

## *The honest woodman*

Once upon a time, out in the green, silent woods near a rushing river that foamed and sparkled as it hurried along, there lived a poor woodcutter who worked hard to make a living for his family. Every day he would trudge into the forest with his strong, sharp axe over his shoulder. He always whistled happily as he went, because he was thinking that as long as he had his health and his axe, he could earn enough to buy all the bread his family needed.



One day he was cutting a large oak tree near the riverside. The chips flew fast at every stroke, and the sound of the ringing axe echoed through the forest so clearly you might have thought a dozen wood choppers were at work that day.

By and by the woodman thought he would rest a while. He leaned his axe against the tree and turned to sit down, but he tripped over an old, gnarled root, and before he could catch it, his axe slid down the bank and into the river!

The poor woodman gazed into the stream, trying to see the bottom, but it was far too deep there. The river flowed over the lost treasure just as merrily as before.

“What will I do?” the woodman cried. “I’ve lost my axe! How will I feed my children now?”

Just as he finished speaking, up from the lake rose a beautiful lady. She was the water fairy of the river, and came to the surface when she heard his sad voice.

“What is your sorrow?” she asked kindly. The woodman told her about his trouble, and at once she sank beneath the surface, and reappeared in a moment with an axe made of silver.

“Is this the axe you lost?” she asked.

The woodman thought of all the fine things he could buy for his children with that silver! But the axe wasn’t his, so he shook his head, and answered, “My axe was only made of steel.”

The water fairy lay the silver axe on the bank, and sank into the river again. In a moment she rose and showed the woodman another axe. “Perhaps this one is yours?” she asked.

The woodman looked. "Oh, no!" he replied. "This one is made of gold! It's worth many times more than mine."

The water fairy lay the golden axe on the bank. Once again she sank. Up she rose. This time she held the missing axe.

"That is mine!" the woodman cried. "That is surely my old axe!"

"It is yours," said the water fairy, "and so are these two other now. They are gifts from the river, because you have told the truth."

And that evening the woodman trudged home with all three axes on his shoulder, whistling happily as he thought of all the good things they would bring for his family.

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