

THE GOLDEN SLIPPER

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Once upon a time there were three brothers who went out to sea to cast their fish nets. When they were far from shore a violent storm broke out. The wind roared and blew so hard that the gulls were almost beaten down on the surface of the water. They were so frightened that they sought refuge on the sides of the boat. The waves rose higher and higher. More and more the storm ran riot, carrying the helpless craft along with it. Finally after many weary hours, the fishermen rejoiced to see the shore, a sharp and rocky cliff atop which they saw a maiden seated.

"What is she doing here?" asked the astonished men. "In the midst of the winds and storm, at the edge of a raging sea?"

The youngest said, "I am going to ask her what she is waiting for."

But the others rebuked him and tried to dissuade him.

"Do you not see that the slope is very steep? A falcon could not fly over it, nor could a squirrel climb up. Why attempt the impossible?"

Nevertheless the youth did not heed his brothers' advice and leaped toward the edge of the cliff, which was so high that one almost had to turn one's head upside down to see the top.

The young fisherman clung to the rocks and climbed higher and higher. The wind blew so fiercely that the birds, blown from the sea, struck themselves against the sides of the cliff and fell dead in the foaming whirlpools below. But the young man hung onto the jutting rocks and climbed from one to another. He felt pain in his hands and feet, but the peak was already near at hand and across the tempest he heard the maiden sobbing bitterly. Below in the deep, the boat floated like a little shaving and his brothers appeared scarcely larger than needles.

The youth made a last leap and found himself at the side of the beautiful stranger.

"Why are you crying?" he asked her.

"I was walking in my garden when a sorcerer appeared. He seized me and carried me to this rock; then he threw my golden slipper into the sea. How can I return with a bare foot? The entire city would mock me, for my father is the king and my mother the queen. The servants would point their fingers at me and make fun of me." And the princess, in thinking of her golden slipper, abandoned herself to sobs while her shoulders shook convulsively.

The fisherman said to her: "Where did the slipper fall? I will retrieve it from the water."

"Do you see that reef?" she pointed. "The reef near the dashing whirlpools of water? It is there that the sorcerer has thrown my golden slipper. How it glittered in the sun as it fell!"

The young man descended to rejoin his brothers and they rowed toward the little island. There they waited three days and three nights in their boat, but could find nothing. Yet when the fourth morning came they saw something that shimmered at the bottom of the sea.

The youngest dived into the water. There the fish looked at him with goggly eyes, wiggling their tails and gaping as if waiting to swallow him. But the young man was brave and dived without fear until he felt the floor of the sea underfoot.

Little sea animals were pushing the golden slipper around with their noses. The young fisherman seized it and returned to the surface.

The brothers rowed him to the shore and he began to ascend but this time without feeling the least pain in either his hands or feet.

When the princess saw him, she began to smile and allowed him to place the shoe on her foot. While fitting it, he did not stop admiring her beauty. He did not hurry and when he was finished he was not anxious to return to his brothers.

"Come down, come down! The storm is over; we have cast our nets and, when we have fish enough, we can go home untroubled," they cried to him.

But the princess arose moaning: "Something has happened to my leg. How unfortunate! Could you help me as far as the city?"

"I will carry you!" he answered.

She rewarded him with a happy smile.

Turning toward his brothers he called to them: "Row home to our parents and tell them their youngest son is carrying a princess to the city. If he is delayed in coming home, a little bird will fly there and perch near the window. If the messenger has a little branch of linden in his beak, that will tell them that their son is happy. If he is not happy, the bird will carry a branch of nettles, and if he is no more of this world, the bird will bear a needle of spruce."

He picked the princess up in his arms and carried her away across the dunes. The maiden rested her head on his shoulder, her lovely hair caressing his face.

The day waned, nevertheless they saw no travellers, passed no hamlets, so far had the evil sorcerer carried her. Night fell. They stopped in the middle of a forest before a small abandoned hut. The young fisherman made a bed of leaves and put moss in place of down. He went into the thicket, picked fruit and gave it to the princess. When the light of day was completely extinguished, when the stars came out, the princess retired on the moss and her dreams were full of golden slippers.

But the young man could not sleep. He sat outside near the door and told himself that the princess was truly beautiful.

Then the beasts of the forest, awakening from their sleep, one after the other assembled around the little cottage. The squirrel came first hopping from branch to branch. Then came the marten running beside a wolf. Ending the procession was a bear advancing waveringly. There was also a ferret and a deer, in short, a marvelous multitude of inhabitants of the forest.

All of them surrounded the hut and greeted the fisherman: "We were sound asleep and we have dreamed that a princess has come through forest and thicket. We wish to see her."

"No, she is sleeping now and you should not wake her," he answered

The animals beseeched him: "At least tell us if she is as beautiful as they say."

"Ah, big and little animals, she is so beautiful that the fish of the sea frisk to the shore when they see her; the eagle, high in the sky, pauses and listens to her voice when she speaks; and when she touches you, the most serious wounds cease to cause you pain."

The squirrel spoke up: "While leaping in the fir trees, I pricked my nose and I'm suffering terribly."

The bear growled: "Your little nose will heal up. Such a hurt has no need of being touched, but I, oh how happy I would be just to look at her."

The fisherman pitied these poor animals. He opened the door a little and permitted them all, one after the other, to look at the princess.

The animals approached the hut on tiptoe. They shook their heads and clucked their tongues in wonder at seeing her hair as bright and shining as the rays of the sun. After that, all, the bear as well as the deer, lay down around the little cottage to watch over the princess. When the sun came up, they went into the forest. One came back with nuts, another with combs of honey, another with roots, and since they believed she might be afraid, they hid behind the bushes and trees and watched through the branches for the time when she arose from sleep.

On awakening the princess spoke: "I have been dreaming that I slept in the castle of my father and that a hundred soldiers stood guard over me."

The fisherman replied: "They were not soldiers, but all the animals of the forest that guarded you last night."

As he spoke, the wolf and the marten, the squirrel and the deer, the big as well as the little, all the children of the forest, came out of their hiding places. Very discretely they appeared; too shy to approach closer they marvelled from afar and nudged each other saying: "Look, she eats the nut I gathered, the honey I found, the berries that I picked."

The bear said to her: "Mount my back, princess, I wish to carry you to the city."

She got on his back and clung to his fur and put her feet in the golden slippers against his ears.

So they began their journey through thicket and heather. The fisherman came on beside the princess. The squirrel leaped ahead and the wolf and marten formed the rear guard. Only the deer disturbed the order of procession. Overcome with joy, it could not contain itself and leaped unceasingly over raspberry bush and under hazelnut trees, while the grouse, balanced on branches, turned their necks, as if asking: "What passes here?"

Toward evening, they entered open country and saw a tower in the distance.

The bear let the princess down from his shoulders, saying: "We are afraid of the soldiers and their guns; we will go no further."

All the animals returned to the forest to hide in their dens.

The princess and the fisherman went on to the city and, thanks to her golden slippers, the people recognized her. They threw their hats into the air and acclaimed her so loudly that the roofs shook.

And when the king heard the news, he mounted his white steed and had a coach follow him to bring his daughter home. Everbody sang from dusk to dawn without forgetting to eat and drink, bringing out casks of mead from the wine-cellars of the monarch.

The fisherman was seated in a place of honor and when the feast was at an end, the king called him and said: "I will give you a bag of gold, so that you will return home a rich man with shining boots and ermine coat. You will not have to work any more and you will be able to lie in bed late and drink good wine."

"Your gold and treasures are of little importance to me if I must leave. Give me work to do and I will be happy at your court."

The king employed him as gardener. He pruned the trees, dug the ground and that year the apple blossoms were so fragrant that they put to shame all those of former springs. The princess liked nothing better than to walk among the trees.

One day the fisherman said to her: "When you come here among the jasmine and the cherry trees, all the bees hum more sweetly."

And he spoke of the sea, the golden slipper and the animals of the forest.

But the king stopped their meetings under the blossoming fruit trees. He sent the young man to the stables to care for the many royal chargers. Then the coats of the chargers became bright. The young man curried the prancing horses until they shone. The princess took great pleasure in her carriage.

The young fisherman, while hitching up her chestnut horses, said gallantly: "I hope you are more comfortable in the carriage than on the back of the bear."

Then the king gave him orders to mount the top of the tower to see if the enemy was coming. Seven days and seven nights he watched there. At the dawn of the eighth day, he saw a troop of knights approaching the city. At their head rode a man with a red cloak and golden crown. His armour shone so in the sun as to dazzle the eyes of all.

The fisherman told the king: "I have seen a troop of knights. Is this the enemy?"

"No," said the king. "It is my neighbor who comes to ask the hand of my daughter."

The poor fisherman went to the garden and walked among the blooming pear trees. He saw the princess coming to him.

He spoke to her: "I have found you beautiful and neither the waves of the sea, nor its black depths have frightened me. I mounted the sharp edges of the cliff and left my parents and brothers and carried you in my arms through the forest and protected you against the wild animals and permitted them to serve you."

She was silent.

He spoke again: "What must I do to have you speak? Must I bring you a bird that sings differently? Must I go to the isle of the far seas to shear the sheep with the golden fleece?"

She did not answer. She listened to the trumpets which sounded at the city gate. Then she returned to the castle. The sad, young fisherman sat down by the fountain. Later he walked into the orchard and bade goodbye to the blossoming trees. Then he made his way to the stables to bid farewell to the chestnut horses.

He began his journey across fields and through swamps. The brambles tore his coat. The pebbles wounded his feet. The birds fluttered around and asked him why he looked so unhappy. In the forest, the bear looked at him with surprise and the squirrel was at a loss as to what to think, finally deciding to stand on his hind legs with his tail raised in a question mark.

The youth travelled on until he came to the sea-shore, where he remained all day and all night. When the morn came, it was stormy. The waves were high, leaping like wild steeds, casting their white foam against the rocky shore.

The gaze of the young fisherman followed the swirling sea until, suddenly, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a golden slipper gleaming at the bottom.

He leaped over the boulders into the waves and dived down and down, farther and farther. A little bird, a swallow, darted out. It circled bravely above the waters, breasting the gale over the spot where he had gone down.

It flew over the forest, stopping to pluck a needle from the spruce tree. When it reached the home of the young fisherman, it perched on the hedge near the window and waited. The brothers passed by and did not see it, the father saw it and did not understand, but when the mother, seated at her spinning wheel, saw the swallow with the green needle in its beak, she wept bitterly.

(Translated by Kate Pendleton)