

LITTLE SISTER AND BROTHER

Once upon a time there was a little girl and her little brother. The little girl was gentle, well-behaved and said her prayers properly at bedtime. Her brother went his own way, was unruly and cheeky, and caused no end of problems for his parents. One day they both went into the forest to pick strawberries. They wandered deeper and deeper into the dark woods. While the little boy just kept eating greedily, without thinking about either his mother or God, his sister had brought a little basket into which she dropped the sweet red berries to take back to her mother.

As they were together in the forest — the little girl collecting and her brother eating the berries — there appeared a beautiful lady. She was bathed in a wonderful radiance, and the crown on her head shone as brightly as the sun. The little girl stopped her work and respectfully stood up when the lady appeared. Her brother did not, he was too busy eating strawberries to be distracted by anything.

“What are you doing, little girl?” enquired the beautiful lady smiling.

“I’m picking fresh strawberries for my mother.” answered the little girl, blushing a little at being spoken to by such a beautiful lady.

The lady smiled once more and presented the little girl with a small golden box, saying “be good my dear, and, when you open this box, think of me. I promise you that we shall meet again.”

Smiling, the lady with the shining crown turned away and approached the brother. He was still greedily gobbling strawberries as fast as he could. “Whatever are you doing, little boy?” she asked kindly, but seriously.

“Tasting!” the angry boy replied sullenly “If you really want to know.”

Her eyes moistened and two tiny tears wet her cheeks. Sorrowfully, she gave the unruly child a small black box. “Remember me when you open it.” she said sadly, and disappeared into the woods. The light of her radiance through the trees was like that of the sun setting behind the mountains. She was, in fact, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

What was in the boxes? You will find out soon enough, as did the little boy. Impatiently, he immediately ripped the lid off the small black box. Out of it slithered two black — blacker than the blackest black — worms. As they wriggled they grew larger, and longer and longer. They wrapped themselves completely around the terrified boy, and dragged him deeper into the dark forest. He was never seen again by a living soul.

His sister thought otherwise. She said to herself “My mother will be pleased. Before I open this little box, I must show it to her.” With this thought, she carried on picking berries. When her basket was full, she wanted her brother to

return home with her, to their mother. Not seeing him, she called out loudly, then again louder and then at the top of her voice. There was no answer. As dusk fell, she continued to search all around — to the right and left, and in front and behind — but he was nowhere to be found.

“Maybe” she thought “he has already gone ahead, or is hiding to frighten me.” So, still worried, she picked up her basket and little golden box, and made her way home to the cottage where her mother would be waiting. Her brother was not there, and together daughter and mother waited as the evening turned to night. While they waited for the brother who would not come, the little girl told her mother of the beautiful lady and showed her the little golden box. “Please look after it” asked the little girl, looking deep into her mother’s blue eyes, “but first, may I see what is inside?”

“Why, of course” said the mother, and her daughter carefully opened the lid of the box. Two tiny angels fluttered out, and as they flew they grew and grew. They took the gentle little girl between them and, as the mother watched, flew higher and higher, all the way to heaven. Her mother sat still on the bench outside the cottage, following them with her eyes which were filling with tears of sadness and joy as she quietly said “My dear child, you have gone before me, but I truly hope that we will find each other again in a better place.”

A BASKET IN A BASKET

There was once a very poor and very sad girl, whose parents died leaving her alone. Her parents' cottage had to be sold to pay off debts with nothing left over, so she was homeless and penniless. Indeed, she had nothing but the raggedy clothes on her back. With nowhere else to go, she wandered into the forest, where, in happier times, she used to pick berries and mushrooms. If her kind didn't want her, she thought, maybe she could find a place among the deer and the rabbits. As she wandered deeper and deeper into the dark woods, the sun sank deeper in the sky. In the evening light, the huge firs and pines cast dark and frightening shadows. Frightened, the girl began to cry. She cried so much that her tears covered the moss and leaves like the morning dew, and even the bare rocks had pity on her. Suddenly a huntsman appeared in front of her, as if he came from nowhere. "Why are you crying, child?" he asked.

The poor girl wiped her eyes and lowered her head, answering softly "Because I am hungry, have nowhere to go, and the forest is so terrifying!" After she spoke, the poor orphan shivered and cried even more plaintively.

"Hush!" urged the stranger "If that is all, I can help. Come with me and I will show you how. You won't regret it." Calming herself, she followed the huntsman, who silently walked deeper and deeper into the woods. When he reached an ancient great oak tree covered in moss, he stopped. "Child" he said, breaking his silence, "we have reached our destination. No harm has, or will come to you, so please still your sobs and dry your tears." The poor sad girl wiped the last two tears from her eyes and stood quietly, wondering what was going to happen next.

"Great Grey Oak, open for me!" commanded the stranger.

Suddenly, the great broad trunk split open, and the inside glittered, glistened and sparkled so brightly that it was blinding. There were silver clothes, gold coins and magnificent jewels, and it all shone brilliantly out into the forest. The poor, surprised orphan girl had no idea what had just happened. She just stood there, staring, with her eyes and mouth wide open.

"Everything here is yours, and you may take whatever you wish, whenever you wish." said the huntsman. "But, you must keep it a secret from all other people, and you must be able to remember my name."

The wonderfully surprised girl managed to stammer a happy "Oh, yes!" and promised that she would remember his name, when he had told it to her.

"My name is —" continued the stranger "— *a basket in a basket.*"

"A basket in a basket" repeated the girl, again and again, to burn the unusual name of the equally strange green huntsman deep into her memory.

“I will return seven years from today. Until then you may take from the Great Grey Oak whatever you wish. But —” warned the stranger “if, when I return, you can’t call me by name, then misfortune will fall on you. Use the treasure wisely, your happiness and fortune depend on it.”

She wanted to thank him, but when she looked around he had already vanished. When she looked again at the oak tree, its trunk was solid and stood motionless in front of her. Only a few of its small higher branches swayed in the gentle breeze. She only had one way to find out if what happened was real, or only a dream —

“Great Grey Oak, open for me!” she tried hesitantly.

The great broad trunk opened, and inside she saw all of the same treasures as before. With an unsteady hand she reached in and pulled out a single shiny new silver coin — 20 kreuzers — with a double eagle and the emperor’s head on it! As soon as she pulled out her hand, the trunk closed. The Great Grey Oak solemnly stood once more in its place in the forest, as if nothing had happened

It was now getting dark, and the girl no longer thought of finding a place with the rabbits and deer. Instead, it was the bear and the wolf who came to mind if she spent the night in the woods. She looked again at the tree, and then all around, so that she would remember it and where it stood. Then she started out in the direction where the forest appeared to be thinner and there was more light. After only a short distance, she came across a well-made wide road, which she followed. As she walked, she kept saying “a basket in a basket” under her breath to herself. At the end of the road, she stopped facing a great big beautiful castle.

Gathering her courage, she entered the courtyard, turned to the side and went up the stairs to the kitchen. Inside, the cook was busy with preparing dinner. The roast on the spit sizzled its welcome, and the orphan girl shyly approached the cook at the stove. She gently asked the cook for work or a place to stay for the night. The cook looked the girl over, from head to toe, and then from toe to head, before angrily telling her to “Get out of the clean kitchen!” and “We don’t need any filthy little beggars here.”

The poor girl again broke down, and started to wail and cry, and couldn’t stop. Eventually the cold heart of the cook softened a little. She said “Well then, if you aren’t going to leave, then I suppose you can look after the chickens. You must sleep in the chicken coop, get up early and go to bed late. But be warned — if a single chick goes missing, you will be chased out of the castle and grounds.

The poor girl was happy to be given a place, and immediately went down to the meadow and drove the cocks, hens and chicks into the coop, where she slept with them on the straw. Each morning she drove her little herd out into the field, repeating under her breath “a basket in a basket”. All day long she took care of the birds, and in the evening drove them all back into the coop,

where she slept among them on a bed of straw. So it went on for a week, and the happy girl thought often about the oak tree and “a basket in a basket”.

Then it was Sunday morning. The bells were ringing all around, and everybody was dressed in their Sunday best on their way to church. It saddened the poor girl to see everybody else out and about in their finery, while she alone remained with the chickens in her dirty grey smock. Then she remembered the treasure in the tree, and, making sure that nobody saw, hurried into the woods.

“Geat Grey Oak, open for me!” she said nervously.

It’s broad trunk opened, and among the treasures inside were the most beautiful dresses that anybody had ever seen. She took one which shone as brilliantly as the afternoon sun on a summer day, and, after bathing in a stream, put it on.

She arrived at the church when the priest was at the altar, but in time for the singing of the Gloria. When the congregation saw the young lady in the wonderful sunshine dress, they all moved aside for her. She found herself at front, next to the lord of the castle. As the poor girl in the rich dress dropped to her knees to pray, the young count was smitten. He couldn’t stop looking at her, and the more he looked the more he was distracted because she appeared to him more beautiful than was possible. After the mass was over, the beautiful lady in the sunshine dress hurried out of the church and vanished into the forest. There, she removed the brilliant golden dress and put on the dirty grey smock. It was the poor chicken maid who returned to the castle.

The count was miserable the whole of the following week. He felt the emptiness from an absence which he couldn’t describe. He was uneasy, and stood long looking out of the window, without really seeing anything. The days seemed to drag and he found himself waiting expectantly for church on Sunday. Finally, it was Sunday!

The church bells were ringing and, as everybody went to church dressed in their finery, the dirty chicken maid went alone into the woods. She went deeper and deeper into the forest until she came to the ancient oak tree.

“Great Grey Oak, open for me!”

The great trunk opened, and among the treasures inside were the most beautiful dresses that anybody had ever seen. She took one which shone as lightly and gently as the full moon on a clear autumn evening, and, after bathing in a stream, put it on. She also took a small purse full of the same shiny new silver coins as the one she took before. She hurried to the church and when the congregation saw the young lady in the wonderful moonlight dress, they all moved aside for her. She found herself at front, next to the Count. As he saw the beautiful maiden in the moonlight dress kneeling to pray, he couldn’t turn his eyes away. When the service was coming to an end the Count signalled to his servants to follow the unknown lady. They hurried after her as she rushed out of

the church and into the forest. When she saw that she couldn't outrun them, she opened her money bag and scattered the coins behind her. The servants greedily fell about collecting the silver, thinking that if they collected enough they could find better positions. The young lady in the moonlight dress escaped undetected to the oak tree, and the poor maid in the dirty grey smock returned to the castle. There, in the meadow behind the tower, she continued to watch over her chickens.

Now, the young Count could not find any peace at all. He was pining for the beautiful maiden in the moonlight dress, and that made him restless and uneasy. The blush of the rose, which used to bloom on his cheeks, withered and his smooth forehead furrowed. He stood on the terrace, for hours on end, staring into the distance. With family and friends, he had no idea what the conversation was about. The days dragged on, and it seemed to him that the interminable week would never end. But Sunday came again, and the church bells were ringing once more. The Count and everybody else made their way to the church, but the chicken maid again went unnoticed into the forest. She washed herself in the stream, and approached the ancient tree.

"Great Grey Oak, open for me!" she said anxiously.

The broad trunk opened, and, from the most beautiful dresses that anybody had ever seen, she chose one which was like the heavens on a clear night. It was a deep blue and full of twinkling golden stars, which seemed to gently move, sometimes shining brightly and sometimes less so. She also took a purse full of bright new golden ducats, all with a double eagle and the emporor's head on them.

They were already singing the Gloria when the young lady in the heavenly dress entered the church and kneeled in prayer beside the Count. His heart lifted, and he couldn't turn his eyes away from the beautiful girl in the shimmering heavenly dress. He had truly never seen a sight so wonderful, and his heart was so full that he removed his signet ring and slipped it on her finger.

After the service, when the unknown lady in the heavenly dress rushed into the forest, the Count's servants hurried after her. When she saw that she couldn't outrun them, she opened her money bag and scattered the coins behind her, which glistened and glittered on the ground as if it had rained gold. The servants greedily fell about collecting the ducats, thinking that if they had enough money they could find better positions. The young lady in the heavenly dress escaped undetected to the oak tree, and the poor maid in the dirty grey smock returned to the castle. There, in the meadow behind the tower, she continued to watch over her chickens.

Now the young Count was really miserable, and his heart was heavy. Every day his face was paler and seemed a little older. Doctors from the whole country were called in, but none of them could help. There are no medicines for a broken heart. His friends, who knew a little of the matter, proposed a great banquet, with a crowd of cheerful friends, to raise his spirits.

It was very busy in the kitchen, and even the chicken maid had to help. She first had to pluck the very chickens which she had previously cared for. Then, she had to work at the stove, holding the pan for the cook who was frying dough cakes. As the fat bubbled and spat, and the dough cakes floated in all directions, the maid wanted to try making a cake herself. The cook refused every time she asked, until they were nearly finished. Then, because she knew that they had made enough for the table, she said "Now, you may try with what is left of the dough."

Excitedly the girl dropped a cake into the boiling fat, but not before she had mixed the Count's ring into the dough. As the cake swam in the bubbling fat, it grew bigger and bigger, and swelled so that when it came out it was the best of all and wouldn't fit on an ordinary plate. Everybody in the kitchen was astonished, and the cook sent it to the table on a special platter.

At the banquet, after everybody had admired the wonderful cake, the miserable Count cut into it — and promptly collapsed into his chair. He recovered very quickly and, with renewed vigour, sent for the cook. He asked her excitedly who had made this particular cake. Eventually, she nervously admitted that the chicken maid had begged her for so long to make a cake that she allowed her to try with last of the dough. Because it turned out so good, she let it be sent to the table. The astonished Count thanked her heartfully, showed her his ring, and ordered that she send the girl immediately to the banqueting hall. "But she is so shabby and filthy!" replied the cook.

"Then let her get washed and changed first!" ordered the Count, and the cook returned to the kitchen. The girl had already washed herself, and when the cook told her that she had be sent for, she left and changed into a dress which she had hidden in her straw bed. She had brought it from the oak the day before, and it was a soft golden colour like the dawn sky on a clear spring morning. When she wore it, she was a beautiful as the morning light and nobody saw the shabby chicken maid. As she entered the hall, everbody present was astonished over her beauty. The count rushed to her side and guided her to a seat next to his. The banquet became their wedding celebration, because in the evening they attended the chapel in the castle, where the chaplain performed the marriage ceremony.

The Count and the beautiful Countess now lived happily together in the castle and, being much in love, thought of little else. The years passed quickly and the beautiful Countess had an equally beautiful daughter who could sit in her lap. Nearly seven years had passed, and her husband and daughter were happy and content, when the Countess suddenly remembered the green huntsman who was responsible for her good fortune. She remembered her promise and what would happen if she didn't keep it, but she could not remember his name!

As the seventh year approached, the Countess became more anxious. She was sad and no longer smiled. Her face became so pale and her expression so pained that she was almost unrecognisable. When her daughter sat on her lap

and looked into her eyes, she could only cry because of the impending doom. Then, when she wept, her little girl cried also. It was very miserable in the castle, but nobody — except the Countess — knew why. The Count tried everything he could think of to find the cause and raise his wife's spirits, but without success.

One evening the sad Countess sat on the terrace looking into the garden where the gardeners were working. She was sadder and more frightened than ever before, because the next day would be seven years to the day since she met the huntsman. His impossible name still escaped her memory. As she remained there sitting and thinking, the gardeners started packing up their things. One of them was carrying a garden trug which he threw into a wicker bushel. As the Countess saw the hand basket fall into the larger one, she gasped, laughed, and shouted "a basket in a basket!"

Hearing this the Count and the servants all came running. Nobody, could understand what had happened to make the Countess so happy, but the Count was just as happy and kissed her.

The following day, as the Countess was taking a walk alone, the green stranger appeared before her. She smiled and greeted him by name. He smiled, put his finger to his lips, and vanished forevermore. The Countess and the Count lived together happily for many years afterwards, and had two more children — a son and another daughter.

And, of course, this tale is true, because the storyteller is still alive to this day.

THE ADDER QUEEN

The Adder Queen is snake which looks and slithers like any other adder, except that on her head she wears a tiny crown. That is how you know she is the Adder Queen. The crown glistens like gold, and its points sparkle like jewels. If the Adder Queen comes to you, and you are kind to her, your good luck is guaranteed. Sooner or later, the Queen will give you her crown, and the crown can do anything for you. If you put it with your pocket money, you could buy as many toys, games and books as you want, but your money would still be in your pocket. If you put the crown with the toys, the whole room will be filled with toys and there will be nowhere on the floor for you to put your feet. But this story isn't about you, it's about a farmer's daughter who was kind to the Adder Queen.

Once upon a time there was an unhappy little girl who lived on a farm and was treated very badly by her evil stepmother. All she heard from her stepmother were complaints, and the only presents she received were beatings for not doing her work properly. She had to get up very early in the morning each day to work in the cattle shed. When she finished work, late in the evening, all she was given to eat was a small bowl of gruel. But she wasn't unhappy, because she had a special friend.

Every morning, when she went into the cattle shed, she was joined by a snake which was wearing a little crown, glistening like gold with its points sparkling like jewels. When the adder looked at the girl, its gaze was so comforting and full of care, that she forgot all her pains and troubles. One morning, as the adder was watching her milk the cows, she thought it looked thirsty and gave it some to drink. After quenching her thirst, the Adder Queen turned to the girl and looked deeply into her eyes, silently saying thank you. That day, she delivered two extra pitchers of milk, and her stepmother had nothing to complain about.

From then on, every time the Queen came into the barn, she gave her milk to drink. Every time, after drinking, the adder looked deep into her eyes with an expression which seemed to say "One day, young lady, I will show you how grateful I am".

This went on for many years. Every morning and every evening the adder came and received a drink of milk. Little by little, one day at a time, the little girl became older, wiser and kinder, and grew up to become the most beautiful and best loved girl in the village.

She was no longer a little girl, but a beautiful young woman, and as often happens to beautiful young women, one day she got married. The wedding feast was a magnificent party, with good food, music and dancing, and everybody was happy and were enjoying themselves. Then, as the party was nearing its end, everybody became quiet – a snake was slithering through the hall towards the newly wed couple. It was wearing a crown!

The Adder Queen quietly slid up the table leg, onto the back of the chair and settled herself on the bride's shoulder. She looked deep into the bride's eyes, which were moist with tears of joy. Then the Queen shook her head, so that her crown fell into the bride's lap, and slithered quietly away, never to return. The young lady picked up the crown and slipped it into her purse. Afterwards, her money never became less, however much she spent, and her farm became the richest and grandest in the area.