.

“Oh,” said the oldest son, looking all about him. “Ah.”

“You have three days and three nights,” said the old woman. “You may come and you may go for those three days and nights, but if at the end the great hall is not filled completely and entirely, every nook and chink and cranny, then you will be thrown into the deepest dungeon for ever and ever and ever.” And she turned round and shuffled away.

The oldest son shook himself. “Well,” he said, “I’d be better beginning than standing here and staring. After all, I can cut down a tree with one swing of my axe. I’ll soon have this hall filled completely and entirely.” He rushed out of the hall and back the way he had come. He burst out of the castle door, and as he hurried into the forest

he was already swinging his axe above his head. He chose the tallest tree and felled it with one blow.

“H’mph,” he said to himself as he hauled and heaved the tree-trunk round the corners of the corridor. “When I am king I’ll have this castle pulled right down and build myself a marvelous and magnificent palace.” And he pulled the tree into the hall and went back for another, and another, and another.

At the end of the three days and nights the oldest son had filled the great hall. Tree-trunks were heaped high and branches and twigs piled above them, up to the arches of the roof. Leaves littered the floor. The oldest son lay, puffing and panting, in the doorway.

The old woman came shuffling up.

“Well, well, well,” she said. “So you think you have filled the hall completely and entirely?”

“That I have, old bag and baggage,” said the oldest son. “Now, give me my crown!”

“Not so fast,” said the old woman, and she clapped her hands. A flock of white pigeons came fluttering all around her, cooing and clucking and murmuring.

“Fly, my little dears!” the old woman told them. “Fly! Find me any nooks and chinks and crannies!”

The pigeons flapped their wings and rose up into the air like a scattering of white petals. They flew in and out of the tree-trunks, they perched among the branches, they paddled up and down among the leaves.

“Ho, ho, ho!” The old woman cackled delightedly. “No crown for you, my fine and foolish fellow!” And she clapped her hands a second time. The pigeons swooped down and touched her cheek with their soft wings, and then fluttered away. As they left the hall there was the crunch of marching feet. Six silver soldiers came wheeling round from the corridor. They seized the oldest son as if he weighed less than a feather, and although he struggled and shouted they carried him off and away down to the deepest dungeon in the castle.

As the heavy wooden door swung shut there was a flash and a bang. A wisp of purple smoke floated up. The oldest son felt himself shrinking and shrinking, and his skin wrinkled and turned greenish yellowish brown. He tried to shout for help.

“Croak! Croak! Croak!” was all he could say. “Croak! Croak! Croak!”

No one answered, and he was left with a heap of wet hay to sleep under and a crust of bread to eat,

The old wizard, the two remaining brothers and Little Beekeeper waited and waited for the oldest son to come marching home in triumph. At last the wizard shook his head and went to try his spells over a bowl of magic water. Abracadabra! There was the deepest darkest dungeon of the castle, and there was the oldest son’s coat hanging on a rusty nail. Fsss-sss-ss! The picture clouded over.

“Oh, dear me,” said the wizard. “My poor, poor boy! Will we ever see him again?”

The second brother snorted. “Serves him right. Now it’s my turn to go. I’ll be crowned king before the end of the week!” He pulled on his hat, snatched up his axe and set out along the road, whistling and singing as he went.

“When I am king,” he said to himself, “I shall play skittles every day, and my skittles will be made of solid gold.”

The second son knocked on the castle door, and the old woman dressed all in black opened it.

“Well!” said the second son, staring at her. “When I am king the door will be opened by a string of servants, all dressed in scarlet silks and satins. Show me the great hall, old raggletaggle. I have come to be made king!”

The old woman smiled, and her little black eyes glittered and shone.

“Come with me,” she said, “my young and foolish boy,” and she led him along the winding passage to the great hall.

The hall was empty and echoing. The second son looked all around him, his eyes popping wide with amazement.

“You have three days and three nights,” said the old woman. “You may come and you may go for those three days and nights, but if at the end the great hall is not filled completely and entirely, every nook and chink and cranny, then you will be thrown into

the deepest dungeon for ever and ever and ever.” And she turned round and shuffled away.

The second son rubbed his head. “I’d best get busy,” he said to himself, and he shouldered his axe and hurried outside. At the edge of the forest he stopped. In front of him was a mighty heap of tree-trunks and branches and twigs and leaves, piled high and seeming to reach almost to the sky.

“This looks like my brother’s work,” said the second son, “and very handy it will be!” And he began to chop the tree-trunks and branches into logs. When he had built a stack he swung them onto his shoulder and carried them into the great hall. In two days and nights he had used up all the wood his brother had cut, and he hastily cut more and more and more from the forest trees. At the end of three days and nights the great hall was filled to the very rafters, and the second brother lay puffing and panting in the doorway.

The old woman came shuffling up.

“Well, well, well,” she said. “So you think you have filled the hall completely and entirely?”

“Can’t you see that I have, old tortoise?” said the second son. “Bring me my crown!”

“Not so fast,” said the old woman, and she clapped her hands. A drift of butterflies came floating down around her, their wings shining in the dim and dusty air.

“Go, my pretties!” The old woman waved them towards the logs. “See if you can find me any nooks and chinks and crannies!”

The butterflies flew up and up and up. They flittered in and out between the logs, and they settled and opened and closed their bright wings in every space.

“Ho, ho, ho!” The old woman shook with laughter. “No crown for you, my fine and foolish fellow!” And again she clapped her hands. The butterflies drifted away, brushing her cheeks with their painted wings as they went. The six silver soldiers came marching down the corridor. The second son found himself picked up as if he weighed nothing at all. In no time he was bundled into the deepest darkest dungeon.

As the heavy wooden door swung shut there was a flash and a bang. A wisp of orange smoke floated up. The second son felt himself shrinking and shrinking, and his skin wrinkled and turned greenish yellowish brown.

“Croak! Croak!” said a large fat toad in the corner.

The second son looked up. “Croak,” he said, and he hopped across to steal the crust of bread.

The old wizard, the third son and Little Beekeeper waited and waited for the second son to come marching home in triumph. At last the wizard sighed and went to look in his bowl of magic water. The water was misty and cloudy, and the wizard groaned.

“My magic is all used up!” he said, but as he muttered spell after spell the water slowly cleared. Abracadabra! There was the oldest son’s coat still hanging on the dungeon wall, and there beside it was the second son’s hat.

“Poor, poor boys,” said the wizard sadly.

“My turn now!” said the youngest son. “I’m sure to be made king! I’m the finest, the strongest, the handsomest of us all!” And he tucked his axe into his belt and set off along the road, humming cheerfully.

“When I’m king,” he said to himself, “I shall play skittles all day with a ball made of diamonds and rubies!”

The youngest son knocked so hard on the castle door that sparks flew in the air.

“You’ll have to be off, old brittlebones,” he told the old woman in black. “I’m to be king here, and I’ll have knights in golden armour to open the door for me. Now, take me to the hall!”

The old woman led the youngest son down the long winding corridor. She smiled as she walked in front of him, and her little black eyes glittered and shone.

“You have three days and three nights,” she told him. “You may come and you may go for those three days and nights, but if at the end the great hall is not filled completely and entirely, every nook and chink and cranny, then you will be thrown into the deepest dungeon for ever and ever and ever.” And she turned round and shuffled away.

The youngest son hardly listened. He was pacing out the length and the width of the floor and squinting up into the dusty arched roof.

“H’mph!” he said. “It’ll be hard work, but it can be done!” And when he found the enormous heap of logs at the edge of the forest he nodded. “Just what I need!” he said, and set to work splitting them into the finest of matchsticks.

As the three days and nights went by, the youngest son worked faster and faster. He ran to and fro filling the hall with armfuls of matchsticks. At the last minute he pushed the final sliver of wood into place.

“Not a chink or a nook or a cranny that isn’t filled!” he gasped, and fell down in the doorway puffing and panting.

“We’ll see about that,” said the old woman as she shuffled up beside him. “We’ll see!” and she clapped her hands.

A black wave of tiny ants came flooding down the corridor. The old woman nodded to them

“My tiny ones, creep and climb and crawl! Find all the nooks and chinks and crannies!”

The ants scattered in among the matchstick slivers of wood. They crept and they climbed and they crawled in among the nooks and the chinks and the crannies, and the old woman rocked with laughter.

“Ho, ho, ho! No crown for you, my fine and foolish fellow!” And she clapped her hands together until all the ants had crawled back through the wooden matchsticks and were gathered at her feet. They swirled around her, and then scurried away as the six silver soldiers came marching up the corridor.

As the heavy wooden door swung shut on the youngest son there was the brightest flash of all. A cloud of green smoke floated up, and the youngest son coughed as he felt himself shrinking and shrinking.

“Croak! Croak! Croak!” said the two fat toads in the corner, and they watched as the youngest son’s skin wrinkled and turned greenish yellowish brown. The youngest son tried to cough again, but he could only croak. He sat and glared angrily at the two fat toads, and they glared back. On the dungeon wall the youngest son’s belt hung beside the coat and the hat.

The old wizard and Little Beekeeper waited and waited for the youngest son to come marching home in triumph. The wizard peered into his bowl of magic water, but it was green and weedy and he could see nothing at all.

“My poor, poor boys,” he said, and he sighed heavily. “Will I ever see them again?”

Little Beekeeper stood up. “Now, Father,” she said, “it is my turn to go to the castle.”

“You?” said the wizard. “What can you do?” And he went up into his tall tower room to stare sadly out over the forest.

Little Beekeeper smiled, but she said nothing. She picked up a plate, a spoon and a basket and went out to the apple orchard. When she came back the plate was heaped with honeycomb, and the basket was full of beeswax. She covered the honey with a cloth, and for the rest of the day she cleaned and softened and smoothed the wax. When the evening star began to climb the pale silver sky she pulled three long hairs from her head, and twisted and plaited them together. As the moon followed the star up and up into the night Little Beekeeper spun the soft yellow wax round and round and round the twist of hair, until by the time the moon sank down once more at the other end of night she had made a tall and golden candle.

As the sun rose, Little Beekeeper knocked on her father’s door.

“Father,” she said, “I’ve come to say goodbye.”

The wizard stroked his beard. “Don’t go, Little Beekeeper,” he said. “Who will wash the clothes and cook the meals and clean the house? Don’t go.”

Little Beekeeper shook her head. “The bees are waiting to show me the way.” She ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. She picked up the plate of honeycomb and carefully wrapped the tall golden candle in her shawl. Outside the door the bees were buzzing and humming in a quivering cloud, and as Little Beekeeper stepped out they flew up into the air and led her away down the path through the forest.

When Little Beekeeper reached the castle she climbed slowly up the steps and knocked gently at the door. The bees flew high in the air as the old woman dressed all in black came out. Little Beekeeper curtsied down to the ground, and held out the plate of honey.

“Madam,” she said, “I bring you a present.” The old woman smiled, and her eyes were bright and shining.

“Thank you, my child,” she said. “Will you rest a little after your journey?”

Little Beekeeper curtsied again. “If you please, I should like to see the great hall.”

The old woman took Little Beekeeper by the hand and led her down the long winding corridor into the vast and empty cavern of the hall.

“You have three days and three nights, my dear You may come and you may go for those three days and nights, but if at the end the great hall is not filled completely and entirely, every nook and chink and cranny, then you will be thrown into the deepest dungeon for ever and ever and ever But, dear child, why don’t you run away home and be safe for ever and a day?”

Little Beekeeper touched her arm gently. “Thank you,” she said, “but I must stay.”

The old woman nodded, and shuffled away,

As soon as the old woman had gone, Little Beekeeper looked all around her. She saw the cobwebs and the flaking walls and the dim grey light. Then she sat down on the blackened and dirty floor in the very centre of the hall, her shawl in her lap. There she sat, for three days and three nights. Every night at midnight the old woman came and asked if there was anything she wished for, but Little Beekeeper only smiled and shook her head.

At midnight on the third night the castle bell tolled twelve long strokes. There was no glimmer of light coming through the tall dusty windows, and the great hall was as black as night’s own shadow. Little Beekeeper stirred and stood up. She unwrapped the tall golden candle and placed it on the floor. She took a tinderbox from her pocket, struck a spark and lit the candle. The flame flickered for a moment and then burnt straight and tall and golden. Light welled up, and the darkness fled away. The whole of the great hall glowed warm and yellow like molten gold.

Little Beekeeper walked slowly to the iron studded door and opened it. The old woman was standing on the other side. As she saw the great hall filled with light, she cried out and clapped her hands.

At once a swarm of bees came buzzing and humming and bumbling all about her.

“Fly, fly, my precious ones,” said the old woman “Fly and search the great hall. See if it is filled completely and entirely.”

The bees flew up and around the hall. They flew this way and that, they flew high and they flew low, but wherever they flew the golden light of Little Beekeeper's candle shone.

"Zzzzz! Zzzzz! Zzzzz!" buzzed the bees, and they circled round Little Beekeeper's head.

"Every nook and chink and cranny is full of light," said the old woman. "At last the great hall is filled, completely and entirely." And she clapped her hands one last time.

Six silver soldiers came marching, marching down the long winding corridor. They were carrying cloaks of silk, satin, and velvet, and a crown of silver and gold glittering with diamonds and rubies. The old woman swung one cloak round her own shoulders, and the other she wrapped around Little Beekeeper. She took the crown, and placed it on Little Beekeeper's head.

"Be queen, my dear," she said, "and be happy."

There was a roaring of trumpets and a crashing of drums. Suddenly the great hall was filled with people, all cheering for their new queen. The floor was polished silver, and the walls were shining gold, and diamonds twinkled in the glittering arches of the roof. At the end of the hall was a golden throne studded with rubies, and the old queen took Little Beekeeper by the hand and led her to her rightful place.

And what happened then? What of the wizard and the three brothers?

The feasting and rejoicing went on for days and days and days, but the brothers and the wizard knew nothing about it. At last a messenger arrived at the wizard's house, carefully carrying a bowl of water. "

A gift from the queen, sire," he said.

The wizard took the bowl and peered into it. He saw a picture in its clear depths, a picture of Little Beekeeper dressed in royal robes and wearing a gold and silver crown. He saw her raise her hand and send a thunderbolt flashing up and up into the roof of the great hall. It exploded with a crash, and purple and orange and green stars scattered and flew in every direction.

The wizard jumped up in amazement and upset the bowl of magic water.

In the deep dark dungeon the three toads leapt into the air with a yell. Stars lit up the darkness and the door to the dungeon swung wide open. Croaking loudly, the three fat toads hopped out and off and away down the forest path.

One autumn day, the six silver soldiers brought the wizard a thousand sacks of matchsticks. He never knew who sent them, but he burnt them on his fire and they kept him warm all winter. He often sat staring into the flames, wondering what had become of his three fine sons. Sometimes he sat there all night long while the matchsticks crackled and burned and glowed. It was difficult for him to sleep. Every night it was the same—three loud toads croaking and croaking and croaking all night long outside his window...