

THE THREE FRUITS

There was once a little girl who lived alone with her poor mother. Although she was only nine years old, she was not only well-mannered and kind, but was also as clever as any grown woman twice her age. One day, when the mother and daughter were in the forest collecting firewood, they came across three fairies waiting by a large tree. The fairies stopped them and, with one voice, said to the mother "One year from today, you must bring your child to us at this place!"

Holding her daughter's hand tightly, the frightened mother silently walked home. Over time, fear gave way to sadness, and she shed many tears over the certain fate of her daughter. Always, the kind little girl tried gently to comfort her mother, saying "I'm sure that all will be well", "I will soon return home", and "God will protect me". At the end of the year, with a heavy heart but fearing to anger the fairies, the mother led her daughter back to the place in the forest. The three fairies took the little girl by the hand and vanished into the trees, while her mother, sobbing silently, made her way home.

At their home, deep in the forest, the three fairies soon set the little girl to work. She not only had to cook, clean and mend for them, but was also given every other task which they could think of. These she did without complaint, but, alas, she never won the cold hearts of her new masters and mistresses. In fact, the more she tried, the more they hated her until, one day, they decided to give her an impossible task.

"Listen carefully little one," said one of the fairies to her one evening, "tomorrow we will send you to a particular castle in a particular place. When you get there, you must go inside, and take from the old witch, who lives there, her three wonderful fruits, and bring them back here. One for each of us."

The little girl promised, on pain of unspeakable punishment, faithfully to do as the fairies commanded, even though she knew it would be a very dangerous task. She didn't sleep that night, but cried throughout, thinking about her poor mother and praying devoutly that she would, one day, return safely to her.

Early the next morning, she set off through the forest, on the way which the fairies had directed her. After some time she met an old man coming towards her. He could see that she had been crying, and asked her kindly "Where are you going little girl, and why?"

"If you only knew" she replied, and seeing his kind face, continued to tell him everything what had happened, and what the fairies had commanded her to do.

The old man smiled softly, and said to her "Take these things, and use them as soon as you need them." Then he gave her: a hammer and some nails; an oil can; a basket of bread; a broom; and a rope!

Not yet fully understanding, the little girl gratefully accepted the old man's gifts and, even though they were very heavy, she went on her way with a much lighter heart. Soon she came to the castle at the place where the fairies had told her it would be. It was surrounded by a deep moat, and the only way across was an old broken-down rickety bridge. One step onto it would lead to certain death, but the clever little girl remained undaunted. Taking the hammer and nails, she secured one plank after another, repairing the old bridge as she made her way across.

At the other side, she came to a great gate which was fastened securely with bolts and chains. But, these were all so completely rusted that not even a giant, with all its strength, could move them. Even its hinges couldn't turn. The little girl took the oil can and, with great care, applied the oil to all the rusted metal. Then she waited, and after the oil had soaked in and the rust had started to soften, she applied some more. By the time she had finished, the bolts slid back easily, and the gate swung quietly open, as if it had opened itself.

In the courtyard, behind the gate, there was a pack of huge hungry dogs, which came upon her growling and barking furiously. The little girl reached into her basket and took out the bread which, one loaf after another, she threw to the dogs. Instead of attacking her, the dogs turned and hungrily set about devouring the bread. Leaving them to enjoy their meal, the little girl made her way into the castle.

Behind the dogs, she saw a maid who was sweeping the courtyard with her own dress. The little girl gave her the broom, and moved on. She then came to a well, where another maid was using the braids of her own hair to pull up the heavy pails of water. So, the kind little girl took the rope and gave it to her.

She had now reached the stairs into the castle, and so, cautiously and silently she climbed them. The stairway opened into a large chamber where, half awake and half asleep, there sat an old woman at a spinning wheel. On the chest, at the other side of the room, there was a golden platter. On it, there were three large, brightly shining oranges!

The brave little girl quickly picked up the three wonderful fruits, and hurried away. But, the old woman had seen her, and came hobbling after her. As the girl passed the well, the old woman shouted to her servant "Stop her! She's stolen my wonderful fruits!"

"I will not!" said the maid, "All these years, you have made me pull up the water with my own braids, but this kind girl has given me a rope to do the job."

Halfway across the courtyard the witch cried out to her other maid "Knock her to the ground! She's stolen my wonderful fruits!"

“I will not!” said the second maid “All these years, you have made me sweep the courtyard with my own dress, but this kind girl has given me a broom to do the job.”

As she passed the resting dogs, the witch cried out to them “Rip her apart! She’s stolen my wonderful fruits!”

“We will not!” said the dogs. Instead of barking and growling, they replied “All these years, you have never given us anything to eat, and we have gone hungry. Now this kind girl has given us bread to quell our hunger.”

When the girl reached the gate, the witch called out to it “Close upon her and squash her flat! She’s stolen my beautiful fruits!”

“I will not!” said the gate, “All these years, you have let my hinges and bolts go to rust, but this kind girl has soothed all my joints with oil.”

Finally, the little girl reached the bridge, and ran across it. The witch cried out “Shake her off, and drop her into the moat! She’s stolen my beautiful oranges!”

“I will not!” said the bridge, standing firm. “All these years, you have let me fall into disrepair, but now this kind girl has made me strong again.”

The little girl was now safe, and out of reach of the old witch. She returned to the three fairies without further mishap and, to their great surprise, presented them with the three wonderful fruits they desired. After she had told them everything which had happened, their demeanour changed. They not only praised her bravery and kindness, but also asked her what her reward should be. The little girl could only think of one thing, to return to her mother and comfort her. The fairies readily agreed to this, but they also gave her money, jewels and other fine things to take with her. And so, from that day on, mother and daughter lived happily and comfortably together.