

FAIRY TURNSPIT.



ONCE upon a time there lived a cruel woman who had a step-daughter, and as this child's own father was dead she had no one to look after her, or to love her.

Gretchen worked hard all day in the house or in the fields, and at even-time she knitted stockings to sell in the neighbouring town.

One evening as she was knitting in the porch, a little old woman came toddling up and bade her "good evening."

"Good evening, mother," answered Gretchen, and she felt inclined to laugh, for the old woman was dressed very strangely. She had on a high-peaked hat, short petticoats, and the red heels of her shoes were so high that they almost tripped her up, and she was obliged to support herself on an ebony stick. However, she was a kind-hearted girl, and, instead of laughing, she rose from her stool and said :

"You look tired, mother ; pray rest yourself here awhile."

The old lady sat down without a word of thanks, and Gretchen went on with her knitting. At last she said, crossly :

"Pretty hostess you are, not to offer a poor traveller bite or sup after a long day's walk !"

Gretchen answered, troubled, "My step-mother will not let me give anything away."

"How will she know?" said the old woman. "She will not be home yet awhile. Go, fetch me a cup of milk from the dairy."

"If I do it will be my own supper," said Gretchen to herself as she went and brought what the old woman wanted.

"Never trouble your pretty eyes about it," said the old woman as she took the cup, "your step-mother will never find it out."

"Yes, she will," said poor Gretchen, "for I shall tell her."

"Humph!" said the strange old creature, and she began to drink her milk. "Skimmed and sour," exclaimed she, making a sour face ; "fine charity, to give away the pig's wash !"

Gretchen's eyes filled with tears.

"I should have had no better myself," said she.

Just at this moment she saw her step-mother coming along the road.

“Oh, pray walk on,” she cried imploringly, “here is my step-mother, and she will kill me if she finds you here.”

“Fiddle-sticks!” said the old woman, “it would kill me to drink this stuff at one draught. Ugh!” She sat quietly there until the step-mother was quite near them, and then suddenly disappeared, whither Gretchen knew not; and strangely enough the step-mother did not seem to have seen her, for she only scolded Gretchen for not having finished her stocking, and bustled into the house to get supper.

When Gretchen looked round trembling for the cup out of which the old woman had been drinking it was gone, and the first thing she saw on entering the kitchen was that very one hanging on its proper peg.

While she was still lost in wonder, she heard her step-mother's harsh voice in the dairy, saying: “You wicked creature, I'll break every bone in your body, that I will.” Gretchen hurried to her and found her holding a large black cat by the neck. “Ah! you villain,” she continued, shaking it violently, “you've drunk up Gretchen's supper, and I shall have to give her fresh; but you'll never come here again, I warrant.”

“Stay, mother,” said the girl, “the cat is not to blame; I took the milk, and gave it to a poor, thirsty traveller.”

“Keep your tongue and your tales to yourself, girl,” cried the angry woman, “we all know how you encourage cats about the house, but you shall both get what you deserve.” And so saying she drove her to her room with blows, and bade her stay there till morning; but when she looked round for the cat it was gone, though she could not think how it had slipped through her hands.

About a month after this Gretchen was again sitting knitting in the porch, when she saw the little old woman come toddling up the road. Gretchen resolved not to speak to her this time, as she felt sure she was a witch.

“Ho! ho! my little lady,” said the old woman, “old friends are soon forgot, it seems.”

“You are a wicked old woman,” said Gretchen, “and try to make me do ill; I will have nothing to do with you.”

“A full stomach makes a fine conscience,” said the old woman

bitterly ; " I hav'n't had a scrap to eat for three days, and I shall not last here long."

Gretchen looked up, and saw indeed that the woman was very thin and white, and could scarcely hold herself up.

She rose and silently offered her the stool, went into the kitchen, and brought her the piece of bread left out for her own supper. The old witch snatched it out of her hand, and mumbled it in her jaws.

" Crumb for the household and crust for the beggars," said she with a sneer ; " I wonder you aren't ashamed to offer this to a poor body when there's white loaf on the dresser."

" That's for my step-mother," said Gretchen.

" Very well, your step-mother will have to do without it," said the old witch, and slipping into the house, she seized the loaf and ran out of the back door so quickly that Gretchen could not see which way she went.

When the step-mother came home she flew into a violent passion, and drove Gretchen out of doors.

" Go and live with thieves and birds of your own feather," she said, " I'll have no more of you in the house."

Gretchen wept and begged to be allowed to stay that night, but the cruel woman bade her begone at once, and she was forced to obey.

She walked many a mile, weary and sad, until she had nearly reached the town at which she sold her stockings. Then she saw a figure in front of her, and found that she was overtaking the witch. She tried to pass her without being noticed, but the old woman hobbled up to her side, saying :

" Whither so fast, my pretty maid ? "

" I do not know," said Gretchen, sadly, " but you have brought me ill-fortune enough, and I do not wish to speak to you again."

" What's all this about ? " cried the provoking old creature. " Young folks used not to fly into tantrums in my time. Here, give me an arm ; it's so dark I cannot see my way, and I've cut my foot against a stone already." So saying, she hooked on to Gretchen's arm, who found herself thus compelled to walk along at the old woman's pace, and besides this to bear almost all her weight.

As they entered the town the old woman said in a gentler tone than she had yet used : " Gretchen, I am Fairy Turnspit. You have been kind to me, and I never forget a good turn. Now you want a home, and I will

give you one for a time, and if I am contented with your service, it shall be yours as long as you will stay."

Gretchen thankfully accepted the offer, as she did not know where to go that night, and they walked on together till they came to a little house on the outskirts of the town. Here they stopped, and the fairy led the way through the garden to the back door. A light was burning in the kitchen, and by it Gretchen could see a tall, untidy-looking girl fast asleep in an armchair. She had a cross, discontented face, and tumbled red hair, and her clothes were torn and dirty.

"Anna!" screamed the old woman, "how often have I told you not to fall asleep with the door open! I declare I'll send you down to the water-nixies if you do not mend your ways."

Anna started up and made most humble excuses: she had been working so hard all day, and had a headache, and she begged the old fairy most piteously not to punish her this time.

"Well, well," said Fairy Turnspit, "this time I will pass it over. The hungry man is ready to forgive, so buckle-to, my girl, and let us have some supper. You will have no excuse after to-day, for I have brought Gretchen here to help you."

Anna scowled at the poor girl, but bustled about, and soon a good supper was waiting on the table.

The next day the old woman woke both the girls very early in the morning, and told them she would be out all day, and that they must divide the house-work between them.

"Three things only I require on my return," she said. "A clean room, a bright fire, and a good soup."

Anna promised at once, and Gretchen said she would do her best.

After she had gone, Anna said the first thing to do was to breakfast, and she took a long time over the meal, making Gretchen toast slice after slice of bread, and only giving her the crusts to eat. When she had at last done, she said:

"I am tired with all this work, and shall rest on my bed a little. Do you clean the room, as you were bid."

Gretchen cheerfully set to work, but she was horrified at its dirty state. All the corners were full of dust and refuse which had been swept there out of sight, and spiders had lived and died undisturbed on the webs which hung among the rafters. However, she had a brave heart and a stout arm, and by midday the kitchen was clean and tidy.

Anna came down yawning.

"How slow you are," she said peevishly. "I've been waiting all this time for you to come upstairs and help me make the beds; now you can do it by yourself,—but you can have your dinner first."

At dinner Gretchen fared no better than at breakfast, for she only had the rind of Anna's cheese, but she said nothing, and ate what she was given with a good appetite.

When all was done and Gretchen had made the beds, Anna told her there were no sticks in the wood-shed, and that she must go to the forest and bind a faggot; and when she had gone, Anna dropped into the armchair, and soon fell fast asleep.

It was nearly dark when Gretchen came home, for the wood was a long way off.

"What a time you have been!" cried Anna, angrily snatching the faggot from her. "Come now, bestir yourself and make a good soup, or you'll be finely scolded when Mother Turnspit comes home."

"I have never made soup," said Gretchen.

"Useless creature!" snapped Anna, "I suppose this will fall to my share too;" and she lazily began preparing the materials.

Gretchen, without saying a word, cleaned the grate and made a bright fire, and then went upstairs to make herself neat before the fairy's return.

When she came down she found Anna in great distress, weeping, and rocking herself backwards and forwards.

"What is the matter, Anna?" she ventured to ask.

"I've made the soup in a dirty pot, and I shall be sent down to the water-nixies," sobbed Anna.

Gretchen was very sorry for the poor girl, so she ran into the garden and pulled up a few onions, washed them, cut them up, and put them in the pot.

"There, Anna," said she, "don't cry. The onions will hide the bad taste, and to-morrow I will clean all the pans for you."

Anna dried her eyes and laughed to herself, for she knew Fairy Turnspit could not bear onions, and that she could throw all the blame on Gretchen.

All was as she expected; the old fairy flew into a great rage when she smelt the onions, and on finding this was Gretchen's fault, she sent her to bed supperless.

When she was gone, Fairy Turnspit noticed the neatness of the room, and Anna took all the credit to herself, and was praised to her heart's content.

But the old fairy was not as blind as she pretended to be. She only acted thus to try the two girls, and she was really very angry with lazy, deceitful Anna.

The next day she rose as before, telling the girls they must wash the linen, weed the strawberry beds, and have a pitcher of fresh spring water for her when she came in.

However, instead of going out, she slipped into the form of a pitcher that stood by the door, and, unknown to Anna and Gretchen, she watched their doings.

All happened as before.

Gretchen washed and weeded as hard as she could, and was rewarded by scraps from Anna's hearty meals, but towards the end of the day she had not done all that the fairy had required, and Anna, scolding her soundly, said she supposed she would have to fetch the water herself.

Picking up the pitcher, she sauntered to the well and listlessly dipped it in the water. It filled very suddenly, she lost her balance, fell in, and sank with a scream. After a few minutes the pitcher came to the top again, and, turning over with a pop which sounded like a chuckle of pleasure, it drifted to the edge of the well.

Then the old fairy suddenly jumped out, and without seeming to be troubled at Anna's accident, picked up the pitcher and trudged home.

Then she called Gretchen, kissed her, and told her she was a good girl, and should stay with her for ever if she liked.

"But where is Anna?" asked Gretchen, after a while.

"With the water-nixies, where she will learn to be more active, my dear," said the old fairy.

And so Gretchen lived with Fairy Turnspit a long time, and the fairy was very good to her, and Gretchen was very happy.