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The Most Beautiful Princess

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Long ago there was a king who was very ill. He wanted a hare killed to make him some broth. His only son, the prince, set out to find one. As the prince walked along the path to the forest a pretty little hare ran out of the hedge and crossed his path. He at once started in pursuit. The hare was a very swift runner. The prince followed her into the deep forest. Suddenly the hare ran into a hole in the ground. The prince kept in sight of her and soon found to his dismay that he was in a big cave. At the very rear of the cave there was the most enormous giant he had ever seen in his life.

The prince was terribly frightened. "Oh, ho!" said the giant in such a deep savage voice that the cave echoed and re-echoed with his words. "You thought you'd catch my little hare, did you? Well, I've caught you instead!"

The giant seized the prince in one of his enormous hands and tossed him lightly into a box at one end of the cave. He put the cover on the box and locked it down with a big key. The prince could get only a tiny bit of air through a little hole in the top, and he thought that he never could live. Hours passed. Sometimes the prince slept, but more often he lay there thinking about his sick father and what he could ever do to get out of the box and back once more to his father's side.

Suddenly he heard the key turn in the lock. The cover was lifted, and he saw standing before him the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen or dreamed of. "I am the hare you followed into the cave," said she with a smile. "I am an enchanted princess and, though I have to take the form of a hare in the daytime, at night I am free to resume my own shape. You got into this trouble following me into the cave and I am so sorry for you that I am going to let you out."



"You are so beautiful that I could stay here for ever and gaze into your lovely eyes," said the prince.

"You would see only a hare in the daytime," replied the princess. "It is not always night. Besides, the giant may return at any moment. He just went out on

a hunting trip because he thought that you would not make a sufficiently big supper for him. Don't be foolish. I'll show you the way out of the cave and then you must hurry home as fast as possible."

The prince thanked her for all her great kindness to him and acted upon her advice. He went home by the nearest path, but when he reached the palace his father was already dead. The palace was wrapped in mourning.

The prince was so overcome with grief that he felt that he could not keep on living in the palace. After his father's funeral he went away as a wanderer. He changed clothes with a poor fisherman whom he met by the river, for he did not wish to be recognized as the prince.

Dressed as a poor fisherman he wandered from one kingdom to another. He caught fish for his food, and he soon recognized the fact that the net which the fisherman had given him as part of his outfit was a most wonderful net. The biggest fish in the sea could not break through. "This net must have the special blessing of Nossa Senhora upon it," said the prince.

In the course of his wanderings the prince arrived at a city where a great festa was being held. The palace was decked with gay banners. Every afternoon the messenger of the king rode up and down the city streets proclaiming, "The princess of our kingdom is the most beautiful princess in all the world."

The prince remembered the beautiful princess who had let him out of the giant's cave. "Surely this princess cannot be as beautiful as she," said the prince. "I am going to see this princess with my own eyes and find out."

Accordingly the prince went to the palace gate to watch for the princess. Soon she came to the balcony and leaned over the railing. She was very beautiful, but her nose was just a tiny bit crooked. She did not compare at all with the princess of the cave.

"This princess is not by any means the most beautiful one in the world," said the prince dressed as a fisherman. "I know where there is a princess who is much more beautiful."

The people standing by heard him. His words were at once reported to the royal guards. They seized him roughly and took him to the king.

"So you are the fisherman who says that my daughter is not the most beautiful princess in the world?" said the king sternly. "You say, I hear, that you know a princess who is much more beautiful. I am a just king or else I should order that you be put to death immediately. As it is, I'll give you the chance to prove what you say. If you are unable to fulfil your boast and show me this princess who in the opinion of my court is more beautiful than my daughter, you shall lose your life. Remember that you will have to bring her here to my court to have her

beauty proven.”

“Thanks, your majesty,” said the prince. “If you will allow me two weeks to fulfil the contract, and if you’ll prepare a festa for the night two weeks hence, I’ll endeavour to present the most beautiful princess in the world to your assembled court.”

The king was astonished at the fisherman’s words, for he had not thought that a poor fisherman like him knew many princesses. However, he allowed him to depart in search of the princess.

Then the prince hurried home and once more walked toward the forest by the same path he had gone the day he went in search of the hare for his father’s broth. He soon found the place where the hare had crossed his path, and he did his best to remember the course they had followed as he pursued her into the forest.

In the forest he saw evidences of what looked like a flood. The water had washed away every trace of the entrance of the cave. He dug and dug at the place where he thought it ought to be. He found nothing which seemed like the cave’s entrance.

He dug and dug at a new place near by and soon he found his way barred by a massive door. The entrance to the cave was securely shut by it. The prince knocked at the door with all his might.

Soon the door was opened a tiny bit and the face of a little old woman looked out. “I am the ama of the princess,” she said. “I think you are the prince she was expecting to return to deliver her from all the terrible calamities which have befallen her.”

“What has happened to my beautiful princess who saved my life?” asked the prince. “I am indeed the prince, but I am surprised that you should recognize me in my fisherman’s garb.”

“The princess told me that I would know you by the smile in your eyes,” replied the old ama. “I did not look at your clothes at all. I looked at your eyes. You have the smile in them though your face is sad. Come into the cave, and I will tell you all that has happened.”

When the prince was inside the cave she hastily barred the door and said, “When the giant returned he was terribly angry at the princess because she had let you escape. He seized her roughly and put her into the box in your place. The princess had thrown away the key to the box when she let you out; and, search as he would, the giant was unable to find it again anywhere. That made him even angrier than before. All day he sits on the top of the chest when the princess is in the form of the hare. At night when he goes away he causes a

great river to flow around the entrance to the cave. He has placed a huge fish as guard to the entrance. This fish swims up and down before our door and calls out such vile names at the princess, that, when she is in her own form, she stays in the box and stuffs cotton in her ears. You got here just as the giant had left. The water must have risen as soon as you were inside our door. I hear the fish now."

Even as she spoke the prince heard the voice of the fish. It said such terrible words that the prince was glad that the princess was in the box with cotton in ears. "You get into the box with the princess," he said to the ama. "I am a good swimmer and I am going to open the door and swim out. The box is made of wood that will float; so, inside of it, you and the princess will float out to safety."

"How will you ever swim past this terrible fish?" asked the old ama.

"Do not fear," replied the prince. "I have with me a net which is so strong that the biggest, fiercest fish in the world cannot break it. I will catch the fish in it. Just wait and you will see. In the meantime take the cotton out of the ears of the princess and tell her that I am here. Quiet her fears and stay in the box for a few moments."

The old ama got into the box as the prince had commanded. Then he unbarred the great door. The fish swam at him fiercely, but the prince quickly entangled him in his strong net. Holding him fast in the net, the prince swam up to the surface of the water and was soon on the bank of the raging river. Then he killed the fish and scaled it and put the scales in his pocket.

The box had floated up to the surface of the water as the prince had said it would. The prince threw his net over it and drew it to land. The ama and the beautiful princess stepped out. The princess was so lovely that the prince fell upon his knees before her. The sight of her great beauty almost blinded his eyes.

"I knew all the time that you would come back again," said the princess. "I knew that you would deliver me from my troubles, but you have been a long time getting here."

The prince told the princess all that had happened to him. "You saved my life from the giant," said he. "I am very glad to have had an opportunity to save your life for you. Now I must ask you to again save my life." Then he told about the festa at which he must display the most beautiful princess in the world or forfeit his life.

"I'll gladly go to the festa with you," said the princess. "It is fortunate that it is held at night."

The Princess and her ama travelled quickly with the prince to the kingdom which claimed to possess the most beautiful princess in the world. It was already the night of the appointed festa when they arrived. The king's army was drawn up to

slay the prince. No one dreamed that the poor fisherman would be able to bring any princess at all with him, much less a beautiful one. The prince hid the princess in the box which the old ama carried on top of her head.

When the poor fisherman stood before the king with an old ama standing by his side, a great laugh ran through the king's court. "We knew that the fisherman would never be able to bring a princess more beautiful than our own lovely princess," said the courtiers one to another. "But see what he has brought in her place!" Then they laughed and laughed until they could hardly stand.

The king's soldiers stepped forward to seize the fisherman to put him to death. "Grant me just one moment more of life," begged the prince.

The king nodded his head and the prince put his hand into the pocket of his fisherman's coat. He pulled out a handful of silver scales. The most beautiful silvery cloud filled the room.

"Just a moment more," begged the prince. Then he pulled a handful of golden scales from out his pocket. The most beautiful golden cloud filled the room.

"Please just another little minute," asked the prince and he pulled out a handful of jewelled scales from his pocket. The most wonderful sparkling cloud of jewels fell about them. As the cloud cleared away there stood the most beautiful princess any one had ever seen or dreamed of between the old ama and the prince in the fisherman clothes.

The soldiers drew back. The king looked at the floor and so did all the courtiers. "You have won your wager," said the king when he could find his voice. "Our daughter is not the most beautiful princess in the whole world. I see myself that her nose is a tiny bit crooked."

The prince and princess and the old ama went back to the prince's own kingdom where the wedding of the prince and princess was celebrated with a great feast. From the moment that the fish scales fell upon the princess her enchantment was broken and she never became a hare again. She and the prince lived together happily in the prince's palace, and the giant never troubled them again, though they were always careful to keep away from the forest.

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