

The Turnip Princess

retold by Reg Down

From: A Tangle of Tales © Copyright 2013

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This German fairy tale was recently released from an archive in Regensburg. It was collected by the historian Franz Xaver von Schoenwerth (1810-1886) in the Bavarian region of Overpfalz over 150 years ago. It was published in the Guardian newspaper in England in spring 2012.

The original tale was, to my mind, rough and fragmentary, and difficult to read. It hardly seemed to hang together as a story, being more a synopsis than a told tale. Yet the images it presented were strong and powerful. They spoke, to my mind, of the interconnections between consciousness, the body and the senses. I rewrote the tale as a way to deepen my connection to the images.

There was once a young prince. He started off small, as most of us do, but he soon grew to be tall and handsome. He lived with his mother in a castle upon a high hill. The castle had windows that saw for many miles around and the air was filled with light and as clear as glass. But his mother, the queen, was sad and quiet. The King had gone out hunting the day the prince was born and never returned. It was as if he'd vanished into thin air or been turned into a wild beast in the forest.

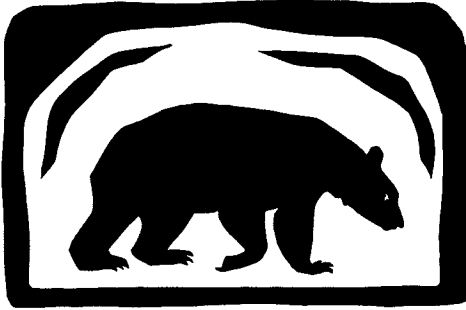
When the prince came of age he decided to see the world. He bid his mother farewell and set off on his journey. At first the way was clear and the roads well made, but soon enough the roads

became tracks and the tracks became trails and the trails led into a forest where all certain paths vanished or crisscrossed in confusion. At last, tired and weary, he found a cave and curled up against the back wall to spend the night.

In the morning he awoke to find an old woman and a bear standing beside him. The old woman was strangely beautiful. She told the prince that she wanted him to stay and marry her. But the prince didn't like her at all. He could not endure her presence and tried to flee—but he found he couldn't get out. Every time he walked towards the light he found himself deep inside the cave again.



One day the old woman left and he was alone with the bear. The bear came over, snuffling and snorting, and spoke to him.



"Pull the rusty nail from the wall," he said, "then I will be freed from enchantment. Place the nail beneath a turnip in a field and you shall have a beautiful wife."

The prince gripped the nail in the wall. He gripped it so strongly that the cave shook and the nail cracked loudly like a clap of thunder. Behind him the bear stood up from the ground like a man. He was bearded and wore a crown on his head.

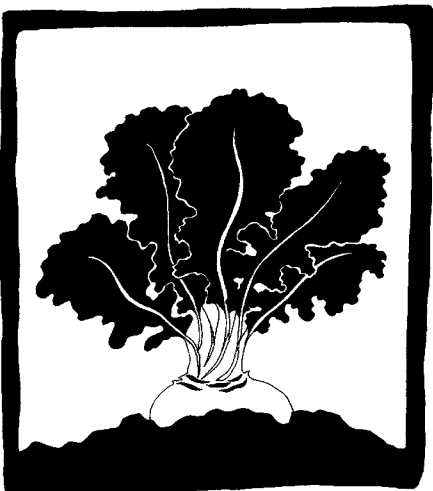
"Now I will find a beautiful maiden," cried the prince, and putting the nail into his pocket he was able to leave the cave.

He journeyed here and he journeyed there, always looking for a plot of turnips.

At last he found one and went into the field. He was about to put the nail beneath a turnip when a hideous monster appeared above his head. He sprang back in terror, dropped the nail, and pricked his finger on a thorny hedge. His finger bled and bled until he fell down senseless.



When the prince awoke he was no longer in the turnip field. He stood up and touched his face. He found he had a blond beard, long and frizzy. He had slept a long, long time. He searched his pockets but the nail was gone.



So he set off to find what he had lost. Over field and over fen, past rocky cliffs and barren lands he wandered, searching every turnip field he came across, but nowhere did he find what he was looking for. Days passed, nights passed, many of them, and he was a long time a-wandering.

One evening, as the sun was low in the sky, he sat on the ridge of a hill beneath a bush. The bush was a flowering blackthorn with red blossoms blooming on one branch.

He reached up and broke off the branch. When he looked down he saw a large white turnip on the ground before him. He stuck the blackthorn branch into the turnip, then lay on the ground and fell asleep.

In the morning the turnip had opened like a clam. Inside lay the nail. The rind of the turnip looked like a nutshell, and the kernel inside was shaped into a picture. He saw a small foot, a slim hand, the whole body, even the fine, lovely hair of a delicate girl.

Taking the nail the prince journeyed back to the forest and came at last to the cave. It was empty and no one was there. He took out the nail and struck it forcefully into the wall of the cave. At once the old woman and the bear were there in the cave with him.

"Tell me," said the prince angrily to the old woman, "where have you put the beautiful girl I saw beneath the blackthorn bush."

But the old woman giggled like a girl, and replied. "You have me, so why do you scorn me?"

The bear nodded and looked at the nail in the wall.

"You are honest," the prince said to the bear, "but I won't be fooled by that old woman again."

"Just pull out the nail," growled the bear.

The prince reached for the nail and pulled—but he only pulled it half out. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bear was already half man, and the horrible old woman was becoming the beautiful maiden.

Quickly he drew the nail out of the wall completely, and the prince and the young woman flew into each other's arms. At last she was freed from the spell that lay upon her. Behind them, on the floor of the cave, the nail burst into flames and burnt up like fire.

The couple turned to the bear. But the bear had changed to his proper self and become the prince's own father.

Then joyfully, happily, the bride and groom and father-king journeyed out of the forest back to the castle upon the high hill.

