# Time and the king of the elements

There was once a married pair who loved each other tenderly. The husband would not have given up his wife for all the riches in the world, while her first thought was how best to please him. So they were very happy, and lived like two grains in one ear of corn.One day while working in the fields, a great longing came over him to see her: so without waiting for the hour of sunset he ran home. Alas! she was not there. He looked high and low, he ran here, there, and everywhere, he wept, he called to her; in vain! his dear wife was not to be found.So heartbroken was he that he no longer cared to live. He could think of nothing but the loss of his dear wife and how to find her again. At last he determined to travel all over the world in search of her. So he began to walk straight on, trusting God to direct his steps. Sad and thoughtful, he wandered for many days, until he reached a cottage close by the shores of a large lake. Here he stopped, hoping to find out news. On entering the cottage he was met by a woman, who tried to prevent him entering.“What do you want here, unlucky wretch?” said she. “If my husband sees you, he will kill you instantly.”“Who is your husband then?” asked the traveller.“What! you do not know him? My husband is the Water-King; everything under water obeys him. Depart quickly, for if he finds you here he will certainly devour you.”“Perhaps after all he would take pity on me. But hide me somewhere, for I am worn and weary, and without shelter for the night.”So the Water-Queen was persuaded, and hid him behind the stove. Almost immediately after the Water-King entered. He had barely crossed the threshold when he called out, “Wife, I smell human flesh; give it me quickly, for I am hungry.” She dared not disobey him, and so she had to tell him of the traveller’s hiding-place. The poor man became terribly frightened, and trembled in every limb, and began to stammer out excuses.“I assure you I have done no harm. I came here in search of news of my poor wife. Oh, do help me to find her; I cannot live without her.”“Well,” replied the Water-King, “as you love your wife so tenderly I will forgive you for coming here, but I cannot help you to find her, for I do not know where she is. Yet I remember seeing two ducks on the lake yesterday, perchance she is one of them. But I should advise you to ask my brother the Fire-King; he may be able to tell you more.”Happy to have escaped so easily, he thanked the Water-King and set out to find the Fire-King. But the latter was unable to help him, and could only advise him to consult his other brother, the Air-King. But the Air-King, though he had travelled all over the earth, could only say he thought he had seen a woman at the foot of the Crystal Mountain.But the traveller was cheered at the news, and went to seek his wife at the foot of the Crystal Mountain, which was close to their cottage. On reaching it he began at once to climb the mountain by making his way up the bed of the torrent that came rushing down there. Several ducks that were in the pools near the waterfall called out, “My good man, don’t go up there; you’ll be killed.”But he walked fearlessly on till he came to some thatched cottages, at the largest of which he stopped. Here a crowd of wizards and witches surrounded him, screaming at the top of their voices, “What are you looking for?”“My wife,” said he.“She is here,” they cried, “but you cannot take her away unless you recognise her among two hundred women all exactly like her.”“What! Not know my own wife? Why, here she is,” said he, as he clasped her in his arms. And she, delighted to be with him again, kissed him fondly. Then she whispered:“Dearest, though you knew me to-day I doubt whether you will to-morrow, for there will be so many of us all alike. Now I will tell you what to do. At nightfall go to the top of the Crystal Mountain, where live the King of Time and his court. Ask him how you may know me. If you are good and honest he will help you; if not, he will devour you whole at one mouthful.”“I will do what you advise, dear one,” he replied, “but tell me, why did you leave me so suddenly? If you only knew what I have suffered! I have sought you all over the world.”“I did not leave you willingly,” said she. “A countryman asked me to come and look at the mountain torrent. When we got there he sprinkled some water over himself, and at once I saw wings growing out of his shoulders, and he soon changed his shape entirely into that of a drake; and I too became a duck at the same time, and whether I would or no I was obliged to follow him. Here I was allowed to resume my own form; and now there is but the one difficulty of being recognised by you.”So they parted, she to join the other women, he to continue his way to the Crystal Mountain. At the top he found twelve strange beings sitting round a large fire: they were the attendants of the King of Time. He saluted them respectfully.“What dost thou want?” said they.“I have lost my dear wife. Can you tell me how to recognise her among two hundred other women all exactly alike?”“No,” said they, “but perhaps our King can.”Then arose from the midst of the flames an old man with bald head and long white beard, who, on hearing his request, replied: “Though all these women be exactly alike, thy wife will have a black thread in the shoe of her right foot.”So saying he vanished, and the traveller, thanking the twelve, descended the mountain.Sure it is that without the black thread he would never have recognised her. And though the Magician tried to hide her, the spell was broken; and the two returned rejoicing to their home, where they lived happily ever after.

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