

# Three Pennies

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Three copper pennies jingled and jangled in a man's pocket as he walked along. They were round and worth much more than they are today. On one side sailed a swan; on the other sat a crown. The man rolled them through his fingers, pondering, or took them out of his pocket and held them on the flat of his hand. He tossed them up and let them settle. One penny looked new, the other old, and the third had a hole in the middle.

"What if they had eyes?" thought he. "And what if they had ears? What did they see and what could they tell?" He put them back into his pocket and went on his way.

By and by he met a beggar.

"A penny, dear sir," said the beggar opening his ancient hand. "God bless you."

"Take your choice," said the man, holding out the three coins on his palm.

The beggar stretched a dirty finger and poked the pennies. "I'll take not the new," said he said, "for it only appears to be so. And I'll take not the old, for it will leave me pennyless," and saying that he took the penny with the hole in the middle and tipped his hat.

"You fool," said the man. "A shopkeeper might not take that penny. What's wrong with the other two?"

"Mine bears no burden," said the beggar.

"Tell us about yours then," said the man.

"Ach, it's been around the world seven times seven. It belonged to a pirate who was stabbed in the heart. That's why the hole is there and the pirate still alive. It's been in the hands of kings and paupers, butchers, bakers, wisemen and fools."

"Has it now?" said the man, grinning from ear to ear. "Then you'll tell me how I came upon it."

"Aye, that's easy," said the beggar, sighing. "I see clearly for all except myself. Why else would I have the road for my home and be so roofless?"

"Stop blubbering and tell me where I got the penny with the hole," said the man.

"From the farmer with the stick."

The man's eyes narrowed.

"And what of my two?"

"The shiny penny is old," said the beggar, "much older than you think. It belonged to a miser who kept it hidden his whole life."

The beggar glanced away.

"Go on, old fool," said the man.

"That miser you murdered. He sits in the spirit bereft of his treasure. He'd be beyond hope if you hadn't killed him."

"And why's that?" said the man.

"A murdered man bears pity for others, said the beggar. "Without that he'd have nothing at all."

"And the old penny?" said the man to the beggar, a look of fresh murder on his face.

"That old penny is a spendthrift's penny. Ever and again it came back to the spendthrift and ever and again he spent it on uselessness. Finally it drove him mad for no earthly thing could keep turning up like that."

"Drove me mad?" said the man.

"Aye," said the beggar. "Only mad men murder as you did—though in your mind it adds up to sense."

"And shall I murder you, O wise one?"

"Only if I take that ancient penny from you," said the beggar.

"Have it then, you sod," shouted the man, throwing the penny in the beggar's face. But the beggar was gone. The penny hit a rock, sang as it flew spinning in the air and landed, yet again, in the palm of the madman's hand.