The Riddle

There was once a man who had two sons. When they grew up and came of age, the elder was to have the farm, and the younger a share of the inheritance. But he does not want to remain at home any longer and therefore requests to be allowed to go out into the world and try his fortune. He is granted permission to do so, and his father gives him ten florins for the journey and one of the best horses at the farm, with riding gear and all other accessories. When he now bids farewell to his parents, they tell him:

neither to enter any inn
nor pass by any church

and that if he saw anyone in need and could help that person, he must not fail to do so, even though it cost him his last penny. He promised this and then set off into the world.

As he was passing a church one Sunday, there was a large crowd of people in the graveyard, and they were not getting on well with each other, each was abusing and scolding worse than the next. So he tethered his horse and went in. After having stood watching them for a while, he asked them why they were making such a row. They were standing by an open grave, and there was a dead man lying in the grave.

‘Oh,’ they cried out all at once, ‘there the scoundrel lies, he owes me such a lot of money,’ one of them said. ‘And he owes me a great deal,’ said another. And the end of the matter was that no one was prepared to cast earth on him, because he had not paid them his debts.

‘It’s quite terrible,’ the youth says, ‘that he cannot be buried because of that. Does he owe people so much that it cannot be paid?’ Then they all started to confer with each other, and finally worked out that the total sum was ten florins. So he answers and says: ‘In that case there’s nothing to worry about, I will pay his debts, and are you then willing to do him the honour of having earth cast on him?’ Upon which he takes out his purse and gives them the ten florins. They are a bit taken aback by this, but their greed was great, so they accept the money and cast earth on the dead man. After that, they can divide the money as they see fit – it was not the youth’s business.

After he has heard and seen this, he enters the church and listens to God’s word, and when he comes out again, he takes his horse and rides further along the road.

Shortly afterwards, a stumping boy comes up to him and greets him. ‘What sort of a fellow are you and where are you off to?’ The youth thought that he was very well dressed, although he was so impertinent, and finally he replies: ‘I’m just an ordinary chap, I want to take a look at the world.’

‘That’s a lucky coincidence,’ the boy says, ‘so do I – we can do so together.’

‘And how can we do that? I’m on a horse and you are on foot.’

‘That’s no problem, we can take turns to ride.’

So they set out together, and keep on along the road until evening falls. They then talk to each other about finding somewhere to spend the night. But at that moment they catch sight of a light, and when they move towards it they finally come to an inn that lies deep in a forest. ‘Excellent,’ the boy says, but the youth is unwilling to enter in. Finally, he allows himself to be persuaded, and they eat an evening meal and are shown into a large guestroom where there are two beds. The hostess follows them up and shows them which bed they are to lie in; for her two sons also lay in there, and they were to lie in the other bed when they came home,’ she said.

When the woman had gone, the boy said: ‘Hey, let’s lie in that one.’

‘Oh no,’ the youth says, ‘it’s nice, decent people we are staying with, and the sons will be unhappy when they come home if they find us in their bed.’ But the boy says: ‘Oh yes, that’s the
bed for us; and he got what he wanted, although the youth was unhappy about it and kept on saying that they ought to have done as the woman had said.

An hour later the two sons come home, and enter the room. ‘Just look, there’s a strange thing,’ one of them says, ‘mother has given them our bed.’ ‘It doesn’t matter,’ the brother says, ‘we can take the other one.’

Around midnight the woman comes in with an axe in her hand. And she goes straight over to the strangers’ bed and strikes both her sons with the axe, first she thwacks off the head of one of them and then the other, and it was all done in a trice. The boy isn’t asleep and when she has gone again, he nudges the youth so that he wakes up and the boy says: ‘Did you notice what just happened?’ – No, he leaps up and lights a candle. ‘That’s the little number she was going to play on us,’ the boy says, ‘weren’t we lucky to escape?’

‘Oh, would you call that playing a little number? It’s so sad they lost their lives because we took their bed.’

‘Perhaps you think it would be playing a little number if she’d chopped off both our heads,’ the boy says, ‘it was a good thing it turned out the way it did.’

But the youth keeps on saying it was so sad, and was extremely crestfallen. ‘What are we going to do now?’ he says, ‘for when she comes again early tomorrow, things will look bad for us.’

‘Well, can you be so quiet and calm that you can make it out to your horse,’ the boy says, ‘and take it without them noticing, we’ll be able to fool them, don’t worry yourself about me, I’ll make it on my own. But when you have mounted your horse,’ he says, ‘ride up onto the stone bridge in front of the door and call out: Goodbye, hostess, and thank you for your fine lodging! If she should get it into her head to offer you something, don’t accept it, but ride away as quickly as you can.’

He did as suggested. When the woman noticed they were still alive, which was all wrong, she comes out and asks if they wouldn’t like to have a sip of wine from a horn. The youth says no thank you, now they have to be leaving and he rides off, but she ran so fast after him that she managed to spill out what was in the horn onto the horse.

Shortly afterwards it fell down, by which time the boy had arrived on the scene. And he says: ‘Nothing but a little number of hers. Now she can go home with nothing to show for it.’

‘Oh, good heavens, just a little number you say?’ the youth says, ‘I’ve just lost my good horse.’

‘Well, that doesn’t matter, since both of us are now on foot, and it’s easier to accompany each other now.’ But the youth nonetheless grieved for his horse, and started to take all its riding gear off.

‘What do you want with that?’ the boy says.

‘Oh, I thought I’d take it with me, since my father gave it to me, and perhaps we can sell it and get a little money for it, for I’ve got no money now.’

‘Well, we’ve plenty of food here, anyway,’ the boy said. But he feared that the horse might come back to life again, so he thrusts his knife into it and slits it open, so that its guts all fall out. They are standing there for a moment when twelve crows fly down and start to peck at the horse. When they had eaten their fill, they immediately dropped down dead. ‘We’ll take them,’ the boy says, ‘have you got a handkerchief in your pocket?’ He did indeed have one, but he would much prefer to have the riding gear than such dead crows. ‘Maybe we can play a little number with them later,’ the boy says, and immediately starts to thread them onto the handkerchief.

They then quietly make off again. They don’t think about an inn before it is evening, and then they enter a forest once more. There they are lucky enough to eventually catch sight of a light, which they aim for. Then they come to a house, but it is completely empty. ‘Suits us fine,’ the boy says, ‘this is a robbers’ den, and they’re sure to come home soon. We’ll pretend you are a fine huntsman and I am your cook, and then they will offer us shelter for the night: I know for sure that
the robbers will want to have something warm inside them when they have been out stealing the whole day.’

The robbers come home a little later. There were twelve of them all told. They start to ask what the two of them are. ‘Oh,’ the boy says, ‘we’re the same sort of people you are, we’ve got lost and would like to stay here until morning. By the way, my master is a fine huntsman, and I am his cook.’ When they hear this, they gladly offer them shelter, they have the best professions imaginable, they said, for one of them could shoot and the other prepare the game.

The next morning the robbers set out in good spirits, saying to each other: ‘Now we can count on a good hot meal when we come back,’ and their mouths watered at the thought of the roasted birds in store for them that same evening. Then the youth went out to shoot, and he soon managed to shoot two or three birds. The boy laid a fine table for the twelve, and when the crows have been roasted, he gets the small birds ready and roasts them separately. When night came, the robbers returned, and immediately they could smell the food and were as pleased as can be. The boy places the food on the table, and each of the robbers can take one of the birds. ‘Haven’t you anything for yourselves?’ they ask. Oh yes, they had a couple of small birds.

When the robbers had sat down, the two others take a seat at the bottom end of the table. Then the boy speaks up and says that he would like them to adopt the same custom he had learnt where he trained to be a cook. They were to put the first mouthful into their mouths at the same time, and all swallow at the same time, after which they could eat as they pleased as long as there was anything left. They had no objection to this – that was how they would do it.

‘Now into our mouths,’ he says, and they were of course so hungry and each of them took a good-sized piece, but before any of the robbers had finished chewing, they all dropped down. There nothing left alive in the house except the boy and the youth.

‘That was a good little number we played, wasn’t it?’ the boy said.

‘Oh, good heavens,’ the youth says, ‘it’s a sorry sight with all those dead bodies. I’m beginning to regret I teamed up with you, for you seem to find it great fun when things go wrong!’

‘Do you mean to say you think their lives were better than ours? They’ve killed so many people, and if we had let them go on living, we would have been at the receiving end.’ When they had eaten, they went to bed, and left the others sitting there at table as long as they felt like that.

The next morning they took a look round the robbers’ den. They entered one room and then another, and there were clothes and lots of money and provisions and all sorts of things. But now they had agreed with each other that when their journey together came to an end, they would divide things equally between them and end up as rich as each other. Now the youth wanted to take both gold and silver with him, but the boy said no, ‘we don’t want to lug that around with us, but we’ll take some provisions – they can come in useful on our journey.’

Then they set off again and, as before, don’t think about anything until evening comes and they need to find a place to shelter for the night. They have now reached a long valley, and it was a very solitary place. They wander around for a long time until they find a building – and it turns out to be an old church. There was no where else where they could find shelter, and the boy says: ‘Let’s go in, it’s better indoors than outdoors.’

‘No,’ the youth says, ‘I have never dared enter a church at night, and I don’t dare do so now either.’

‘There’s no need to be afraid,’ the boy says, and so the youth goes in with him. It was horribly cold, and the boy goes up to the altar and breaks it to pieces and then goes up and down among the chairs and collected a lot of pages from the hymn books. He makes a heap out of them and sets light to them, and they take out the food they have taken with them, they boil and roast, and warm themselves by the fire. But the youth is unhappy, he feels it is a sin to make fire out of God’s word.
‘No,’ the boy said, ‘it might just as well be turned into useful fuel as lie around here and fall to pieces or be wasted.’

When they had eaten their meal and got warm, they lie down to rest in there. But in the morning, when they are to journey on once more and open the church door, they seem to see a glittering sea outside the door. They couldn’t leave the place without drowning, for the land around the church has become flooded during the night. Then the youth says: ‘That’s your fault, because you have plundered a church, it is God’s punishment because we have done so much harm and mischief. Now we are going to die here.’

‘Oh, nothing to worry about,’ the boy says, ‘I’ll think of something – we’ll have to go back into the church again.’

So they went back in and broke the canopy over the pulpit to pieces. They also wrenched loose some beams and planks and made a raft out of them, which they launched. But, not being seafarers, they must simply allow it to drift. They finally come to a country town and drift ashore right in front of a doorway to a large merchant’s house or castle, and on the door was a sign that read:

If you enter, you will fare ill
but if you pass by, you will fare worse.

‘Hm, well now we’re probably to be punished for our sins,’ the youth says, ‘what shall we do?’

‘Go in, of course.’

‘Yes, but perhaps we could slip past: if we go in, a misfortune will befall us.’

‘No, we must go in,’ the boy says, ‘for it says things will be even worse if we pass by, and what’s written there must be right: of two bad things, the better thing to do is choose the less bad. Now you’re to pretend to be a merchant and I am your servant.’

Well, in they go and are well received. Everything was so grand and imposing, for it was a king’s castle they had entered. When they had been there for a day, they pretended they wanted to leave again.

‘No, stop, you cannot slip away like that,’ the king said.

‘How then?’

‘No one is allowed to enter here,’ he says, ‘without courting my daughter, and here we have the custom that all suitors are asked a question and if they cannot answer it, it will cost them their life. This has happened for those who have tried so far. They are hanging outside in the trees where you can come across them here and there. But when someone comes along who can answer the question, he shall have my daughter and kingdom and all that goes with it.’

So now this merchant had to court the daughter, after which the king asks him a question: he had until the following morning to come up with an answer. That was the way it was done. Then the boy says: ‘Isn’t the servant allowed to answer on behalf of his master?’

Oh yes, there was nothing against that, the king did not consider him to be at all bright. Right then, the next morning comes, and the servant answered on behalf of his master, and did so in such a way that the king was unable to say that it was incorrect.

Then the king speaks up and says that this couldn’t be the end of it – they had got away with the test far too lightly. Now they were to ask her a question, and if she was unable to answer, she was to take him. She would be given seven days to think of an answer, and during that time they were to be given a separate room and good food. Well it must still be allowed for the servant to speak on behalf of his master, the boy says. Yes, that was quite alright. Both of them could speak if they liked, for it should of course be as difficult as possible. Then the boy puts the question:
‘The horn killed the horse, and the horse killed twelve crows, and twelve crows killed twelve forest robbers, which saved the lives of two who were innocent; they prepared their food with God’s word and broke down the canopy and sailed over the water with it.’

It was unreasonable, the princess thought, to have to guess a riddle, but she had been given a week to think of an answer, and there were also other clever people in the kingdom than herself.

One, two and three days pass, and the king has all his soothsayers called to the castle, but they are just as unable as the princess to work out what the riddle might mean. She became so miserable because of this that she was unable to sleep at night, and time passed, and there was only one night still left. But she had two ladies-in-waiting, and she got one of them to go in to the boy at night when everyone had gone to bed – for no one was to see that she did so. She was to try to get him to reveal the solution to the riddle. She was to be prepared to give him a lot for it. The youth and the boy lay in the same room, but in separate beds, and the princess and the lady-in-waiting lay in another.

Well, she goes over to the bed and begs the boy to tell her the answer. No, he couldn’t tell her that, for he was unwilling to betray his master. But she inveigles him, and says he will tell her if she does him a favour. And what was that? If she would take off her shift and place it under his master’s head. She flinched from doing this. But in order to do her lady that service, she has to do it, and then she returns to the boy for the information. But he didn’t give any information to her, merely repeated the riddle – which she hadn’t heard before — and she thought this was the right answer and went back to the princess.

When she hears what message the girl has been given, she says: ‘What nonsense, that’s what I know already.’ Then the second lady-in-waiting says that she will go over and winkle the secret out of him. She goes over and she too has to place her shift under his master’s head. That was hard for her to do, but she agrees to it for the princess’s sake, but she gets a message that does not differ from what the first girl got. ‘Well, I’m none the wiser, for that is the same as before,’ the princess says, and when she has lain there for an hour and thought about it, she decides to go over herself. The same happened, she flinched at what was asked of her and offered to pay a lot of money instead. But he said no, he would not tell her anything unless she did as he asked, and so she had to agree to it. But when she comes back and gets the same message as the girls, she says that she is not satisfied with that. Well, he couldn’t tell her anything else, and so she had to leave.

In the morning, when they come in for breakfast, the king first wants to know of his daughter if she is now able to solve the riddle, for it was now the seventh day. No, she was no better off than before. Then the boy says that he will ask the king a riddle.

‘Half an hour after I went to bed last night,

  a hind came in to me
  where I lay contentedly
  on her my eye did play,
  her did my master flay.

When I had been lying there a little longer,

  a far lovelier hind came in to me
  where I lay contentedly;
  on her my eye did play,
  her did my master flay.'
And when I had been lying there a while longer,

    the loveliest hind came in to me
    where I lay contentedly;
    on her my eye did play,
    her did my master flay.

and if you will not believe me, you can see the proof of it here.’ Upon which he took out the three shifts that had lain under his master’s head and showed them to the king. He recognised his daughter’s shift, and then he grew angry and said: ‘Well, if she is no more virtuous than to go in to you during the night, she is no better than to be yours.’ So the youth was allowed to have her and a wedding was arranged.

The youth was immediately given half the kingdom, and they lived together there for several years. The boy stayed with them and had, more or less, the same rights as the prince himself. So much time passed that the couple now had five children, but one Sunday the boy says to him: ‘Let your wife go to church today, I have something I want to talk to you about, but let her ladies-in-waiting accompany her.’

‘Yes, but they can’t be away from the children.’

‘I will take care of them,’ the boy says.

When they had left, he says to the prince that he is to follow him into the children’s room. ‘You recall,’ he said, ‘the agreement we made the first day we travelled together.’

‘Yes, he could remember it, ‘and it is also my intention for you to share everything with me.’

‘But now I want my half,’ the boy says, ‘now you are well enough off and I no longer want to serve you. I want half of every single thing, except your wife – you can keep her.’

‘But, Good Lord, what about the children. I have five of them.’

Well, he wanted his share of them, too.

‘In that case, you can have three.’

No, he didn’t want more than he was entitled to, but his rightful half he also insisted on.

‘How are we going to resolve that?’ the prince asks.

‘Oh, that’s easy, we just chop one in half.’

‘Oh, great heavens,’ the prince says, ‘you mustn’t do that – take three of them!’

No, he wasn’t prepared to do that, and he took a sword down from the beam and cleft one of the children in two.

‘Oh, you have never made me so miserable as now.’

‘So, you’re miserable now, are you?’

‘Yes, I have never been so miserable in all my days.’

Then the boy takes a jar and smears both halves with what is in it and sticks the two halves together. And the child was just as alive as before.

‘Now I have never been so happy before,’ the father says.

‘So, you’re really happy, are you? Well, just as miserable as you were a moment ago was the soul of the man who no one would cast earth on outside the church, remember? And back then you paid ten florins, so that he could find rest in his grave, and then his soul found rest and happiness, so that he became as happy as you are now. But I am one of the attendant angels that stands before the Lord God, and he has sent me down to help you through the world because of the good you did that man, and because you obeyed your father’s injunction so well. Now I will bid you farewell, for I will see you no more here on earth. You may keep all you have and please say goodbye to your wife from me.’

Then he departed from him.
‘The Riddle’ was told by Poul Revskov in Tvis, Denmark to Evald Tang Kristensen, who published the tale in ‘Jyske Folkeminder, især fra Hammerum Herred’ (Jutland folklore, particularly from the Hammerum County, 1881), AT 507A and 851.

*Translated into English by John Irons in 2014 for the Hans Christian Andersen Centre at the University of Southern Denmark.*

[Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/).