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Autor: [s.n.]
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THE FIRST ALPINE HORN

A story from Switzerland re-told by S. L. Ricardo.

Have you ever seen a Swiss alpine horn? It is so long that a tall man can stand upright with one end of the horn in his mouth and the other end resting on the ground. The loud trumpet notes carry far over the mountains to call the cows or send a greeting from one lonely chalet to another.

Once there was a brave young hunter called Karl who loved to chase chamois. One day he leapt a ten-foot ravine, another he climbed a rock face steep as a wall. No wonder the mountain fairies began to notice him. They held his ankles when he walked along a three-inch ledge. They pulled him back by the hair when he slipped into a deep blue crevice in the ice. They strengthened his climbing rope with their magic threads and blew his arrows onward with their breath. At night as he slept they whispered in his ear, telling him where he could find a chamois next day.

But the gnomes who lived in the roots of the mountains and came out only at night, loved the chamois and all the other wild creatures and were troubled when Karl killed so many of their friends. They took to spying on him. Karl never really saw them, but they were all about his path. Now and again he could see a red cap whisk behind a boulder as he strode down the mountain at twilight; or would hear little voices crying through the morning mist, "Oh dear, oh dear, here he comes hunting again."

Then one day he chased a pure white chamois which led him on and on until, just at twilight, he lost it. It was too late to begin the long climb down the mountain so Karl looked about for somewhere to sleep. He found a herdsman's hut. It was old and empty and the floor was so wet and cold that Karl climbed into the loft and fell asleep on some straw.

At midnight something woke him, he peered through the ladder hole into the room below and saw a bright fire burning and three crystal bowls on the table. Round the fire stood three little red-capped gnomes cutting away with their axes at something which lay on the floor. As Karl watched they dropped their axes and stood back and he saw that they had made a great horn, as long as the hut. They dragged it to the door and blew on it and its deep, sweet notes

re-echoed round the mountains and was answered by the cows on every pasture. Then the gnomes called up to Karl, "Come down Karl, come and drink from which ever bowl you will." Karl climbed down the ladder and looked at the bowls. In the first bowl was a red drink, in the second a yellow one and the third bowl was full of milk. He chose this bowl and drained it. "You have chosen well," said the biggest gnome. "Now the magic horn shall be yours. Only once in 500 years do we make such a horn. So you must learn to copy it. Then all Swiss herdsmen will be able to call their beasts to the mountain pastures. They will grow rich and have no need to kill our friends the chamois." "Sometimes when you blow your horn," said the smallest gnome, "wild creatures will come, but if you would live in happiness you must do them no harm." Then the gnomes vanished. But long after they had gone Karl heard their voices echoing under the ground, "Remember, remember."

Soon after this Karl fell in love with a shepherd girl, Fenette. She begged him to give up his wild life as a hunter and become a shepherd. At last he agreed. He made Fenette a horn like his own and every evening they used to call to each other across the mountains. One evening, just before the day fixed for their wedding, Karl began to blow his goodnight tune; as he blew a young chamois came bounding to him. He forgot the gnomes' warning, snatched up his bow, fitted an arrow and sent it right to the heart of the chamois. Then raising his horn he called to Fenette again and again. But there was no answer. Fenette had indeed risen to her feet to answer. But she was standing near a deep crevice. As she raised her horn an arrow sang, she took a step back and fell and the very same arrow with which Karl had pierced the chamois tinkled after her down the ice.

Day after day Karl searched for Fenette, but never found her. He became a gentle old man, caring for her sheep as well as his own. In winter he ventured out from his hut on the high alpine pasture to look for lost travellers and guided them to safety by the notes of his horn. One evening when the sunset glow glorified the peaks Karl blew one long clear note and left his hut for the last time. He was never seen again; but people said that the gnomes had forgiven him at last and allowed him to join Fenette in the land at the roots of the mountains.

(Teachers World)

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