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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Tree of Swords

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Once there lived a king who had a daughter that had been changed by a wicked witch into a brindle cow.

The witch had wanted the King to invite her to the feast when the Princess was born, and because he invited her only into the servants' hall and not to the feast of the royal family the old witch had thrown a spell over the baby, and when she grew to womanhood she suddenly one day changed into the brindle cow. Great was the surprise of the King and Queen when they went to the room of the Princess one morning and found in her dainty lace bed a cow in place of their pretty daughter.

They sent for the old witch at once, for they knew that some magic spell must have caused this terrible change, but the old witch sent back word that the only thing that would change the Princess back to her own shape was a pear from the tree which grew by the mountain of ice.

Now this mountain of ice all the people knew was controlled by a three-headed troll, and the tree which grew near by was the chimney to his home under the mountain.

There was nothing to do but to offer money to the one who would get the pear which would restore the little Princess to her own form.

There was another thing that made it very dangerous to try to get the pear, and this was that no sooner did one attempt to touch the tree than all its branches changed to sharp swords.

To reach the tree the mountain must be climbed, and this being of ice, the ones who tried were in danger of slipping and being killed as they fell, sliding down the mountain and striking on the tree, which would be filled with swords as soon as they struck it.

After a while all those who tried gave it up as too dangerous, and the King then sent out word that to the one who would bring the pear, be he rich or poor, of high or low degree, he would give to him the Princess for a wife, as well as a barrel of gold.

But no one would risk his life for that offer, for they thought perhaps the Princess would not regain her shape even after eating the pear, and who would wish to

marry a cow, even if she were royal?

But one day a poor youth came to the palace and told the King and Queen that he would try to get a pear if they would give him the brindle cow before he ventured up the mountain of ice. "For if I fail," he said, "I wish to leave my poor mother something, and a cow is always useful."

The King offered money, but the youth would have nothing but the brindle cow, so they led away the cow to the peasant's barn, while the King and Queen watched her go with sad hearts.

On her back was a velvet blanket trimmed with gold, and the Queen tried to make the peasant take a soft bed for her to sleep on, but this he would not do. "No, she is a cow, and must sleep in the barn like other cows," he said.

The King and Queen had all this time been feeding the cow on dainty fruit and all sorts of good things, and the youth had heard that the pear she was to eat to save her would be bitter and bad to taste, and he wanted to get her used to eating anything that was given her.

The peasant youth began his climb up the mountain of ice, but each day for a month he only went one step ahead, for while he sometimes went far up, each time he would slip back.

And all this time the poor little cow was growing thinner and thinner, for she would not eat the food that was put before her.

One day when the peasant youth was about discouraged and thought he would have to give up trying for the pear, he felt the ice under him suddenly grow soft and his feet seemed to stick and not slip any more.

To his surprise, when he looked at his feet he saw a little fairy standing on each foot and touching them with her wand.

Up he went swiftly now, and soon was at a place on the mountain where he could touch the magic tree, and there the little fairies told him they were powerless to help him further.

"We can only tell you that if you can get from the three-headed troll the belt he wears you can get the pear, but we fairies cannot throw a spell over trolls," they told him.

When the fairies disappeared the peasant felt more discouraged than before, for there he was in danger of slipping, and before him was the dreadful tree.

But while he stood thinking the tree opened and out came the troll, leaving the tree wide open behind him.

He did not look up or down, to right or left, but walked down the mountain, and

the youth, sitting flat upon the ice, slid into the open tree.

Down, down he went! And then suddenly he found himself in a big room, in one corner of which was a huge bed, in another a big stove, in another a big chair and table, and in the fourth corner stood a large sword so tall that the peasant could easily hide behind it.

And lucky it was for him that it was big, for at that moment in came the three-headed troll and rolled all six of his eyes about the room.

"He, hi, ho, hun! I smell the flesh of a mortal son," he said. "You cannot escape me, so come out from wherever you are hiding!" The frightened youth was trembling so that the sword tipped over, and there he stood before the three-headed troll, who jumped to catch him.

But though he had three heads, he had only two feet, and, tripping over the sword, he fell sprawling on the floor.

Now his three heads were so heavy that, once he was down, it was hard work to get up, and while he struggled his belt became unfastened and lay under him on the floor.

The peasant saw this and, knowing he was in danger anyway, thought he would risk a little more.

So he ran over to the troll and with both hands tugged at the belt, and as the troll rolled over out from under him it came.

Quickly as he could he put the belt about his waist, and, to his surprise, he felt so strong that the size of the sword on the floor seemed no longer to frighten him.

He picked it up and found that it was as light as a tin one, and then the troll, rolling over again, saw his belt around the peasant's waist and his sword in his hand, and he cried out, "My power is gone!" as he tried to crawl away.

"Tell me how to get a pear from the tree and I will spare your life," said the peasant.

The troll managed to get upon his feet, but he was no longer the powerful creature he had been a few moments before.

"Follow me," he said, as he led the peasant out of the door of the tree, which was still open.

The tree was filled with swords, all shiny and sharp-looking, as the sun fell upon them, for as soon as the peasant had slid in the door the swords had appeared and had warned the troll before he entered that some mortal was near by.

"If you will promise to do as I ask you after you have the pear, I will tell you the secret of getting it," said the troll. "It will not harm any one to grant my last wish."

So the youth promised and the troll said: "You must strike the swords on the tree with the sword you hold until the sparks fly. Then the pears which you see hanging from the swords will fall to the ground, but the tree will burn up.

"And then there will be nothing for me. My magic power will be gone forever. So I ask that you will then strike me with the sword on my middle head, and that will change me into a shape which will never harm any one again."



This the youth said he would do and began to strike the swords on the tree, making the sparks fly and the pears drop, and then all at once the tree began to burn.

Keeping the sword still in his grasp, the youth looked for the largest of the green pears and picked it up, putting it in his pocket.

"Don't forget your promise," said the troll as the youth started to go away. "You need not be afraid," he said as the youth drew back. "The blow will not hurt me."

So the youth lifted the sword and brought it down on the troll's middle head with such force that the sword fell from his hands and struck the mountain of ice with such a bang that the ice began to crack.

At first the youth did not see what had happened, the noise had startled him so, but the next minute he saw that in place of the troll stood a beautiful tree filled with pears, and the mountain was no longer ice, but covered with soft, green moss.

He did not stop, but down the mountain he ran and to his home, where the brindle cow stood in the barn, so hungry she opened her mouth at once and ate the pear, thinking it would be sweet and juicy, but it was far from that. It was so bitter and bad that had she not been so hungry she could not have eaten it, but it was swallowed before she knew it, and there in the stall of the peasant's barn stood the pretty Princess looking about her in astonishment.

"How did I come in this horrid place, and what a dirty-looking man you are!" she said. "Take me home at once! My father is the King, and he will punish you if you do not obey me!"

It did not take the peasant long to take her home, and when the Queen and the King saw their daughter in her own form again they fell on their knees before the

peasant youth and thanked him.

But the Princess did not understand what it all meant, and said: "Why do you kneel to him? He should kneel to you! Are you not King and Queen of this land, and this man a poor peasant?"

Before the King could explain to the Princess the youth said: "I have brought you your daughter, but you must keep her. I could never marry a maid who thought herself above me. Give me gold and let me go back to my home!"

He was wise enough to see that a poor peasant and a princess could not be happy together and a peasant girl was a more fitting bride for him.

The Princess was very sorry for all she had said when she found out the peasant had saved her, and when he was married she sent to his wife a chest of linen and silver which made her the envy of all the other peasants for miles around.

The troll was never heard of again, and only the peasant youth knows that the pear-tree on the side of the mountain which bears such juicy fruit was once the three-headed troll who lived under the tree of swords.

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