THE HONEST WOODCUTTER

Once upon a time, far away in the hills, there was a very small mountain village. In that village lived an old woodcutter who had devoted his whole life to working hard so he could take care of his family. He would spend his days walking along a river in the mountains, looking for trees to fell, and when he finished, he would send the trees down the river and they would float all the way to a hamlet by a lake where the townspeople would catch them and turn the wood into bowls and furniture and any other useful thing they might need. One day, as he was chopping down a tree, his axe slipped out of his hand and fell into the river. The current was very strong and the woodcutter knew better than to jump into the water and try to catch it. Upset, he paced around and wept, not knowing how he would survive without his axe. Mercury, the god of wealth and good fortune, was passing by and heard the woodcutter wailing, so he stopped at the river to see what had happened. He saw the old man sitting by the river, mourning his lost axe, and decided he would help. He reached into the water and pulled out a golden axe, which he brought to the woodcutter. "Thank you, Mercury, but this is not my axe," the wood cutter said. "This axe is very beautiful, but I liked my old one. It fit my hands perfectly. Could you please look in the water again and see what else you can find?"

Mercury was surprised that the woodcutter would refuse a golden axe, but he once again reached into the water and pulled out an axe entirely made of silver. But the old man refused the gift once again and asked Mercury to try one last time. This time the god pulled out an old axe – the wooden handle worn down where old hands had held it for many years.

"That's my axe! My beautiful axe!" the woodcutter shouted, ecstatic.

"I like your honesty, woodcutter," the god said, and told him to keep all three axes.

When the old man returned home, he told his wife about everything that had happened. Excited, they tried to split wood in their backyard with the golden one, and when they hit the log with the axe the wood doubled! Every time the woodcutter split a log, he would have twice as much wood. The woodcutter was grateful to Mercury; he and his wife would never have to worry again!

When the neighbours heard the story, they all came to visit and see the magic axe. One of their neighbours, however, decided he wanted a magic axe of his own and the next morning went to the woods by the river. When he got there, he threw his own axe into the water and started wailing. Mercury heard his cries immediately and set out to find out what had happened. He wanted to help this woodcutter, too, and once again pulled a golden axe out of the stream.

"Yes! That's my axe!" the man immediately shouted.

But Mercury knew he was lying and the man's greed enraged him. He took the axe back and made it disappear.

"Please," the man begged, "won't you at least retrieve my old axe for me?" But Mercury did not forgive greed easily and refused to reach into the river again, and so the man's axe stayed at the bottom of the brook forever and no one ever tried to trick Mercury again.