

The Child Who Would Seek Remedies

There was once a widow who had three children; the eldest was twelve years old, the second eleven, and the youngest nine. She was not rich and she worked as much as she could to raise them and give them bread; but one day she fell ill and her young children, who had no money to pay the doctor and buy medicines, were in despair and did nothing but cry.

The poor woman went from bad to worse, and one day when the children were all three crying in the house, they saw coming down the chimney a little woman who was no taller than the boot of a cavalryman.

“Why are you grieving, children?” she asked them.

“For the last fortnight our poor mother has been ill,” replied the elder; “She is getting worse and worse, and we do not know what to do for her.”

“Well! My young children,” said the good woman, who was a fairy, “stop your lamenting; there is a three-pronged herb on Mont Blanc, under a barn owl; if you can bring it back, it will cure your mother; and it is necessary that you challenge a fairy who is my mortal enemy.”

The fairy gave the eldest a golden ring and told him, “It is up to you to go, because you are the eldest; well, here is a ring; whatever you show it to will soon vanish.

The fairy went up the chimney, and the oldest child set off; on his way he met a great snake that crept toward him, hissing:

“Ah!” he thought, “I’ll be swallowed.”

But he remembered the ring that the fairy had given him; he drew it from his pocket and showed it to the snake, which disappeared immediately, and he never saw it again. He continued walking and met a tiger coming toward him, its mouth wide open:

“Ah!” he thought, “This time I’ll be devoured.”

But he remembered that he had a gold ring that the fairy had given to him; he showed it to the tiger, who disappeared immediately, and he never saw it again.

He resumed his journey, and went far, far away; he saw a great precipice before him, and as he went along, the precipice grew. He tried to go around it, but the precipice grew in proportion. The boy thought no more of his ring, and he turned back.

He had scarcely returned home when the little fairy came down the chimney. "You're back," she said to him. "You have not done everything I told you."

"No," he replied. "When I saw the great precipice, I was so scared that I no longer thought about the ring."

"It's your turn to leave," said the fairy to the second brother. "Here is a dagger; everything you touch with its point will disappear instantly."

The second brother set off; he went far, far away, and met a large black cat who was as large as a sheep, and who advanced toward him while beating the sides of his enormous tail.

"Ah!" thought the child, "I will be devoured; but, if I die, I will at least die for my mother."

He fortunately remembered the dagger that the fairy had given him; he stood on the big black cat and thrust the dagger into its heart, but did not think to remove it.

He resumed his journey and arrived at a precipice that grew in proportion as he approached it; he tried to go around it, but still the precipice stood before him and he could not find a way.

"Ah!" he said, "I will be obliged to return like my brother."

He turned back, and when he returned home, his little brother reproached him for not going to Mont Blanc. "For me," he said, "when it comes to my mother, I would die before retreating."

As he said these words, the little fairy came down the chimney and said to the middle brother, "You did not do what I told you."

"Alas! No, I forgot the dagger in the heart of the cat and I could not pass the precipice."

The fairy said to the youngest child, "I gave your brothers everything I had, and they could not succeed; it is your turn to go search on Mont Blanc for the three-pronged herb guarded by a barn owl. Listen well; all that you are told to do is necessary to undertake without hesitation."

And so the child left; he arrived in a wood, and on his way, he encountered a hut; he entered and saw an old, old woman who had red eyes, a crooked mouth, a long nose, and who was thin as a rail.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him in a harsh voice.

"My mother is sick, and I'm going to Mont Blanc to search for the cure, the three-pronged herb guarded by a barn owl."

“I know,” said the old woman. “My mortal enemy sent you; but as it is for your mother that you are making this trip, I will let you pass. Here is an anthill: before you go, you have to tear out the eyes of all the ants and place them into a bowl, and you must not miss even one.”

The boy began to work, and soon he brought back the bowl filled with eyes of ants.

“Here you are, already ready”, said the old woman, you did not take long.

She went to the anthill and blew on it, and immediately she saw that there were no ant eyes remaining. “Pass,” she said to the boy, “because it is for your sick mother.”

He resumed his journey, and he went far, far away; on his way he found a lake that extended as far as the eye could see, and as he sought where it ended, he saw a fisherman’s hut on its edge; he presented himself at the door, and said, “Hello to you.”

“What are you doing here, you little earthworm, dust from my hands, shadow from my whiskers?” exclaimed a great ogre. “Without doubt, you came to be eaten.”

“No, mister ogre, please, do not eat me before my mother is healed. Could you not tell me how to pass the pond, mister ogre?”

“Where are you going?”

“My mother is sick,” replied the child, “and for her to be healed, I must bring her back the three-pronged herb on Mont Blanc, guarded by a barn owl.

“If it is for an invalid, I’ll allow you to pass; but on the condition that you bring me all the fish in the pond.”

“Alas! Mister Ogre, how can I do that?”

“Well, here’s a line and a wicker basket. Choose.”

The boy took the wicker basket and went to the edge of the pond; he had hardly plunged into the water when he saw a little fish, completely golden, come in. As he prepared to catch it, the fish said to him, “Ah! Please, let me go!”

“No,” replied the child, “because if I cannot catch all the fish in the pond, I’ll be eaten by the ogre.”

“I am the king of fish; if you want to throw me back into the water, all the fish will come into your wicker basket and you will take them easily.”

The boy placed the little golden fish back into the water, and it disappeared; immediately, fish jumped over and over again into his wicker basket, and soon he had them all caught and placed on the grass at the edge

of the pond. He came to the hut of the ogre and told him that his task was done.

“You caught them all?”

“Yes,” he said, “except for a small golden fish who begged me to let him go.”

“Scoundrel,” cried the ogre, “that is my mortal enemy; woe to you if he is still in the pond!”

The ogre looked at the fish, then he breathed on the pond and saw that none were left in the water, because the little golden fish had sunk deep into the mud. He let the little boy pass, so the child went on his way and arrived in a plain where, spread into the distance, there was a wheat field; the stems were taller than any man, and there was no path to be seen.

“What should I do?” said the little boy.

He looked all around and saw a hut where he entered. “Hello to you,” he said. “Would you let me pass?”

“No,” replied a giant. “I will not let you go unless you can cut the wheat, beat it, and make it into bread.”

The boy remembered the advice of the fairy; he began to work, and in a short time he had completed his task and was able to avert the giant.

The giant came to the edge of the field and he breathed and saw that not a single grain of wheat remained; so he gave way to the little boy.

The child continued his journey, and by walking he arrived near a gate that stretched out of sight; behind it there were tigers, leopards, and snakes that showed their teeth as if to swallow him and made a deafening sound.

“What should I do?” he said.

He looked all around and saw a hut where he entered. “Could you not,” he asked, “let me pass?”

“No,” replied the giant, “Unless you can kill all the beasts behind the gate in eight days.”

“If I had weapons I would try,” said the boy. “But I have none.”

“Well, here are a bow and arrows.”

The boy took the bow and arrows, and at the end of the seventh day, he had killed all the ferocious beasts. The giant came and blew on the beasts sprawled across the ground; none stirred, and he allowed the child to pass.

The little boy, by walking, arrived at Mont Blanc; it was a great mountain that was very difficult to climb, and when he reached the top, he saw the barn owl, who said, “It is high time that you arrived; five minutes later and you would not have found the herb nor myself. Well, here’s the three-pronged herb, hold it carefully; but watch yourself carefully on your return, because you have to pass many precipices.”

“How, barn owl, do I not fall into them?”

“Take a feather of my tail and place it between your legs, and you will cross all obstacles.”

The little boy plucked a feather from the tail of the barn owl and put it between his legs as if riding a broomstick; soon he was off into the air, and in less than five minutes, he arrived at the home of his mother.

Immediately the little fairy who was no taller than the boot of a cavalryman descended down the chimney; he gave her the herb that he had gathered on Mont Blanc. She rubbed the woman with the herb, and she was cured instantly.

From that time forward, the mother and her three children lived happily together, and if they're not dead, they're still alive.

Paul Sébillot, *Contes des paysans et des pêcheurs* (1881)

Translated by Elianna Lisan