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Description: These are Swahili stories. The illustrations are by John Hargrave.

The Magic Date Trees

Once upon a time there was a man, and he married a wife and had two sons.

After many days his wife died, and the man stayed awhile, and then he married again.

Those two sons grew up, till at last their father died.

So their stepmother turned them out of the house and they travelled away.

Now they were very poor, and had no money, nor had they any food.

So they travelled on, and by day they journeyed and ate of the fruits of the forest, and at night they climbed into a tree and slept there, for fear of the wild beasts of the jungle.

Till after many days they arrived at a town, and when they came there the elder brother said to the younger, "You, my brother, sit here outside the town while I go in and beg for food."

Now it so perchanced that the chief of that town had just died and he left no son. So the people of that place had gone to the astrologers and soothsayers and had asked them, "How shall we choose another chief?"

The astrologers had answered them, "Let there be a meeting of all the people of the town, and let a lime be thrown into their midst. He on whom this lime shall fall, take him and make him your chief."

Now when the elder of the two brothers entered the town he found all the people of that place assembled in the centre of that town.

As he drew near to this congregation a lime hit him on the head, and all the people turned and, rushing at him, seized him and placed him in their midst.

So he was greatly afeared.

They took him, crying out, "This is our chief!" and they carried him to the palace amidst general acclamation.

So he sat there as chief of that town and during that day and the next he was afraid to say that he had a brother outside the town awaiting for his return.

On the third day he sent soldiers to look for him, but they found him not, for when he perceived that his brother did not return he was afraid and went away.

So the elder brother remained as chief of that place for many months, and he sat with sorrow for the thought of his brother.

Till one day he looked out of the window and saw below in the street a poor man selling mats, and when he beheld him he recognised him as his brother.

So he sent out soldiers to bring him into the palace.

When the younger brother saw the soldiers, and was told that the chief of the town had sent for him, he feared exceedingly.

He was brought into the palace, and his brother was very joyful to see him again, and he honoured him greatly, and made him as his Wazir.

So after that they lived together, and they ordered the affairs of that town, and grew very prosperous.

Now when the chief of that town had grown very rich he looked upon a certain woman and beheld her very beautiful, and desired much to take her for his wife.

Outside the town there was a creek, and over this creek ran a bridge, but at low tide there was no water under the bridge.

The woman said to him, "Not till you pile up wealth from the ground below the bridge up to its top, and give it all to me as my marriage portion, will I marry you."

So the chief collected all his wealth and piled it up from beneath the bridge, and, when he had exhausted all his property, it just reached level with the top of the bridge.

So that woman said to him, "Give me a respite of four hours and then will I marry you."

So she went away, and she prepared a dish of chicken and eggs and curry, and with it she mixed opium and Indian hemp, and she sent it to him as he was awaiting her.

He ate of this dish, and he lost consciousness from the strength of the opium and Indian hemp.

Then she came with her slaves, and some of them she ordered to take him out to sea in a boat and cast him away, while the remainder took all the wealth of the chief and put it in her house.

So those slaves took him and, putting him in a boat, rowed him far out to sea and cast him in.

Now it so happened that he was washed on to a shoal, and when he recovered his senses he found himself sitting on a sandspit.

He gazed all round him, and could see no land in any direction.

Then he looked behind him and saw that the sandspit came from a small island, and on this island were two date trees.

He came to the first tree, and he saw that there were growing dates on it, but they were as yet unripe.

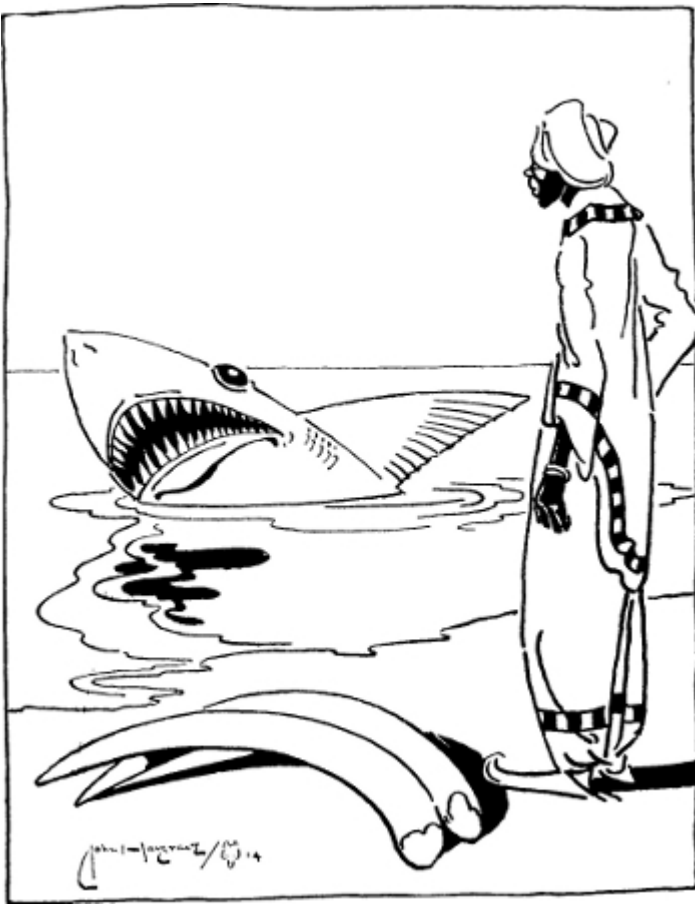
As he felt the pangs of hunger he plucked a date from this tree and ate it; immediately there grew out of his mouth two large tusks of ivory. These were so heavy in his mouth that he could hardly stand.

On the second tree he perceived that there were also dates and that these were ripe.

He thought to himself, "Here I am without food, and there is no land in sight. I will most certainly die of hunger and thirst, and now, in addition to all my troubles, I have two tusks growing from my mouth, and they are of such a weight that I can scarcely move. Perhaps if I eat of this second tree I will die, and then my troubles will be at an end."

So he plucked a date from the second tree and ate it. Immediately he had eaten it his tusks dropped off on to the ground.

At that moment there appeared a shark who was swimming past in the sea, and the shark stopped and asked him what he was doing.



He told him how he had found himself cast on this island, and asked the shark to take him to the shore. The shark refused, saying, "You are my enemy, and it is you sons of men who kill and eat me."

So he said to the shark, "I am the Sultan of such and such a town, and if you carry me away from this island I will give an order that the fishermen of the town kill no more sharks."

So they made an agreement after this manner, and the shark consented to take him on his back.

Then the man plaited two small baskets of date leaves, and the one he filled with dates from the first tree, and the other he filled with dates from the second.

Then he took his two baskets and climbed on to the shark's back, and the shark carried him till they arrived in sight of the shore.

Then the shark said to him, "I am afraid to go any nearer the shore, for if the sons of men see me they will kill me."

So he called a Tewa fish and asked him to take the chief the remaining distance to the shore. But the Tewa fish said to him, "You are one of the sons of men, and you are our enemies, for it is you who kill and eat us."

So the man made a compact with the Tewa fish, that if he carried him safely to the shore he would give out an order to the fishermen making it unlawful to kill Tewa fish.

So the Tewa agreed, and he climbed on to his back and was brought safely to the shore.

When he arrived he got off the Tewa's back and, taking his two little baskets, came to his brother's house.

Now there was no more wealth left to him, for all his property he had given that woman.

He said to himself, "Let me try now and see if these dates will do the same to others as they did to me."

So he took the basket of unripe dates and gave one to every one in the house, and behold, they all grew tusks of great size.

All of them were then very angry with him, but he took the second basket, and when each had eaten one of the dates their tusks dropped off.

Then he called a slave of the household and gave him dates of the first basket and told him, "Go and hawk these dates in the town, but you must only sell to such and such a person," and he told him the name of the woman whom he had wished to marry, and who had all his property.

That woman was now exceedingly rich, and she had all his wealth and all the properties and plantations of the town in her possession.

Now as the slave passed her house she was looking out, with her head outside the window; and she called the slave and asked what he was selling.

He replied, "I am selling these dates," and he offered her one, and handed it up for her to taste.

So she took it and ate it there as she was leaning out of the window, and immediately there grew from her mouth two tusks of such size that she was unable to withdraw her head from the window.

So she remained there all that night, and on the next day she sent a crier round the town saying, "Who will deliver me from here, where I am fixed, I shall give him a great reward."

On the next day she was still in the window, and she sent a crier round the town to say, "Who will deliver me, I shall marry him and give him half my property."

On the third day she was still stuck there, and on this day she sent a crier round to say, "Who will deliver me to-day I shall give him all my property and I shall become his slave."

The chief sent round a slave to say, "I want a signed document to this effect."

So the woman wrote and signed the document as required, while she was still fixed there in the window, and it was taken to the chief.

Then he came there and gave her a date of the second basket, and immediately the tusks dropped off and she was freed.

So the chief received back all his wealth and property, and he lived in happiness and prosperity, he and his brother, while the woman became his slave.

