Once upon a time there was a King who had three sons. The two eldest were lazy, good-for-nothing young men, but the third son, whose name was Charming, was a delightful youth, who was loved by everybody (outside his family) who knew him. Whenever he rode through the town the people used to stop whatever work they were engaged upon and wave their caps and cry "Hurrah for Prince Charming!"--and even after he had passed they would continue to stop work, in case he might be coming back the same way, when they would wave their caps and cry "Hurrah for Prince Charming!" again. It was wonderful how fond of him they were.

But alas! his father the King was not so fond. He preferred his eldest son; which was funny of him, because he must have known that only the third and youngest son is ever any good in a family. Indeed, the King himself had been a third son, so he had really no excuse for ignorance on the point. I am afraid the truth was that he was jealous of Charming, because the latter was so popular outside his family.

Now there lived in the Palace an old woman called Countess Caramel, who had been governess to Charming when he was young. When the Queen lay dying the Countess had promised her that she would look after her youngest boy for her, and Charming had often confided in Caramel since. One morning, when his family had been particularly rude to him at breakfast, Charming said to her:

"Countess, I have made up my mind, and I am going into the world to seek my fortune."

"I have been waiting for this," said the Countess. "Here is a magic ring. Wear it always on your little finger, and whenever you want help turn it round once and help will come."

Charming thanked her and put the ring on his finger. Then he turned it round once just to make sure that it worked. Immediately the oddest little dwarf appeared in front of him.

"Speak and I will obey," said the dwarf.

Now Charming didn't want anything at all just then, so after thinking for a moment he said, "Go away!"

The dwarf, a little surprised, disappeared.

"This is splendid," thought Charming, and he started on his travels with a light heart.

The sun was at its highest as he came to a thick wood, and in its shade he lay down to rest. He was awakened by the sound of weeping. Rising hastily to his feet he peered through the trees, and there, fifty yards away from him, by the side of a stream sat the most beautiful damsel he had ever seen, wringing her hands and sobbing bitterly. Prince Charming, grieving at the sight of beauty in such distress, coughed and came nearer,

"Princess," he said tenderly, for he knew she must be a Princess, "you are in trouble. How can I help you?"
"Fair Sir," she answered, "I had thought to be alone. But, since you are here, you can help me if you will. I have a--a brother--"

But Charming did not want to talk about brothers. He sat down on a fallen log beside her, and looked at her entranced.

"I think you are the most lovely lady in all the world," he said.

"Am I?" said the Princess, whose name, by the way, was Beauty.

She looked away from him and there was silence between them. Charming, a little at a loss, fidgeted nervously with his ring, and began to speak again.

"Ever since I have known you--"

"You are in need of help?" said the dwarf, appearing suddenly.

"Certainly not," said Charming angrily. "Not in the least. I can manage this quite well by myself."

"Speak, and I will obey."

"Then go away," said Charming; and the dwarf, who was beginning to lose his grip of things, again disappeared.

The Princess, having politely pretended to be looking for something while this was going on, turned to him again.

"Come with me," she said, "and I will show you how you can help me."

She took him by the hand and led him down a narrow glade to a little clearing in the middle of the wood. Then she made him sit down beside her on the grass, and there she told him her tale.

"There is a giant called Blunderbus," she said, "who lives in a great castle ten miles from here. He is a terrible magician, and years ago because I would not marry him he turned my--my brother into a--I don't know how to tell you--into a--a tortoise." She put her hands to her face and sobbed again.

"Why a tortoise?" said Charming, knowing that sympathy was useless, but feeling that he ought to say SOMETHING.

"I don't know. He just thought of it. It--it isn't a very nice thing to be."

"And why should he turn your BROTHER into it? I mean, if he had turned YOU into a tortoise--Of course," he went on hurriedly, "I'm very glad he didn't."

"Thank you," said Beauty.

"But I don't understand why--"

"He knew he could hurt me more by making my brother a tortoise than by making me one," she explained, and looked at him anxiously.

This was a new idea to Charming, who had two brothers of his own; and he looked at her in some surprise.

"Oh, what does it matter WHY he did it?" she cried as he was about to speak. "Why do giants do things? _I_ don't know."

"Princess," said Charming remorsefully, and kissed her hand, "tell me how I can help you."

"My brother," said Beauty, "was to have met me here. He is late again." She sighed and added, "He used to be SO punctual."
"But how can I help him?" asked Charming.

"It is like this. The only way in which the enchantment can be taken off him is for someone to kill the Giant. But if once the enchantment has stayed on for seven years, then it stays on for ever."

Here she looked down and burst into tears.

"The seven years," she sobbed, "are over at sundown this afternoon."

"I see," said Charming thoughtfully.

"Here IS my brother," cried Beauty.

An enormous tortoise came slowly into view. Beauty rushed up to him and, having explained the situation rapidly, made the necessary introduction.

"Charmed," said the Tortoise. "You can't miss the castle; it's the only one near here, and Blunderbus is sure to be at home. I need not tell you how grateful I shall be if you kill him. Though I must say," he added, "it puzzles me to think how you are going to do it."

"I have a friend who will help me," said Charming, fingering his ring.

"Well, I only hope you'll be luckier than the others."

"The others?" cried Charming, in surprise.

"Yes; didn't she tell you about the others who had tried?"

"I forgot to," said Beauty, frowning at him.

"Ah, well, perhaps in that case we'd better not go into it now," said the Tortoise. "But before you start I should like to talk to you privately for a moment." He took Charming on one side and whispered, "I say, do YOU know anything about tortoises?"

"Very little," said Charming. "In fact--"

"Then you don't happen to know what they eat?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Dash it, why doesn't ANYBODY know? The others all made the most ridiculous suggestions. Steak and kidney puddings--and shrimp sandwiches--and buttered toast. Dear me! The nights we had after the shrimp sandwiches! And the fool swore he had kept tortoises all his life!"

"If I may say so," said Charming, "I should have thought that YOU would have known best."

"The same silly idea they all have," said the Tortoise testily. "When Blunderbus put this enchantment on me, do you suppose he got a blackboard and a piece of chalk and gave me a lecture on the diet and habits of the common tortoise, before showing me out of the front gate? No, he simply turned me into the form of a tortoise and left my mind and soul as it was before. I've got the anatomy of a tortoise, I've got the very delicate inside of a tortoise, but I don't THINK like one, stupid. Else I shouldn't mind being one."

"I never thought of that."

"No one does, except me. And I can think of nothing else." He paused and added confidentially, "We're trying rum omelettes just now. Somehow I don't think tortoises REALLY like them. However, we shall see. I suppose you've
"You needn't bother about that," said Charming briskly. "By to-night you will be a man again." And he patted him encouragingly on the shell and returned to take an affectionate farewell of the Princess.

As soon as he was alone, Charming turned the ring round his finger, and the dwarf appeared before him.

"The same as usual?" said the dwarf, preparing to vanish at the word. He was just beginning to get into the swing of it.

"No, no," said Charming hastily. "I really want you this time." He thought for a moment. "I want," he said at last, "a sword. One that will kill giants."

Instantly a gleaming sword was at his feet. He picked it up and examined it.

"Is this really a magic sword?"

"It has but to inflict one scratch," said the dwarf, "and the result is death."

Charming, who had been feeling the blade, took his thumb away hastily.

"Then I shall want a cloak of darkness," he said.

"Behold, here it is. Beneath this cloak the wearer is invisible to the eyes of his enemies."

"One thing more," said Charming. "A pair of seven-league boots.... Thank you. That is all to-day."

Directly the dwarf was gone, Charming kicked off his shoes and stepped into the magic boots; then he seized the sword and the cloak and darted off on his lady's behest. He had barely gone a hundred paces before a sudden idea came to him, and he pulled himself up short.

"Let me see," he reflected; "the castle was ten miles away. These are seven-league boots--so that I have come about two thousand miles. I shall have to go back." He took some hasty steps back, and found himself in the wood from which he had started.

"Well?" said Princess Beauty, "have you killed him?"

"No, n-no," stammered Charming, "not exactly killed him. I was just--just practising something. The fact is," he added confidentially, "I've got a pair of new boots on, and--" He saw the look of cold surprise in her face and went on quickly, "I swear, Princess, that I will not return to you again without his head."

He took a quick step in the direction of the castle and found himself soaring over it; turned eleven miles off and stepped back a pace; overshot it again, and arrived at the very feet of the Princess.

"His head!" said Beauty eagerly.

"I--I must have dropped it," said Charming, hastily pretending to feel for it. "I'll just go and--" He stepped off in confusion.

Eleven miles the wrong side of the castle, Charming sat down to think it out. It was but two hours to sundown. Without his magic boots he would get to the castle too late. Of course, what he really wanted to do was to erect an isosceles triangle on a base of eleven miles, having two sides of twenty-one miles each. But this was before Euclid's time.

However, by taking one step to the north and another to the south-west, he found himself close enough. A short but painful walk, with his boots in his hand, brought him to his destination. He had a moment's natural hesitation about making a first call at the castle in his stockinged feet, but consoled himself with the thought that in life-and-death matters one cannot bother about little points of etiquette, and that, anyhow, the giant would not be able to see him.
Then, donning the magic cloak, and with the magic sword in his hand, he entered the castle gates. For an instant his heart seemed to stop beating, but the thought of the Princess gave him new courage....

The Giant was sitting in front of the fire, his great spiked club between his knees. At Charming's entry he turned round, gave a start of surprise, bent forward eagerly a moment, and then leant back chuckling. Like most overgrown men he was naturally kind-hearted and had a simple humour, but he could be stubborn when he liked. The original affair of the tortoise seems to have shown him both at his best and at his worst.

"Why do you walk like that?" he said pleasantly to Charming. "The baby is not asleep."

Charming stopped short.

"You see me?" he cried furiously.

"Of course I do! Really, you mustn't expect to come into a house without anything on your feet and not be a LITTLE noticeable. Even in a crowd I should have picked you out."

"That miserable dwarf," said Charming savagely, "swore solemnly to me that beneath this cloak I was invisible to the eyes of my enemies!"

"But then we AREN'T enemies," smiled the Giant sweetly. "I like you immensely. There's something about you--directly you came in ... I think it must be love at first sight."

"So that's how he tricked me!"

"Oh, no, it wasn't really like that. The fact is you are invisible BENEATH that cloak, only--you'll excuse my pointing it out--there are such funny bits of you that aren't beneath the cloak. You've no idea how odd you look; just a head and two legs, and a couple of arms.... Waists," he murmured to himself, "are not being worn this year."

But Charming had had enough of talk. Gripping his sword firmly, he threw aside his useless cloak, dashed forward, and with a beautiful lunge pricked his enemy in the ankle.

"Victory!" he cried, waving his magic sword above his head. "Thus is Beauty's brother delivered!"

The Giant stared at him for a full minute. Then he put his hands to his sides and fell back shaking in his chair.

"Her brother!" he roared. "Well, of all the--Her BROTHER!" He rolled on the floor in a paroxysm of mirth. "Her brother! Oh, you--You'll kill me! Her b-b-b-b-brother! Her b-b-b-b--her b-b-b--her b-b--"

The world suddenly seemed very cold to Charming. He turned the ring on his finger.

"Well?" said the dwarf.

"I want," said Charming curtly, "to be back at home, riding through the streets on my cream palfrey, amidst the cheers of the populace.... At once."

An hour later Princess Beauty and Prince Udo, who was not her brother, gazed into each other's eyes; and Beauty's last illusion went.

"You've altered," she said slowly.

"Yes, I'm not REALLY much like a tortoise," said Udo humorously.

"I meant since seven years ago. You're much stouter than I thought."
"Time hasn't exactly stood still with you, you know, Beauty."

"Yet you saw me every day, and went on loving me."

"Well-er--" He shuffled his feet and looked away.

"DIDN'T you?"

"Well, you see--of course I wanted to get back, you see--and as long as you--I mean if we--if you thought we were in love with each other, then, of course, you were ready to help me. And so--"

"You're quite old and bald. I can't think why I didn't notice it before."

"Well, you wouldn't when I was a tortoise," said Udo pleasantly. "As tortoises go I was really quite a youngster. Besides, anyhow one never notices baldness in a tortoise."

"I think," said Beauty, weighing her words carefully, "I think you've gone off a good deal in looks in the last day or two."

Charming was home in time for dinner; and next morning he was more popular than ever (outside his family) as he rode through the streets of the city. But Blunderbus lay dead in his castle. You and I know that he was killed by the magic sword; yet somehow a strange legend grew up around his death. And ever afterwards in that country, when one man told his neighbour a more than ordinarily humorous anecdote, the latter would cry, in between the gusts of merriment, "Don't! You'll make me die of laughter!" And then he would pull himself together, and add with a sigh--"Like Blunderbus."

(The end)

A. A. Milne's short story: Matter-Of-Fact Fairy Tale

By A. A. Milne