

Two Brothers and the Axe

Once upon a time there were two brothers: one was very rich and the other was poor, with a large family of children. His only means of livelihood was an axe. One day when he was going to work, he had to cross over a footbridge. In doing so he quite by accident let his axe fall into the water. The poor man began to look for it because when he was without his axe it was like being without hands: he had nothing to work with to earn a living for himself and his children. And besides, he had no means to buy a new axe. The older brother was a detestable person who hated people and was very stingy, so it was no use waiting for him to help anyone.

The poor man started to cry bitterly when suddenly, on the bank there rose out of the water a little man who held in his hand a golden axe. He said, “Are you weeping for your axe? Look—is this yours?”

“No, it is not mine.”

The little man plunged into the water and swimming out with a silver axe asked, “What about this one?”

“Neither is that one mine.”

A third time the little man dove into the water and emerged with an iron axe, the very one with which the poor man had been working. “Is this yours, then?” he asked.

“That’s mine! That’s mine!”

“Well then, take it.” And scooping out two bags of gold and silver he gave them to the poor man who, joyful and happy, ran home. He sold the gold and silver and lived in plenty from then on.

In time the rich brother found out how his poor brother had become rich. He was spiteful and jealous and wanted to own still more. He walked across the footbridge and, as though not meaning to, he let

his axe drop into the water. Then he began to complain and to weep. A little man sprang out of the water with an iron axe and said, “Are you crying for your axe? Look—is this yours?”

“No, it is not mine.”

The rich man said the same about the silver axe. But when the little man showed him the gold axe, the rich rascal cried out, “Oh, that’s mine! That’s mine!” and he jumped into the water after the gold axe. But it was very deep there and so he drowned. Only bubbles marked the spot where he disappeared.