THE WATER-WITCH.

Long ago there lived a young peasant named William and a pretty young maiden named Bella. They loved each other dearly and would gladly have married, but they were poor and were forced to go out to service for a living.

One day William told Bella that he was going into the wide world on the morrow to see if he could meet with any luck.

Bella wept, and William consoled her as well as he could, promising to return soon.

"Then," said Bella, "since it must be so go in God's name. But first we will share together these valuables which my father left behind him at his death."

She brought from a closet a little bell, a knife and a staff.

"This little bell," said she, "has the gift of notifying by its clear ring the friends of the possessor whenever he is in danger. The knife has the power of freeing from enchantment whatever it touches, and the staff guides one wherever he wishes to go. I will give you the little bell and the knife and the staff I will keep myself."

William thanked her and bade her farewell. Bella looked after him with tearful eyes till he disappeared behind the mountains.

In the course of a few days William came to a town in the vicinity of a lake, where he overheard two ass-drivers talking about the water-witch on the island in the lake. William inquired who she was, and was told that she was a fairy who was richer than all the kings together. Many people had gone to her abode to get possession of her treasure, but not one had ever returned.

William could not get this story out of his head and he made up his mind to go to the water-witch and see if he could not get enough from her just to buy a cow and a little pig.

When the ass-drivers heard this they cried out with horror and tried to keep him back. But William set off to the lake, and there met a ferryman who took him over to the island.

In the center of the island was a large pond, covered with water lilies in full flower. William walked around the pond and discovered in the rushes a boat in the shape of a sleeping swan with its head under its wing. This William thought very remarkable, and he climbed into the boat in order to examine it. But his feet had no sooner touched the bottom of the boat than the swan seemed to awake, and swam swiftly away from the shore.

William uttered a cry of horror, but the swan swam on, till the young man sprang into the water to make his escape; but the swan drew him down with her to the bottom of the pond.

In this manner he was brought to the dwelling of the water-witch. This was a palace of rare beauty, built entirely of muscle-shells. A crystal staircase led to it, every step of which gave out a musical note as soon as the foot touched it.

The water-witch was reclining on a golden sofa. She was dressed in sea-green silk, her long black hair reached down to her feet, and her face was of that delicate red and white which distinguishes the inner surface of the muscle-shell.

The young man stood entranced by her beauty, but the water-witch rose from her couch and bade him welcome.

She led him into a second apartment which was built entirely of pearl, and she placed before him eight golden beakers, with eight different kinds of wine. Then she showed him her countless treasures, and told him that all the precious things that fell into the sea came into her possession by means of her magical arts. William was astonished, and he said: "Well, one who is so rich is much to be envied. If I had only a thousandth part of these great riches I should be content."

'Half of them shall be yours if you wish," said the water-witch. "Remain with me; I will be your wife, and you shall be master of all."

The wine was whirling in William's head; he forgot his promise to Bella, and accepted the water-witch's proposal without the least hesitation.

She immediately commenced preparing a delicious repast. She betook herself to a fish-tank in the garden, and called out. "Holla! the miller! Holla! the tailor! Holla! the clerk!" and so on; and at each cry a little fish came swimming toward her which she caught in a steel net until her net was full. Then she put the fish into a golden pan and began to fry them.

It seemed to William as if he heard the fish sob while they were frying. "What is that sighing in the golden pan?" he asked.

"It is the wood sighing," said the water-witch.

After a while little voices began to whisper. "What is that whispering?" he asked.

"The fat hissing in the pan," she answered.

But now the little voices cried out audibly. "What is that cry?" said William.

"Those are crickets in the hearth," said the water-witch, and she immediately began to sing so loud that he could hear nothing more. She now brought him the fried fish, begged him to eat, and went to fetch twelve different kinds of wine.

William drew his knife from his pocket, and was about to begin; but hardly had he touched the dish than the spell of enchantment was broken, and the fishes rose up and became little men. They all cried out together: "William, save us if you would be saved your self!"

William was astonished. "Pray, who are these little people?" he cried out.

"We are men like yourself," they answered. "We came here to get rich; but the day after our marriage to the water-witch she changed us into fishes, and threw us into the great tank."

William gave a spring. He seemed to see himself already frying in the golden pan, and he was fain to make his escape before the water-witch returned. But she met him at the door; she had heard all. She touched him with her wire net, and changed him into a frog and threw him into the tank. At this moment the little bell which he wore on his neck sounded, and Bella heard the sound, though she was far away. She uttered a cry of anguish and said, "William is in danger!"

She put on her shoes and her Sunday suit at once, hung her little silver cross around her neck, and staff in hand she left the house. She went to a cross roads and there she stuck the staff in the ground and said:

"Little staff, little staff, hear me
Little staff, little staff, hear me
Over stone and stump,
Over copse and clump,
Over the river, and over the sea.
Far away through the air, little staff, carry me!"

Then the staff instantly changed into a saddle-horse, all groomed, saddled and bridled, with a blue plume on its fore head, and a fluttering ribbon behind each ear.

Bella mounted the horse without delay, and he went so swiftly that ditches, trees, houses and towers flew by her like the arms of a windmill. As swift as a thought he flew, and in a moment he was at the foot of a high rock so steep and high he could not get over.

Bella immediately began to cry:

"Little horse, little horse, hear me!
Little horse, little horse, hear me
Over stone and stump,
Over copse and clump,
Over the river, and over the sea.
Far away through the air, little horse, carry me!"

She had hardly pronounced the words, when huge wings grew out of the horse' sides, and it changed into an eagle, which brought Bella to the top of the rocks. There she espied a great nest, in which sat a little, black, crippled dwarf. "Dear maiden," he cried, "save me, save me!"

"Who are you, pray, my dear little man?" cried Bella.

"I am the husband of the water-witch, who has enchanted me here, and here I am condemned to sit till somebody frees me, or till I have hatched these stone eggs. If you rescue William, who is in the power of the water witch—"

Bella did not wait to hear that a second time. "Quick, what must I do?" she said.

"First you must dress yourself like a man," replied the dwarf, "so that the water-witch may not recognize you; and then you must snatch away the wire net she wears at her girdle and imprison her in it forever."

"But I have no men's clothes," said Bella.

"We'll soon help you to them," answered the little man, as he pulled out four of his red hairs. He blew them into the air, muttering softly; they instantly turned into four tailors, one of whom bore a cabbage head. They seated themselves around the nest and began to make a suit for Bella. Out of the first cabbage-leaf they made a coat, out of the second a vest; two others gave the flowing trousers, the heart served for a hat, and the stump for shoes. Bella looked like a nobleman in her new dress.

She mounted her eagle, and betook herself to the island of the water-witch. Here she changed the eagle into a walking-staff and suffered herself to be brought by the swan to the dwelling of the water-witch.

At the sight of the young man in silk and satin the water-witch was greatly delighted. She brought Bella into the pearl room and served her with wine. Bella found William's knife on the table, and stuck it into her girdle. Then she went with the water-witch to walk into the garden, and they both stood beside the fish tank. Bella leaned over the little fishes with delight, and when the water-witch invited her to remain with her she said, "Yes, if you will permit me to fish a little in the tank."

The water-witch suspected no harm. She gave her the net which hung from her girdle and said, laughing, "Now, let's see what you will catch."

Bella threw the net over the water-witch with a cry of joy. "Infamous witch, become in appearance what you are in heart!"

The water witch shrieked, but she was quickly changed into an odious mushroom. Bella drew the net closely over it, and threw it into a deep well, which she filled up with heavy stones. Then she hastened back to the fish-tank. But the fishes had already come up out of the water, and were wriggling along in an upright position toward Bella.

She took the knife in her hand. She had observed close to her feet a frog who wore a little blue bell around his neck, and sighed heavily. She touched him with the knife; the frog turned into a man who was no one else than William. Then she touched the fishes, and they immediately turned to men.

When she had done this the dwarf from the high rock made his appearance; he sat in his nest as in a carriage, and the six stone eggs had been changed into as many beetles, and were drawing the carriage.

He thanked Bella a thousand times, and led her and William to the treasure-chamber, which was entirely filled with gold and precious stones. Both filled pockets, hats and handkerchiefs; then Bella changed her staff into a winged carriage which was large enough to hold them both, and which took them back to their native village.

Now they could get married. William bought all the land there was to be sold, and all the cattle, horses, sheep and goats there were to be had, and they built a splendid house and living a long life in peace and happiness.

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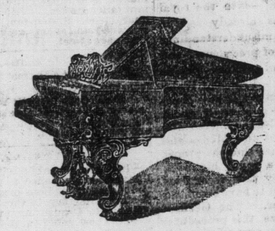

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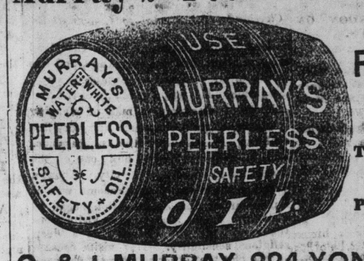

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