



Prunella

Andrew Lang'S Fairy Books

Italian

Intermediate
10 min read

There was once upon a time a woman who had an only daughter. When the child was about seven years old she used to pass every day, on her way to school, an orchard where there was a wild plum tree, with delicious ripe plums hanging from the branches. Each morning the child would pick one, and put it into her pocket to eat at school. For this reason she was called Prunella. Now, the orchard belonged to a witch. One day the witch noticed the child gathering a plum, as she passed along the road. Prunella did it quite innocently, not knowing that she was doing wrong in taking the fruit that hung close to the roadside. But the witch was furious, and next day hid herself behind the hedge, and when Prunella came past, and put out her hand to pluck the fruit, she jumped out and seized her by the arm.

‘Ah! you little thief!’ she exclaimed. ‘I have caught you at last. Now you will have to pay for your misdeeds.’

The poor child, half dead with fright, implored the old woman to forgive her, assuring her that she did not know she had done wrong, and promising never to do it again. But the witch had no pity, and she dragged Prunella into her house, where she kept her till the time should come when she could have her revenge.

As the years passed Prunella grew up into a very beautiful girl. Now her beauty and goodness, instead of softening the witch’s heart, aroused her hatred and jealousy.

One day she called Prunella to her, and said: 'Take this basket, go to the well, and bring it back to me filled with water. If you don't I will kill you.'

The girl took the basket, went and let it down into the well again and again. But her work was lost labour. Each time, as she drew up the basket, the water streamed out of it. At last, in despair, she gave it up, and leaning against the well she began to cry bitterly, when suddenly she heard a voice at her side saying 'Prunella, why are you crying?'

Turning round she beheld a handsome youth, who looked kindly at her, as if he were sorry for her trouble.

'Who are you,' she asked, 'and how do you know my name?'

'I am the son of the witch,' he replied, 'and my name is Bensiabel. I know that she is determined that you shall die, but I promise you that she shall not carry out her wicked plan. Will you give me a kiss, if I fill your basket?'

'No,' said Prunella, 'I will not give you a kiss, because you are the son of a witch.'

'Very well,' replied the youth sadly. 'Give me your basket and I will fill it for you.' And he dipped it into the well, and the water stayed in it. Then the girl returned to the house, carrying the basket filled with water. When the witch saw it, she became white with rage, and exclaimed 'Bensiabel must have helped you.' And Prunella looked down, and said nothing.

'Well, we shall see who will win in the end,' said the witch, in a great rage.

The following day she called the girl to her and said: 'Take this sack of wheat. I am going out for a little; by the time I return I shall expect you to have made it into bread. If you have not done it I will kill you.' Having said this she left the room, closing and locking the door behind her.

Poor Prunella did not know what to do. It was impossible for her to grind the wheat, prepare the dough, and bake the bread, all in the short time that the witch would be away. At first she set to work bravely, but when she saw how hopeless her task was, she threw herself on a chair, and began to weep bitterly. She was roused from her despair by hearing Bensiabel's voice at her side saying: 'Prunella, Prunella, do not weep like that. If you will give me a kiss I will make the bread, and you will be saved.'

'I will not kiss the son of a witch,' replied Prunella.

But Bensiabel took the wheat from her, and ground it, and made the dough, and when the witch returned the bread was ready baked in the oven.

Turning to the girl, with fury in her voice, she said: 'Bensiabel must have been here and helped you;' and Prunella looked down, and said nothing.

'We shall see who will win in the end,' said the witch, and her eyes blazed with anger.

Next day she called the girl to her and said: 'Go to my sister, who lives across the mountains. She will give you a casket, which you must bring back to me.' This she said knowing that her sister, who was a still more cruel and wicked witch than herself, would never allow the girl to return, but would imprison her and starve her to death. But Prunella did not suspect anything, and set out quite cheerfully. On the way she met Bensiabel.

'Where are you going, Prunella?' he asked.

'I am going to the sister of my mistress, from whom I am to fetch a casket.'

'Oh poor, poor girl!' said Bensiabel. 'You are being sent straight to your death. Give me a kiss, and I will save you.'

But again Prunella answered as before, 'I will not kiss the son of a witch.'

'Nevertheless, I will save your life,' said Bensiabel, 'for I love you better than myself. Take this flagon of oil, this loaf of bread, this piece of rope, and this broom. When you reach the witch's house, oil the hinges of the door with the contents of the flagon, and throw the loaf of bread to the great fierce mastiff, who will come to meet you. When you have passed the dog, you will see in the courtyard a miserable woman trying in vain to let down a bucket into the well with her plaited hair. You must give her the rope. In the kitchen you will find a still more miserable woman trying to clean the hearth with her tongue; to her you must give the broom. You will see the casket on the top of a cupboard, take it as quickly as you can, and leave the house without a moment's delay. If you do all this exactly as I have told you, you will not be killed.'

So Prunella, having listened carefully to his instructions, did just what he had told her. She reached the house, oiled the hinges of the door, threw the loaf to the dog, gave the poor woman at the well the rope, and the

woman in the kitchen the broom, caught up the casket from the top of the cupboard, and fled with it out of the house. But the witch heard her as she ran away, and rushing to the window called out to the woman in the kitchen: 'Kill that thief, I tell you!'

But the woman replied: 'I will not kill her, for she has given me a broom, whereas you forced me to clean the hearth with my tongue.'

Then the witch called out in fury to the woman at the well: 'Take the girl, I tell you, and fling her into the water, and drown her!'

But the woman answered: 'No, I will not drown her, for she gave me this rope, whereas you forced me to use my hair to let down the bucket to draw water.'

Then the witch shouted to the dog to seize the girl and hold her fast; but the dog answered: 'No, I will not seize her, for she gave me a loaf of bread, whereas you let me starve with hunger.'

The witch was so angry that she nearly choked, as she called out: 'Door, bang upon her, and keep her a prisoner.'

But the door answered: 'I won't, for she has oiled my hinges, so that they move quite easily, whereas you left them all rough and rusty.'

And so Prunella escaped, and, with the casket under her arm, reached the house of her mistress, who, as you may believe, was as angry as she was surprised to see the girl standing before her, looking more beautiful than ever. Her eyes flashed, as in furious tones she asked her, 'Did you meet Bensiabel?'

But Prunella looked down, and said nothing.

'We shall see,' said the witch, 'who will win in the end. Listen, there are three cocks in the hen-house; one is yellow, one black, and the third is white. If one of them crows during the night you must tell me which one it is. Woe to you if you make a mistake. I will gobble you up in one mouthful.'

Now Bensiabel was in the room next to the one where Prunella slept. At midnight she awoke hearing a cock crow.

'Which one was that?' shouted the witch.

Then, trembling, Prunella knocked on the wall and whispered: 'Bensiabel, Bensiabel, tell me, which cock crowed?'

'Will you give me a kiss if I tell you?' he whispered back through the wall.

But she answered 'No.'

Then he whispered back to her: 'Nevertheless, I will tell you. It was the yellow cock that crowed.'

The witch, who had noticed the delay in Prunella's answer, approached her door calling angrily: 'Answer at once, or I will kill you.'

So Prunella answered: 'It was the yellow cock that crowed.'

And the witch stamped her foot and gnashed her teeth.

Soon after another cock crowed. 'Tell me now which one it is,' called the witch. And, prompted by Bensiabel, Prunella answered: 'That is the black cock.'

A few minutes after the crowing was heard again, and the voice of the witch demanding 'Which one was that?'

And again Prunella implored Bensiabel to help her. But this time he hesitated, for he hoped that Prunella might forget that he was a witch's son, and promise to give him a kiss. And as he hesitated he heard an agonised cry from the girl: 'Bensiabel, Bensiabel, save me! The witch is coming, she is close to me, I hear the gnashing of her teeth!'

With a bound Bensiabel opened his door and flung himself against the witch. He pulled her back with such force that she stumbled, and falling headlong, dropped down dead at the foot of the stairs.

Then, at last, Prunella was touched by Bensiabel's goodness and kindness to her, and she became his wife, and they lived happily ever after.

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