

Stith Thompson - The Folktale - p 81-82

D. MARVELOUS SKILL

It is not always easy to tell, in tales of the marvelous, whether we are dealing with magic or with mere exaggerations of actual qualities. Particularly confusing in this respect is a small group of stories of men who are endowed with extraordinary skills.⁽¹⁶⁾ The first of these tales, *The Four Skillful Brothers* (Type 653), is by far the best known. The father of the four brothers sends them away to learn skillful trades. When they return home he puts their skills to a test and bids them display their accomplishments. The star-gazer sees how many eggs are in a bird's nest on a distant tree; the thief steals the eggs; the huntsman shoots them, although they are scattered about upon a table. Finally, the tailor sews them up so that they can be returned to the nest: only a red line is around the necks of the birds when they are hatched. This is only a preliminary test for the brothers, who now hear of a princess who is offered in marriage to her rescuer. The astronomer finds her on a rock in a distant sea; the thief steals her; the huntsman shoots the dragon guardian; and the tailor sews together the shattered planks on the boat on which they are returning.

This dragon rescue story with its four rescuers does not lead to the neat conclusion possible with a single rescuer. Each of the brothers claims that he played the most important role in the rescue and should receive the princess. The versions offer three possible solutions of the quandary. The tale may be left with the dispute still unsettled. Or it may be proposed that she be divided, and in this manner, reminiscent of King Solomon, the true lover is discovered. A third solution is to give the brothers half the kingdom instead of the princess.

The tale has a long literary history, with its origin apparently in India, where it is told in the *Vetālanpancavimçati*, or *Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire*. Later stages are represented by the Mongolian *Siddhi Kür*, the Persian *Tuti-Nameh*, and an Italian novella of Morlini. From the sixteenth century down it has appeared frequently in literature, notably in the famous tale collections of Straparola and Basile. But though its literary origin seems clearly established, the tale has been taken over into the oral folklore of a good part of the world. It is well represented in every part of Europe and is unusually popular in Asia, where it is known from the Mediterranean to Japan and from India to Malaysia, Farther India, and Indonesia. It is scattered over much of Africa and has been carried, apparently by Negroes, to North America.

On the other hand, it has not been reported on the American continent from American Indian, French, Spanish, or English tradition. We may well expect at some time to hear of the tale from Spanish America, since three versions are known in Spain.

(16). We have already encountered a series of these men in the story of The Extraordinary Companions (Type 513).