

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

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THE GOLDEN PEAR TREE

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Fran Milčinski: The Golden Pear Tree

In a garden belonging to a powerful king there grew a pear tree that was so tall you couldn't see to the top of it, nor had the king ever got any fruit from this tree. Therefore he called together the wisest and eldest men from far and wide throughout the land and asked them if they knew or had ever heard anything about the top of that pear tree and whether it produced or had ever produced any fruit. None of them knew and no one remembered. The king ordered them to ask their parents and grandparents back home, whom age had prevented from appearing before the king in person. They did so, but even the oldest among them could recall nothing about this tree and its fruit.

Then the king had criers go through the whole country, proclaiming, "If there be anyone who can go find the top of the pear tree and bring back its fruit, the king pledges his own daughter and half of his kingdom to that man."

People came from all parts of the country and all walks of life and gaped up at the tree, but when they heard that the king threatened death to anyone who undertook this feat but then reconsidered or came back empty-handed, they thanked him for his kind offer and went back to whatever place their feet, or horses, or wheels had brought them from.

There was a young shepherd who heard the king's proclamation. Now this little shepherd knew how to climb like a squirrel, so he boldly appeared before the king and said that he wanted to win the princess's hand and the kingdom and was going to head up the pear tree and wouldn't be back until he climbed to its top and picked its fruit.

The king looked him over from his bare feet to his tousled hair and said, "Agreed! But remember, if you don't get to the top and bring me the fruit, you'll lose your head!"

This threat didn't scare the shepherd one bit. He handily made his way up the tree, climbing like a squirrel, and soon he vanished from the sight of everyone down below.

He climbed and climbed, until the bells began ringing noon in his stomach. He looked around and saw that he had climbed up to a big city that was as white as pure silver. I need some lunch, he thought, and I might get some there, it's still a long way to the top – so he climbed out of the tree and went into town.

The town appeared to be dead, the houses were empty and half dilapidated, and there was no one out on the streets. He went from the first street to a second, from the second to a third, and at last in the ninth street he came across a house that was still intact and built out of hewn stone.

He said to himself, "Here's where I'll try my luck." But barely had he touched the silver door handle to the house, than a ravishing lady with a silver star on her head appeared out of the blue like a flash and stopped him with these harsh words: "You earthly vermin, what brings you here? Go back to wherever you've crawled here from."

"If I do that, I'll lose my young head," the shepherd said and explained the task he'd undertaken.

The lady replied, "Too bad for you, you'll be old and gray before you ever get to the top, and if you ever do get that far and touch so much as a branch at the top, let alone its fruit, the whole pear tree will shake like a reed in a gale, and you'll destroy us and yourself. Eight districts of our city have already been destroyed, and now you're going to level the ninth. This is why you may not and will not proceed, even if it means I have to dispatch you with my own hand!"

The shepherd relented at this right away. All he asked for was a place to stay overnight, pledging that he would go back down the pear tree to earth in the morning.

These words appeased the lady. She gave him dinner to eat and let him spend the night in her house, but she locked the door so he couldn't escape.

But the shepherd had not given up on his plan. Late that night he climbed out through a window – quietly and surreptitiously, with the intent of slipping across the courtyard and leaping over the high fence. But something distracted his eye – a brilliantly white light shone from the barn, as though the radiant moon itself lived inside, and his ear picked up a remarkable sound. He went up close, and what did he see? Inside the barn there was a white horse, and all this radiance was coming from it. Tied up to a silver manger, with its woven lead rope tangled around its neck, the horse was breathing with difficulty and wheezing loudly. Seeing this, the shepherd felt sorry for the horse, ran up to him and handily untangled the rope.

The horse whinnied brightly and said, "Thank you for your help. Without you I would almost certainly be lying on the floor now, dead and cold. I would like to repay you, but don't know how."

The shepherd told him, "I have to get to the top of the pear tree, I have no other wish."

The horse answered, "I can help you with that. Mount up quickly so we can get back before daybreak, when my mistress gets up. But listen! When we go flying past the branches, be careful that you don't break any off! And there are golden pears at the top of the tree, but woe betide you if you pick any of them! And hold tightly onto my mane so you don't fall!"

The shepherd jumped up onto the horse, grabbed hold of its silver mane, and they were off racing as quick as lightning up the side of the pear tree. They darted through a second city that shone as though it was made out of gold, then through a third that shone as gently as the early morning light. Then they went flying through the branches of the tree, which were made of pure gold and produced a ravishing sound, then to the top, which had pears hanging, which were gold and as fat as a child's head. As soon as the shepherd saw them he forgot about the warning, picked the finest and shoved it under his shirt. But in order to pick it and put it away, he had to let go of the mane, and suddenly the horse was gone from under him. The shepherd tumbled and began to fall and fall, and as he fell, he saw that the whole pear tree was shaking like a reed in a storm, and as he went flying down past the pink, the gold, and the silver cities, the cities themselves were shaking and their buildings collapsing.

He fell and fell for three days and three nights, until at last he fell to the ground, and it would have been over for him if he hadn't fallen onto a dungheap and got stuck in it, leaving only the big toe of his right foot sticking out.

Just then some farmworkers tending to their chores came walking by, and they noticed the toe.

They tried pulling on it but couldn't pull it out.

Then they said, "What kind of a sparrow is this that refuses to come out!" And they started to dig with their shovels, and they dug out a person who was more dead than alive and as black as a Moor. They reported this to the king, who ordered him washed, so they scrubbed him in ten different tubs and only then recognized him as the shepherd.

They served him some golden buns and sweet drinks to bring back his strength, then they took him before the king and the king asked him if he'd been to the top of the tree.

The shepherd took the golden pear out of his shirt, and it was as big as a child's head. "King, now you give me what you promised: your very own daughter to wife and half of your kingdom!"

The king had the golden pear in hand and now he wasn't much interested in a son-in-law who'd been dug out of a dungheap. Still, he didn't dare break a promise he'd made.

He prepared a banquet big enough for a hundred people, brought the shepherd to the table and said, "You have to eat and drink all of this before you get what I promised. Otherwise you'll pay with your head."

This worried the shepherd, so he asked, "Your royal grace, permit me first to go for a walk for one or two hours, so I can work up my appetite for such a feast."

The king consented and the shepherd went for a vigorous walk, during which he thought and pondered about nothing other than how he might save his head, because he was not up to a feast of that magnitude. Then he saw a man who was out plowing a field, and another walking behind him who had a mouth like a bushel and was constantly scooping up, gulping and swallowing the furrow.

The shepherd jumped for joy, he clasped his arms around the glutton and said, "Come with me, friend, and you'll get far finer things to eat than this furrow, and so much you'll be full!"

The two of them walked on in good spirits and happened upon a man who was standing up to his head in water, holding his mouth like a tub, with the water falling into it like an abyss, yet he kept crying out how thirsty he was. The shepherd invited him along, too, "Hey, gulper, come with me, there's better drink waiting for you, and more than you can swallow!"

All three of them were heading toward the castle, when they came across a long-legged man who was standing in the middle of a field on just one leg.

The shepherd asked him why he wasn't standing on both legs, and the longshanks answered, "If I let both of my feet touch the ground, I take off and start running so fast that I catch every rabbit."

The shepherd invited him to come along, too. They went into the castle, where the glutton ate everything that was on the table almost without setting a dish down, the gulper drank everything to the last bead of liquid, and the long-legged fellow served both of them, running back and forth like a rabbit, and they still complained they were going to die of hunger and thirst.

Before the hour was out the shepherd appeared before the king. "King, I've eaten up everything and drunk everything that your table had to offer. Now give me what you promised, half of your kingdom and your daughter's hand!"

The king was amazed and went to see with his own eyes if it was true, and what he saw sent him reeling.

He had seven wild hares, so he told the shepherd, "Tomorrow morning I want you to chase these seven hares out to pasture, but be sure that you come back at dusk with every last one of them! If so much as one of them goes missing, it will mean your head. Otherwise you'll get what I've promised."

The shepherd drove the hares out to pasture and feared for his head that he might not be their match, but then longshanks joined him and said, "Don't give it a thought, I'll help you, if any of them get away, I'll bring them back."

The king was also wracked with worry that he might lose his kingdom and daughter, so he dressed up in disguise and went after them. He found them grazing all seven hares, not one of which had escaped.

So he tried to trick them, and he went up and addressed the two shepherds, "Hey you two, what if I asked you to sell me one of those hares. How much would you want?"

The shepherd replied, "They're not for sale. They're from the king's castle and we've been ordered under pain of death to bring each and every one of them back home."

The king said, "A hundred talars is quite a fine sum. Give me one of the hares!" But they refused.

The king pleaded, "I'll give you two hundred! Tell the king that a fox caught one of them." But they remained insistent that they couldn't do it.

The king refused to give up and offered them three hundred talars.

At this point the shepherd recognized the king and, feeling mischievous, replied, "It's a deal! We'll let you have it for three hundred talars, but only if you kneel down in front of me and kiss the sole of my boot."

The king was in a bind over his kingdom and daughter, so like it or not he knelt down and kissed the boot's muddy sole. He counted out three hundred talars and got the hare, all the while grinding his teeth and thinking, "You just wait, that kiss is going to cost you your head!"

The king went away and the shepherd ordered his longshanked friend, "Stretch out those legs quick, run as fast as you can, and catch me that hare, so that we've got the full count of seven again."

And so it was. At dusk as they were driving the hares back home, the king was waiting for them at the door to the castle and around the corner behind him his guards stood in wait for the king to call them.

The king counted the hares and his face dropped, for there were seven of them. Once again he'd failed to outwit the shepherd. But he thought of one final way.

An empty bushel was brought in and the king ordered the shepherd, "Talk into that bushel and when the bushel is so full of words that no more fit in, that's when you'll get my daughter to marry and with her half of my kingdom. Otherwise, it's your head!"

All the generals and ministers were assembled, a judge stood at the door, and on the other side of the door stood the executioner, holding a bare sword.

But the crafty shepherd wasn't worried one bit and he started speaking distinctly and loudly into the bushel, saying this, "My king and master ordered me to drive seven wild hares out to pasture, but then a stranger came and said to me, 'I'll give you one hundred talars for one of those hares,' but I replied, 'I can't sell it to you, for my king and master has ordered me to drive all seven of them back home,' then it turned out that the stranger was his highness the king himself and he wouldn't stop and he promised me three hundred, so I gave him a hare for three hundred, and on top of it his highness the king had to kiss..."

Just then the king shouted, "Cease and desist! Don't you see that the bushel is already full of words?"

And he gladly gave the shepherd half of his kingdom and his daughter to marry, if only to shut him up.