

THE CHICKEN MAID

Once upon a time, there was a count who lived in a magnificent palace with his wife and his many sons and daughters. The count and countess loved all of their children, except for one. They gave all of their children many presents, except for one. All of their children were very happy, except for one. Only the youngest, prettiest daughter was unhappy. Only the youngest, prettiest daughter cried herself to sleep every night. Only the youngest, prettiest daughter never received presents. Only the youngest, prettiest daughter was unloved by her parents.

One day she decided to run away to try to find her own way in world. She thought that even amongst strangers, nobody could love her less than her own mother and father. So, she packed some money and three fine dresses — one blue, one red one and one white one — and left the palace. The further she walked, the happier she became until, for the first time in her life, she was quite cheerful and skipped along with a spring in her step.

After a while she met a poor peasant woman who was wearing a ragged and dirty dress. She asked the woman if she would like to change clothes with her. The poor woman looked at the young lady's fine clothes and then at her smiling face. She didn't know whether to think that the fine young lady was making fun of her, or if she really was crazy. Whichever she was, she thought it best to ignore the young lady and moved to carry on her way. But, the girl followed her and pleaded with her, and in the end she agreed. Both went happily on their way: the peasant woman in all her new finery, and the young lady wearing the ragged and dirty dress.

A little further on, she came to a steep cliff. The narrow path wound its way up through the rocks towards a great castle which overlooked the valley. She decided that it seemed to be a good place to look for work, and started to climb the path. But, before she did, she hid her money and the three dresses in a cave at the bottom of the hill.

When she reached door of the castle, she rang the bell. It was soon answered by a stiff-backed stern-faced steward who asked her coldly what she wanted. Words almost failed her, but gathering all her courage she told him softly that she was looking for work. At first he said "you've wasted your time climbing all the way up here, we don't need anybody", and started to close the door. But, as she turned away, he stopped and cried "Wait!". He continued "There is one position. The chicken maid left only this morning. You can take her place if you want."

And so the youngest, prettiest daughter of the count and countess became the chicken maid in the castle at the top of the cliffs. She worked hard and kept good care of her charges, fed them well, and they loved her for it. In truth, she was much happier listening to their clucking and scratching than hearing her mother's scolding and complaining.

Now, the lord of the castle was a young gentleman who wished to marry, but who knew very few young ladies and didn't have a bride. He decided to invite all the fine ladies and gentlemen in the area — and their daughters — to a great ball at his castle. He would then ask the most beautiful young lady he met at the ball to be his wife.

The day of the ball was a great occasion. Many lords, knights, their wives, and their daughters accepted the invitation. The great rooms of the castle were full of grand ladies and gentlemen in their finery, and their daughters in magnificent ball gowns. Uniformed servants carrying silver platters weaved their way through the throng, and the musicians assembled in the ballroom. Then they started to play.

When the chicken maid heard the music start she went to the stiff-backed stern-faced steward and asked him if she could look inside the ballroom, just for a moment. He refused, saying "Are you mad? I could never let a filthy thing like you into the ballroom with all those fine ladies and gentlemen."

She answered him, a little cheekily, "Don't worry, you won't be ashamed of me. I clean up well."

"Then" he replied "I won't stop you, but don't blame me if you get into trouble."

The chicken maid hurried away laughing to wash herself and plait her golden hair. Then she ran down the path to the cave at the bottom of the cliff, where she changed her ragged and dirty dress for the fine sky blue gown. The stiff-backed stern-faced steward didn't see her when she returned to the ballroom, but the young lord did. The musicians were just starting a new dance, and the young men were all seeking new dance partners. When the young lord saw the young lady in the blue gown, he hurried over to dance with her. She was the most beautiful girl in the room, and as he danced he couldn't stop staring into her clear blue eyes. But, then the music stopped and the beautiful young lady in the blue gown hurried out of the room. For the rest of the evening, the young man searched for her, but couldn't find her anywhere. The fine sky blue gown was in the cave, and the chicken maid in the ragged dirty dress was back with her hens and chicks.

Now, the lord of the castle was a young gentleman who knew who he wished to marry, but not who she was or how he could find her. He decided to invite all the fine ladies and gentlemen in the area — and their daughters — to another great ball at his castle. If the beautiful young lady in the blue gown appeared again, he would ask her to be his wife. To make sure he could, he gave instructions to the watch not to let guests leave the castle during the ball.

When the chicken maid heard the music start she went to the stiff-backed stern-faced steward and asked him if she could look inside the ballroom, just for a moment. She again told him "Don't worry, you won't be ashamed of me. I clean up well."

“Then” he replied “I won’t stop you, but don’t blame me if you get into trouble.”

The chicken maid hurried away happily to wash herself and plait her golden hair. Then she ran down the path to the cave at the bottom of the cliff, where she changed her ragged and dirty dress for the fine rose coloured gown. The stiff-backed stern-faced steward didn’t see her when she returned to the ballroom, but the young lord did. The musicians were just starting a new dance, and the young men were all seeking new dance partners. When the young lord saw the beautiful young lady in the rose coloured gown, he hurried over to dance with her. She was the most beautiful girl in the room, and as he danced he couldn’t stop staring into her clear blue eyes. But, then the music stopped and the beautiful young lady in the red gown hurried out of the room. At gate she scattered some silver coins which she had taken from the cave and, while the watchmen were picking them up, she ran down the path. For the rest of the evening, the young man and his men searched for her, but couldn’t find her anywhere. The fine rose coloured gown was in the cave, and the chicken maid in the ragged dirty dress was back with her hens and chicks.

Now, the lord of the castle was a young gentleman who was very sad because nobody could tell him the beautiful young lady’s name, where she came from or how he could find her. He decided to invite all the fine ladies and gentlemen in the area — and their daughters — to a third great ball at his castle. If the beautiful young lady appeared again, he would ask her to be his wife. To make sure he could, he again gave instructions to the watch and all the servants not to let guests leave the castle during the ball.

When the chicken maid heard the music start she went to the stiff-backed stern-faced steward and asked him if she could look inside the ballroom, just for a moment. She again told him “Don’t worry, you won’t be ashamed of me. I clean up well.”

“Then” he replied “I won’t stop you, but don’t blame me if you get into trouble.”

The chicken maid hurried away happily to wash herself and plait her golden hair. Then she ran down the path to the cave at the bottom of the cliff, where she changed her ragged and dirty dress for the shining white gown. The stiff-backed stern-faced steward didn’t see her when she returned to the ballroom, but the young lord did. The musicians were just starting a new dance, and the young men were all seeking new dance partners. When the young lord saw the beautiful young lady in the shining white gown, he hurried over to dance with her. She was the most beautiful girl in the room, and as he danced he slipped his own gold ring onto her finger. But, then the music stopped and the beautiful young lady in the shining white gown hurried out of the room. At the gate she scattered some gold coins which she had taken from the cave and, while the watchmen and servants were picking them up, she ran down the path. For the rest of the evening, the young man and his servants searched for her, but

couldn't find her anywhere. The fine shining white gown was in the cave, and the chicken maid in the ragged dirty dress was back with her hens and chicks.

Now, the lord of the castle was a young gentleman who was very sad because he still didn't know the beautiful young lady's name or where he could find her. One day, to raise his spirits, he asked the cook to prepare his favourite food: a delicious tangled mess of fried dough called *Strauben*, served with fruit compôte and fine sugar.

It so happened that as the cook was preparing the *Strauben*, the chicken maid was also in the kitchen preparing the food for her hens. When she heard the fat bubbling and saw the cook pouring the snake of batter into it, she asked if she could try. At first, the cook refused, but the chicken maid continued to beg and so she let her. She poured a stream of batter into the fat, letting it move around to make a long tangled string and then, as the cook looked away dropped something onto the knot and covered it quickly with a stream of fresh batter. The *Strauben* were then sent to the table, and the chicken maid returned to preparing her chicken food.

The young lord was very hungry, and ate not only the two *Strauben* which the cook had made, but started on the third which the chicken maid had prepared. As he broke it apart, he saw something shiny and gold in between the strands of dough. It was his ring, the ring which he had placed on the finger of the beautiful young lady at the ball. He immediately summoned the cook, and asked her who had made the last *Straube*. Of course, the cook first told him that she herself had prepared all of them, but he knew that this wasn't true. After much pleading, and some threatening, she admitted that she had allowed the chicken maid to make one.

As soon, as he heard this, the young lord sent for the chicken maid. She had already washed and plaited her golden hair and the young man immediately recognised her. She was the beautiful young lady who had first worn the sky blue gown, then the rose coloured gown, and then the shining white gown. He stood up and went over to her and placed his ring back on her finger. A short time afterwards, there was a great wedding with a celebration afterwards which was even grander than any of the other three balls.