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Opening extract from

Quentin Blake's Magical Tales

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Introduction



The little-known folktales I have brought together for this book come from very different parts of the world. But, for all that, they have a lot in common.

For one thing, when the stories were first invented they were intended to be told and not read. So they are all much, much older than the earliest versions that I have been able to find in books.

And for another thing, they all illustrate the element of magic which is such a familiar ingredient in most of the folktales that you got to know when you first began to listen to stories. Magic in all its weird and wonderful variations abounds in this book – in the form of wishes granted, supernatural powers, enchanted animals, transformations, the ability to fly, spells, visions, and all those other remarkable things that make folktales so vivid and exciting. The fact that, whether by coincidence or by direct borrowing, certain of the tales contain moments that remind us of more familiar stories only increases the pleasure, I think. For instance, we don't mind being able to guess in advance that Aleodor's kindness to the three helpless creatures in *Half-Man-Half-Lame-Horse* will be rewarded handsomely in the end, just as will the young servant's to the old beggar in *The Magic Handkerchief* and the widow's to the old man in *The Pumpkin Tree*.

And I'm sure we all positively relish the age-old satisfaction of seeing the poor, simple characters turning the tables on the mean-spirited people who want to cheat them, as happens in *The Magic Cakes*, *The Witch Boy* and *The Magic Handkerchief*.

It is this marvellous mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, together with the colourful backgrounds of the stories, that will – I hope – make these magic folktales worth listening to and reading over and over again.

John Yeoman



The Blue Belt

In a far-off time in a far-off land there lived a young orphan lad who collected firewood from a nearby forest to make a living.

Late one afternoon, when it was beginning to get dark and his sack was still half-empty, the boy spotted a blue belt lying in the grass. He picked it up and tied it around his waist under his shirt. Suddenly he felt enormously strong, and knew it must be a magic belt. But he had no time to try its powers because it was getting very dark and he had to find himself a shelter for the night.

In the distance he spotted a glimmer of light coming from a tumbledown hut and decided to try his luck there. When he pushed open the door, to his surprise, there was an enormous troll sitting on the fireside bench.

"I've sat here for three hundred years" boomed the troll, "and never had a visitor yet. You'd better come in."

The lad sat himself by the troll's side and chatted away as if they were old friends.

"Might there be a bite to eat?" he asked, as bold as brass.

"If you're prepared to wait a while," said the troll, tossing six logs the size of young pine trunks on to the fire. And then, when the fire had settled into glowing embers, he rose and strode out of the house.

A few minutes later the door burst open and he came back in carrying an enormous ox on his back. He set it on the floor, felled it with one blow of his fist behind its ear, hoisted it up by its four legs on to the fire and turned it about in the embers until it was cooked brown all over.

He handed the boy a huge knife and invited him to help himself to the



meat, then watched in amazement as the lad carved off a thick slice the size of the table-top and gobbled it up.

"If you've had enough," said the troll, "I shall have a little bedtime snack." And with that he finished off the ox – hoof, horns and all.

But the troll wasn't as kind-hearted as he seemed. He was very offended that this slip of boy was so strong, and decided to teach him a lesson.

The next morning he said, "I would like to treat you to a drink of lionesses' milk for breakfast. There's nothing quite like it for a growing lad.

As it happens I keep a few lionesses in that further field. I can't milk them myself this morning as my back aches, so perhaps you'd could do it while I set out the breakfast."

The boy obliging took the pail and set off for the field. No sooner had he vaulted the hedge than twelve snarling lionesses appeared, twitching their tails threateningly. He marched over to the fiercest, bashed it over the head with his bucket and then swung it around by its tail until the terrified creature was yelping for mercy.

When he put it down all the others clustered around his feet like kittens, so he led them back to the troll's hut and left them at the door.

"I've brought the lionesses back with me," he called, "so that you can tell me how much milk we need."

"Nonsense," bellowed the troll from inside, angry that the boy hadn't got torn to pieces. "You haven't even been to the field!" And he flung open the door in a temper. Immediately the lionesses set upon him, biting and scratching until the boy had to speak to them very sternly and send them back to their paddock.

All morning the troll sat nursing his wounds and thinking how he could get even with the brat. And then he had an idea. His two brothers had a castle on the hill, and by that castle was an orchard where the most delicious apples grew. But anyone who ate even a small bite of one of those apples would fall into a deep sleep immediately.

"My brothers are ten times as strong as I am," said the troll to himself. "They will rip him apart as he sleeps."

"I really fancy some of those tasty apples from the castle orchard," he said to the boy. "But with my bad back... Why don't you pick a basketful for us?"

The lad was eager to help, but he was careful to collect the lionesses as he passed their field.

When they reached the orchard he climbed a tree and picked as many apples as he could, eating many along the way. But no sooner had he got down than a heavy sleep overcame him. Seeing this, the lionesses all lay down in a circle around him.

It was not until the third day that the troll's two brothers appeared, but they didn't come in the shape of an ordinary man; they came snorting savagely in the form of man-eating stallions.

At once the lionesses rose up against the troll-stallions, tearing them to

pieces and finishing up every bit. When the lad awoke there they were purring contentedly around him and licking their chops.

Looking up he saw a pretty young maiden leaning from a window.

"You were lucky not to have been caught up in that terrible fight!" she called. "You would have been killed."

The lad tapped his magic blue belt. "I doubt it," he said.

Leaving the lionesses waiting patiently outside, he went into the castle to talk to the maiden. She told him she was the daughter of the king of Arabia and that the two trolls had kept her prisoner in the castle.

"And now I am free," she said. "What should I do? Shall I return home to my father or become your wife?"

"I'd love for you to become my wife," he replied. So they got married.

They lived happily in the trolls' castle until one day the princess felt she really ought to go back home to let her people know that she was safe and well.

"I'll tell them that I am married," she said, "and they will be sure to invite you to Arabia to join me."

So they loaded a ship and she set sail.

After a few months the lad was really beginning to miss his princess so he too set sail for Arabia, taking one of the trolls' giant swords with him.

The ship made good speed and he soon reached the city where the king of Arabia had his court. People everywhere were talking about how pleased the king was to have his daughter back again.

The lad stopped a stranger in the street. "Is it possible to see the princess?" he asked. "Does she ever appear in public?"

"No longer," said the man. "The king is given to strange moods and has hidden his daughter from all human gaze. But he has promised her hand in marriage to anyone who can find her."

'That is most unjust,' thought the lad. 'She is already married to me.'

Just then he noticed that one of the traders in the market was selling white bear skins. A plan immediately came into his mind, and so he bought a skin from the trader. He also bought himself an iron collar and a length of iron chain.

He explained his plan to his ship captain, who was very willing to play his part. The lad dressed up in the white bear skin and the captain put the collar round his neck. Then he led him into the market place where he danced and



played tricks for the crowds.

People were so amused by the antics of the white bear that news of his success soon reached the king's ear. He commanded that the captain should bring his bear to perform before the court.

All the court ladies screamed when the captain first led him in, but the captain had his speech prepared: "The white bear is as gentle as a lamb," he reassured them. "He will only turn savage if anyone laughs at him. Please, no one laugh at the bear!"

The lad began his bear-like dance and all the company kept a very straight face but, at last, when he took the flute from the musician and began playing it himself, a waiting-woman couldn't restrain her laughter any longer.

Making ferocious noises, he lunged at her and ripped her beautiful gown to shreds so that she looked like a scarecrow.

Everyone fled the chamber, except the king.

"I like him," he said. "He must stay the night here in a room full of pillows and cushions."

So pillow and cushions were fetched and the white bear was put in the room to sleep alone.

At midnight the king came into the room with a lamp in his hand and took the bear by the chain. The lad was slightly puzzled but willingly followed him.

They passed through galleries and courtyards, they went upstairs and downstairs, they turned this way and that, until finally they reached a jetty which stuck out into the sea.

The king began to turn winches and haul on ropes, and work levers, until a little house rose up from beneath the water.

This was the house in which he kept his precious daughter hidden. Leaving the white bear outside, he went in to tell her about the surprise he had brought to make her happy.

"You call this a surprise, father!" she cried. "The creature will surely eat us alive!"

But the king explained that the bear was perfectly gentle unless anyone laughed at it, and brought him in. The princess managed to keep a straight face while the bear danced around the room, but when it put on the princess's head dress the waiting-woman burst into laughter.