

THE FISHERMEN

Once upon a time, by a lake there lived a fisherman and his wife. They lived very comfortably and had everything they wanted, except that they had no children, which made them sad.

One day the fisherman went out to the shore, whistling to himself, and cast his line into the deep blue-green water. It wasn't long before he felt the first pull on his line. It was a huge monstrous fish, which pulled so hard that his rod bent over double and his line almost broke. But he fought just as hard, and with great effort pulled the creature onto dry land.

No sooner had he landed the fish, than it opened its mouth and spoke. It said "From this day on, you will have good fortune. Serve my middle portion to your wife, and she will bear you three fine sons. Feed my innards to your mare, and she will bring forth three magnificent colts. Give my head to your dog, and she will give you three faithful hounds. Lastly, bury my tail in your garden, where three trees will grow. These trees will grow and prosper with your sons, their horses, and their dogs. If any one of the trees sickens, then it means that one of your sons is in mortal danger, and if it dies — then your son is dead."

After it had spoken, the fish lay silently, just like any other he might have caught. The only sound he could hear was now the slapping of its tail on the stones. But, the fisherman had taken the fish's words to heart, and hurried home. There he placed the fish on the board, took a knife, and prepared it exactly as it had told him to. He cleaned out the innards, and fed them to his horse. He cut off the head, and fed it to his dog. He cut off the tail, and buried it in the garden. Then he gave the best piece, from the middle of the fish, to his wife.

It wasn't long before everything came to pass as the fish had predicted. Three years in a row, his wife gave birth to a son who grew into a fine young man. Each time, the mare bore a foal, which grew into a magnificent black stallion, and the dog produce a puppy which grew into a true and faithful hound. In the garden, sprouted three saplings, which grew as his sons grew, becoming three beautiful trees.

For a long time, the fisherman, his wife, and three sons lived happily in the cottage by the lake, with their dogs and horses. The three trees stood proudly in the garden, their branches and leaves fluttered gently in the breeze. Until one year, when spring came, the oldest son told his parents that he wished to go out and see the world. He took with him, one of the horses, his dog, the good advice and blessings of his parents, and rode out into the world.

He had already been travelling a while, when he found himself in a deep, dark forest. The trees alongside the path were huge, black, and horribly misshapen. In their branches and in the shadows, he could see the glowing eyes of owls — and other creatures. It was all very strange, and so frightening, that he wished

himself to be at home with his family, and out of the forest. But, he drove his horse forward, as fast as possible, to get through this terrible place as quickly as possible. Then, dark clouds filled what little of the sky he could see, and flashes of lightening briefly lit up the forest with a cold blue light, casting eerie shadows through the trees. Heavy rain started suddenly, and the young man was left with no choice but to seek cover.

Not far along, he found a small house, a little to the side of the road. He dismounted, tied his horse to a nearby tree and approached the cottage. Unfortunately, it was occupied by witch. She was so old that she only had one tooth left in her mouth, and that was loose. As the young man neared the door, she cursed him, so that he was turned into a standing stone. Then the old woman went outside, to the horse and hound, and did the same to them.

That morning all three trees in the fisherman's garden had been upright and strong, with their green leaves fluttering gently in the breeze. By evening, one had bent, with its leaves curling and its small branches drooping down. The following morning, it lay on the ground, with its leaves yellow and mouldy.

When his parents saw what had happened to the tree, they remembered the words of the fish and knew what had happened. Their eldest son must be dead, and they cried from evening until morning, and then from morning until evening. Then, early on the second morning, as the sun rose above the mountains, and the mist cleared from the valleys, their second son saddled the second horse. He took the blessings of his parents, and set off, with the second dog, to seek his brother. The old fisherman and his wife, watched him for a long, long time from the doorway until they saw him disappear into the distance. Their hearts were heavy, and they were afraid that they would never see either son ever again.

The second son drove his horse hard and fast, across fields, through meadows, and along forest paths. He wouldn't rest until he had found his brother, or what had become of him. But, as night came and the last golden rays of the sun left the valleys, he also found himself at the entrance to a deep, dark forest. He was unsure whether to take the road through the woods, or the road around. Quickly deciding that his brother would have take the shorter road, he turned his horse and rode into the woods.

He hadn't ridden very far, when dark clouds rolled across the sky, a mist rose from the ground, a soft wind whistled through the tree like the sound of a moaning ghost, lightening flashed, and the rain came down upon him. He spurred on his horse, and rode further, seeking a place to shelter from the storm. Not far along, he came to the little house by the side of the road. Like his brother before him, he dismounted, tethered his horse to a tree and approached the cottage. And, like his brother, he was met by the witch. There were now two standing stones by the door of the cottage.

The next morning, when the fisherman and his wife went into the garden, they saw that a second tree had bent, with its leaves curling and its small

branches drooping down. By the afternoon, it lay on the ground, with its leaves orange and dry. They knew that that they had now lost their second, and both sat down, between the two fallen trees, and cried. They cried from midday until midnight, and then from midnight until midday, and were still crying on the morning of the third day.

But, on that morning, their youngest son saddled his horse and wanted to ride out to find his two brothers. His parents were afraid of losing their last remaining son, and refused to let him go. But, after much crying and pleading, they relented, and he rode off with their blessing. Like his brothers before him, he soon came to the deep, dark forest, and rode into it. As he rode, the sky became darker and darker, lightening flashed, and the rain came down heavily. Ordinarily, the young fisherman, would have sought shelter, but forest was a very strange place, and he wanted to push on to find his brothers. So he rode on, hard and fast, past a creepy cottage with two strange standing stones by the door.

He rode on until the skies cleared and he reached the nearest city. From a distance, the city had seemed grand and beautiful, but when he passed through the gate, he found it to be drab and miserable. Everywhere was decorated with black flags and banners, as if the whole city was in mourning. All the people were dressed in black, and they moved silently through the streets, as if they were ghosts. He didn't know what to make of it, so he stopped a young boy to ask.

The boy was surprised to see someone who was not dressed in black, and not talking in whispers. He was even more astonished to find find somebody who had never heard of the dragon. When he finally realised that the young fisherman was a stranger, and really didn't know anything, he told him the story. On the mountain, above the city there lived a seven-headed dragon, which was always hungry. Every day, the townspeople drew lots to decide which person would be taken up the mountain, to be fed to the monster. Today, it was to be the king's daughter, so everybody was in mourning.

"Maybe, that is what happened to my brothers" thought the young man, "but in any case, it is an opportunity to show my worth". He let the boy tell him the way to the dragons lair in the mountain, and set off. He climbed the narrow path, until he came to a small chapel. Inside, he prayed, and then, outside, he waited, armed with a lance and a sword.

As noon approached, the princess was brought to the chapel by the city lamplighter and the night watchman. She was sad and beautiful, dressed all in black. As she knelt to pray, tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped to the floor. Death was approaching, and she knew it.

Then the dragon appeared. It bored down rapidly on the princess, with all of its mouths open. But it hesitated, which mouth should swallow its victim in one gulp? At the same, time the young fisherman leapt out and drove his lance deep into the belly of the creature. It fell to the ground, blood and writhing in

pain. It was wounded, but not yet dead. The young man quickly drew his sword and finished the deed. Then, using the same sword, he cut out all seven tongues from all seven mouths in all seven heads.

The princess was beside herself with joy and cried from happiness. She was safe, and her city had been released from the curse of the creature. She couldn't find enough words to thank her handsome saviour, and so she gave him her black veil as a token. This, he gratefully accepted, but then, remembering his brothers, he took his leave and departed.

Shortly after, the two men who had brought the princess returned to see if the dragon had taken her. They were surprised to find that the princess was still alive, and that the dragon was dead. But they saw an opportunity to get a reward. The two men agreed between themselves, that they would take dragon's seven heads back with them, and proclaim the lamplighter as its killer. Seeing, no alternative at the hands of these blackguards, the princess agreed and went with them to the king.

The king, who was very happy to see his daughter return alive, embraced the lamplighter as the saviour of the princess and of his realm. He could think of no better reward than to offer him the hand of his daughter in marriage. The princess was horrified. Every day, her face became whiter and her eyes stared more wildly into the distance, but she kept her silence. So great was her fear of the two rogues, that she never said a word to her father throughout the weeks leading up to the wedding and coronation of her husband.

"But what about the young fisherman?", I hear you ask. Allow me to continue with his story.

When he left the mountain, the young man returned to the witch's forest. His brothers had never reached the city, and the woods were so strange that he was sure that something had happened there. He rode back along the same path until he reached the little house by the side of the road. There, he saw two large rocks, shaped a little like horses, tethered to two trees, which he had missed in the storm. "Hello," he said to himself "there is something unnatural going on here". He stopped his horse, and turned towards the cottage, but he didn't dismount. Instead he drew his sword, and let the old woman approach him.

At first, the clever old witch claimed to know nothing about his brothers, and tried to walk away. But, as the young man raised his sword to her chest, she knew that there would be no escape. She took a small bottle out of her bag, and gave it to the young man. As if being pressed, she whimpered "if you wish to have your brothers back, then wet the two stones by the door with the potion in this bottle."

Without hesitation, the young fisherman rode over to the stones, and pored a little of the liquid on each in turn. The spell was immediately broken, and his two brothers stood there, complete with their hounds and horses. The three

brothers greeted each other happily, and soon after the two eldest mounted their steeds, and all three rode away.

Their three sons, their horses and their dogs were now restored to the old fisherman and his wife. Even the two trees grew new leaves and unbent themselves and stood proudly in the garden alongside the third. But, it wasn't long before the youngest son became restless as he remembered the beautiful princess. Despite the pleas from his parents and brothers to stay home, one morning he saddled his horse and set off for the city. He passed through the forest in fine weather, without mishap, and soon reached the city gates. As he entered the city, he was surprised to see how much it had changed. Everywhere was decorated with colourful flags and banners, and everybody was cheerful and danced in the streets. He stooped a young girl to ask what everyone was celebrating.

"Well" answered the girl "today is the wedding of the princess. She is going to marry the lamplighter, who saved her and the city from the terrible dragon. The whole city is celebrating with a great festival."

"Maybe, I have something to say about that" thought the young fisherman, as he turned his horse and rode quickly to the palace. There, sprang from his mount, ran up the stairs, through the great entrance doors, and into the throne room. Quickly, and without elaboration, he told the king every detail of how he had killed the dragon.

After some thought the king said "Both you and the lamplighter must prove which of you killed the creature. Whoever can do so will marry my daughter as my heir, and the other will go the gallows as a rogue and a rascal." He then led the young man into a large room, decorated with gold and silver. In this room stood the proud groom, and sitting next to him was his sad, frightened bride. When she saw the young fisherman, she smiled a little, but still remained silent.

"Can you prove to me," asked the king of the lamplighter "that it was you who killed the dragon and rescued my daughter? This man at my side claims otherwise."

"It should be enough that I have here the seven heads of the dragon, which I cut off" answered the proud villain.

But, the young fisherman went to the heads, and opened each mouth in turn. He said "True, here are seven dragon heads, but none of them has a tongue in its mouth. Now, your Majesty, tell us who is the dragon slayer. This man has seven dragon heads without tongues, and I have seven tongues."

"He who has the tongues, must have killed the dragon, and he will marry my daughter and become my heir" replied the king.

The young fisherman then brought out the seven tongues as proof that he had killed the creature, and then the black veil which the princess had

presented him as a token. He was, without a doubt, the dragon slayer and the saviour of the princess. He was also the one who the princess preferred. As she raised her head, as lips curved into a smile and her eyes sparkled. A heavy weight had been lifted from her heart.

That same day, she was married to the young fisherman, and he was proclaimed as the king's heir. As for the lamplighter, and his accomplice the night watchment, they were both hanged, and their bodies still hang from the gallows, to this day.