



The Witch's Granddaughter

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German

Intermediate

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PART I

In a green valley between two mountain-slopes lay a little village crowned by the Castle of Eppenhain, that stood on the mountain-side, built on projecting slabs of rock.

The quaint old houses of the village with their red, slanting roofs, and black-beamed walls, made a pretty picture in the May sunshine as Count Karl of Eppenhain rode through the stone-paved highway, mounted on his white steed decked with scarlet fringes. The lilac bushes were in flower, the air was sweet with their scent, the laburnums hung out their “gold rain” between the houses, the cherry-trees in the little gardens shed their blossoms like snow.

At the farther end of the village was a house somewhat larger than the peasant’s cottages, with many gables and corners. This house was surrounded on all sides by a thick briar hedge. The Count knew that it had belonged to an old woman who was said to be a witch. There she had lived all alone, save for her seven cats, her seven ravens, her poultry—famous for the remarkable size of the eggs—and her little granddaughter, Babette.

Count Karl had heard that the old woman was dead; for there had been a great fuss about her burial. The villagers had said that as she was a notorious witch, she ought not to be buried in consecrated ground; but as the old lady had left money to the church, her tombstone was erected after all in the little churchyard. The village boys declared that they had seen her riding on a broomstick over the church spire; but the Count did not

believe such tales. He wondered what had become of the child; she was the prettiest, as well as the most mischievous and ill-behaved child in the village.

As the Count came up to the house, he heard voices shouting and scolding. Then he saw a strange hunting scene. The hunters were not men, but women with sticks and brooms, and the creature pursued was neither a hare nor a fox, but just a little girl.

Yes, it was little Babette, the witch's granddaughter. She was leading the fat peasant women a fine dance. They were quite unused to running, and were obliged to stop every few minutes to pant; then Babette danced just before them, made naughty faces, and (oh, fie!) stuck out her little red tongue. Her hair blew over her head in the fresh breeze, till she looked like some tall flower with curling petals. Sometimes she stopped and shook her little fist at her pursuers; then off she flew again. She knew every nook and corner of the garden, and that was to her advantage.

The Count paused, laughed, then blew a blast from his horn.

Instantly everyone stood still as if they were living pictures.

"Hi! Ho! Come here, good folk!" he cried.

The women came at once, wiping their hot faces with the corner of their aprons, puffing and blowing like so many fat seals. Babette stood at a safe distance, but near enough to hear all that went on.

"Please sir," said one of the women with a curtsy, "as your Lordship knows, the child's granny is dead and buried. Four days has the child lived here all alone, never a bite or sup has she had; she will die of starvation. (Here Babette laughed.) She hides in the bushes like the wild cat that she is!"

"Babette, little Babette, come here, child," he called, interrupting the old woman's narrative.

She came at once in obedience to his gentle command. She gave him one glance out of her deep brown eyes, lifting up her long black lashes, and his heart was captured at once. He was very fond of children, but he had none of his own. Here was a beautiful child that seemed ready made for him. Not one of the women before him really wished to keep her; for they feared her, and the supposed power of her dead grandmother.

Meanwhile the child stood by the Count, and began to stroke his fine embroidered sleeve; finally she slipped her little hand into his. This settled the matter.

“Well, well, we must see what is to be done for the child. Meanwhile I shall take her up with me to the Castle. She seems to have made you all rather hot,” he remarked mischievously to the reddest and stoutest of the women.

“A devil’s brat, I call her!” she muttered in return, between her teeth.

“Hush,” said my Lord indignantly, “she looks more like a little angel,” and, indeed, at his kind words her small face had become very sweet.

As he mounted his horse again and lifted Babette to place her before him, she began to cry bitterly.

“Why, little one, what ails you?” he said. “Are you frightened?”

“No-o-o-o-o,” said Babette, “but I don’t want to go away from my beau-ti-ful home!”

“You shall have a far more beautiful home, and everything that you can want, shall be yours,” he said. “Why, you would have starved there alone, you poor little thing!”

“Oh no!” said Babette, “for Lucky—she is my pet hen you know—always laid the biggest eggs for me; then I make a little hole and suck them so. (She tossed back her curly head.) Then I am never hungry or thirsty. O, who will feed Lucky, and all the baby chickens; and my cats?” she continued, and began to cry again.

“We will fetch them all up to the Castle,” said his Lordship consolingly.

The road wound upwards and upwards, until they reached at length the gateway of the Castle. The heavy gates stood open to receive them. There was a pretty terraced garden in the front, where peacocks strutted up and down, who nodded their heads as if they knew Babette.

A dog sprang out barking to meet his master. Count Karl patted his head; then he lifted Babette from his horse, and led her by the hand into the Castle. “Welcome to Eppenhain, my little maid,” he said, formally, but kindly.

Her little heart beat fast; for she was timid, like all wild, untamed creatures, and did not know what might happen to her next. The Count drew back the heavy curtain that hung before the entrance to a room; and there

in a deep window niche sat a lady dressed in a rich green velvet dress with puffed sleeves, and a gold chain round her neck. She was working at embroidery on a frame. She sprang up at once, as her husband (for it was the Countess herself) entered the room, and uttered a cry of surprise as she saw the child.

“Why, what dirty little thing have you picked up? Send her away again at once,” she said imperiously. “Don’t touch me, child,” as Babette attempted to stroke her grand dress.

Now the Count had not noticed that Babette was very dirty, that her red pinafore hung in rags, and her hair had not been combed for many a day. He was somewhat taken aback, and saw that he had been rash.

“She shall be washed and properly dressed, and then you will see,” he said. He dared not tell her his plans at once. He sent for his old nurse, who had brought him up as a boy, and gave the child into her care.

The poor woman soon had her hands full, I can tell you! You might as well have tried to dress a hare as Babette! She would not stand still for a second, and as for a bath, she seemed to be quite afraid of it. However, several maids were called, and Babette was bathed in spite of kicks and screams. She was no sooner in the water than she began to splash about like a baby, and to enjoy herself finely. It was almost as difficult to get her out as to put her in! Some old clothes that had belonged to the Count’s sister, were produced. Babette thought them very fine, and seemed quite pleased, she stroked the old nurse’s cheek, chucked her under the chin, and sprang up and down violently on her knee, “nearly cracking my old bones,” as nurse related afterwards. Her curls were the most trouble; it would take more than one day’s brushing to set them in order.

Meanwhile Count Karl had been explaining to his wife that he meant to adopt Babette, and bring her up as his own daughter.

“A witch’s offspring without a family pedigree,” exclaimed his wife, “must I be mother to a witch’s brat?”

Just then the “witch’s brat” entered the room, making a funny bobbing curtsy, as nurse had taught her to do, just outside the door. Very pretty she looked in her low-necked, white-embroidered frock, with the cherry-coloured sash, her face flushed after the bath. Even her Ladyship was bound to acknowledge that she was quite a lovely child.

“What is your name, child?” she said condescendingly.

“I don’t love you,” said Babette, and stuck out her tongue.

“Babette,” said the Count sternly, “if you are a good little girl, and do as you are told, you may stay here with us, and this lady will be your mother, and I your father. Then you will be brought up as a lady instead of becoming a little heathen and wild girl of the woods.”

Babette stood still a moment, as if she were considering the matter; then she gravely kissed his Lordship’s hand. The Countess extended her lily-white fingers, and Babette kissed them as well, but timidly; for she feared a rebuff.

Just at this moment a noise of scratching and miewing was heard at the window.

Babette flew to open it, and in walked—what do you think?—seven cats with their tails in the air rubbing themselves comfortably against the window-pane.

“O my dear Fotchen, dear Silverpaws, how glad I am to see you!” exclaimed Babette, and she kissed them all.

“What next?” said the poor Countess, holding up her hands in horror!

In a few minutes there came a rap at the window, seven times repeated. These were the ravens. However, they did not venture into the room; they were afraid of the big gun that stood in the corner. They flew straight up into a tall fir-tree, and there they chattered away as usual, hidden by the dark branches.

The funniest sight of all was the arrival of the poultry. The cocks walked first with an air of importance and authority; the baby bantams sat on their mothers’ backs; the whole procession toiled up the hill to the Castle and entered by the yard gate. The servants watched them with astonishment; they too said: “What next?” However, no one grumbled, not even the Countess when she heard of it; for such guests were welcome. The old witch’s hens were renowned for the size of their eggs; they had often been bought for use at the Castle.

Now the clock struck seven.

“High time for little girls to have their supper and go to bed,” said her Ladyship, and nurse was called, and carried Babette off again.

A beautiful wooden cot, painted white and gold, stood in the room where Babette was to sleep. It was still called the nursery; for the Count and his sister had slept there as children.

Nurse persuaded her to let five of the cats sleep outside in the barn; but she begged so hard to have Fotchen and Silverpaws that nurse sent for a bundle of hay, and the two pussies slept in a corner of the room to keep her from feeling homesick.

Babette stole out of her bed at six o'clock the next morning. She dressed herself in haste; she was so anxious to see her new surroundings. It seemed to her like a wonderful dream, or like one of the fairy stories that her old grandmother had so often narrated to her.

Yesterday, little, wild Babette, whom no one cared for, and everyone scorned; to-day, the Count's own daughter. She would try and be so good, never naughty any more. She smoothed her hair a little with her fingers; washing she did not think necessary. Then she went down the big oak staircase followed by her two pussies. When the young servants saw her, they began to tease her unmercifully and to pull the cats' tails.

Then Babette grew very angry. "Leave my cats alone, will you?" she said. She stamped her little foot, made ugly faces, and used bad words. Finally she escaped from her persecutors into the garden. Here she was alone. She sat down and cried with rage and sorrow. She had meant to be so good; but it was very hard when people were so horrid!

However she heard a cock-a-doodle-do from the hen-house, and ran off there, forgetting her troubles. She was greeted by a chorus of melodious voices. They made such a noise that they woke my Lady out of her comfortable early-morning doze. Lucky had laid an immense egg. She rolled it with pride to the feet of her young mistress, who promptly began to suck its contents. The ravens flew down to greet her, and she stroked their glossy plumage.

The five cats were still shut up and miewed bitterly. Babette luckily met one of the gardeners who opened the door of the barn and freed the captives. They followed her into the big kitchen with the shining copper pans, purring and rubbing themselves against her legs. Babette coaxed the cook till he gave her seven saucers of milk; then there was a great smacking of lips.

When nurse awoke as usual at seven o'clock, she was frightened to find that her little charge had vanished. "What a child to look after in my old age!" she groaned. "And yet she is taking too! How sweet she looked curled

up in the old cot." She soon found out from the servants what Babette had been doing; so the child was seized upon, washed and brushed again, and dressed in a stiff frock with white frills.

Quite sober and respectable our little wild girl looked when she went downstairs after breakfast to see my Lord and Lady in the dining-room.

She sat on the high, straight-backed sofa, and played with the carved lions' heads, and had never a word to say for herself until the Count produced a doll that he had rummaged out from among some old treasures. It was yellow from age; but its frock was of satin, and it had on little gold shoes. To Babette, who had never had a doll of her own, it seemed very lovely indeed. "Is it really for me?" she asked in tones of ecstasy.

She was perfectly good all the morning, playing with it, washing its face, dressing and undressing it, and putting it to bed as little girls love to do.

At dinner she shocked the polite company by putting her food into her mouth with her fingers; forks and spoons she did not know how to manage. So she was sent to have dinner with the servants who made fine fun of her again, till she flew into a passion and declared with many tears that she would run away. Then they were frightened lest my Lord should hear the noise, and soothed and petted her till she was quiet again. They did not mean to be unkind; they were only stupid, and thought her tempers amusing.

Well, the days went on, and Babette became more gentle and docile, and gave up many of her wild ways. She saw but little of the Countess, but she grew to admire the grave, silent lady, and to long for some response to her affection. My Lord was Babette's best friend and protector in all her childish troubles. Everyone said that he was quite infatuated with the child. He would play ball with her in the garden, "regardless of his knightly dignity," as his wife remarked.

Babette knew all the animals about the Castle and ruled over them like a little queen.

She would go up to the proud peacocks and say imperiously: "Spread out your tails, or I will smack your silly heads!" and they obeyed her meekly at once.

She had a pet frog in the pond, and once when the gardener was scolding her for breaking some of his beautiful lilies, she popped it down his neck, to his horror and disgust! For this she was whipped and put to bed. I think she richly deserved it—don't you?

The garden at the back of the Castle led into the dense forest by which the mountains were covered. Babette would sit on the stone wall and gaze into the deep shades, as if she could see things there that were invisible to others. She knew how to call the deer. One day she enticed a fine stag into the garden. She made a garland of cornflowers and ox-eye daisies, and threw it over his antlers; then she sprang on his back, holding a red foxglove in her hand for a whip, and galloped round the garden, singing and shouting: "Look at me, look at me! I am the Queen of the fairies!"

The Countess herself owned that she had never seen a prettier sight; but then she sighed deeply, and said to her husband she feared all was not right with the child.

The Count shared her fears to some extent, and nurse had orders never to let her out of her sight.

Nurse had several times seen a strange man watching Babette from over the wall as she played alone in the garden. She too felt nervous and anxious about her little charge.

PART II

Years passed by, Babette grew into a tall and charming maiden. She learned to read and write, and to play on the harp. She could even speak a little French, which was the fashionable language of the Court in those days. So that with these accomplishments she was considered a fine lady, far above the village children, who had formerly despised her.

One fine evening (she was then about sixteen years of age) she was walking with her old nurse in the forest, not far from the Castle, picking bilberries, and singing to herself songs of her own composing. The wood was very still; not a leaf stirred. The setting sun shone out behind a beech-tree, making a brilliant star of iridescent colours that dazzled her eyes. She heard a sudden noise as of a cough: the bushes near her rustled. She felt frightened and called out: "Nurse, nurse," in trembling tones.

As she spoke, a man sprang out of the wood and seized her by the arm. Nurse began to scream; but the man raised the stick he had in his hand, and she stood as if turned to stone.

Babette's courage always rose to emergencies. She looked the man over from head to foot. He was dressed in green, with a red feather in his cap. His hair was dark and curly; his eyes were large and would have been beautiful, but that they had a wild and sinister look that Babette did not like, and squinted slightly. She seemed

to remember his face; but where or when she had seen him before, she did not know. Her first thought was that he must be a wizard like one of those her grandmother had told her stories about.

“Who are you?” he said, shaking her slightly.

“I am Babette, daughter of Count Karl of Eppenhain,” said Babette proudly.

“A Count’s daughter—a fine tale—the witch’s granddaughter you mean,” he said with emphasis, and Babette shuddered. “Come along with me, child!” he continued, “you must follow me now, and serve me well and cook my dinners. I knew your old grandmother and have often seen you as a child; a little imp you were,” he said. “Now it is high time you learnt to be useful; they will only turn your head, and teach you rubbish up there at the Castle; you must come along with me now.” Then he turned to the poor nurse, and said, “In half an hour you will be free to return to the Castle. Adieu!” He fixed his strange eyes on the nurse, who swooned away, and thus she was found exactly half an hour afterwards by the housemaid, who had followed her to say that supper was ready.

You may imagine the consternation at the Castle. The poor Countess who had been so cold to Babette, seemed to feel it most. She sat and cried: “O Babette, come back, come back, my dear, and I will be a real mother to you, indeed I will.”

The Count immediately took steps to recover her. The forests were searched through and through by his men; but not the slightest trace could they discover.

The seven ravens said: “Caw, caw,” and set off at once in search of her.

The next day Fotchen and Silverpaws and the other cats disappeared. Lucky and several of the old witch’s hens were also missed.

It was evident that they had all followed Babette, and that she must be alive somewhere; but where, that was the question. Where there is magic at work, it is always a difficult matter.

One clever youth remarked that if one could find her pets, why, then one might find Babette.

But this brilliant idea was not of much use, as they were all lost.

Meanwhile Babette followed her strange guide with many misgivings and sad sinkings of the heart. They had

not gone far when they came to a cottage in the forest, surrounded, like her granny's garden, by a briar hedge.

Now I must tell you that Babette had fallen into the power of a reputed wizard, and he had the power of making everything within this briar hedge invisible and intangible to those outside. So that poor Babette would be more safely imprisoned there than in an iron-barred fortress. She did not realise this at first; she grew to understand it later, when she became more acquainted with the wizard (or Mr Squint-eyes, as Babette called him) and his ways. The hedge was so thick and high, and the thorns were so huge, that it would have been impossible for Babette to think of squeezing herself through it, and running away.

The wizard parted this hedge with his wand; it closed up thick and close behind them as they entered.

The cottage garden was laid out in patches of vegetables. Not a flower was to be seen in it; but there were fruit-trees with ripe apples, and pears, plums and medlars; for it was the early autumn. They entered into the little parlour which seemed dark and gloomy to Babette. Mr Squint-eyes tossed off a mug of beer that stood on the table, and told her to be off to bed. The poor girl was hungry; for bilberries are not very satisfying and it was supper time; but she crept up the narrow stairs, too much frightened to say a word. She found a tiny room with a white bed in it, a looking-glass, very dim and old and uncanny-looking, with candlesticks on either side, also a primitive washing-stand.

As she began to undress, a sense of fear and loneliness came over her. She thought of her happy home at Eppenhain, and of the Count, and hot tears began to fall. However, she was accustomed to look at the cheerful side of things. "They are sure to find me to-morrow," she said to herself; she knew she could not be far away.

The next morning she was awakened by a loud knocking at the door. The horrid man who had stolen her, poked his head in, "Get up, get up, you lazy bones," he said, "and see about my breakfast."

Babette hurried downstairs and found a small kitchen, with a door leading into the garden. There was a heap of dried wood just outside the door, and, after many attempts, she succeeded in making the fire.

She filled the heavy iron kettle from the pump in the yard, making her pretty frock quite black.

"That's right, that's the way that women should work," said the wizard coolly.

Babette felt indignant and thought that he might offer to help her, but not a bit of it. There he stood, leaning against the door, smoking his long pipe, the picture of laziness.

“Please where is the coffee?” said Babette.

“Use your eyes and you will find it,” said her polite host.

Then she saw a jar on a shelf labelled “Coffee,” and near it the coffee-mill.

Babette ground the beans till she was red in the face. Then she waited for the water to boil. Whilst she was attending to the coffee, rolls and butter appeared on the table and a blue and white china coffee service. The table seemed to have laid itself; for Babette was sure that the man had never moved from the door. Now breakfast was ready. They sat down together, the wizard saying never a word, but lifting one eyebrow at times in a peculiar way that made Babette feel very uncomfortable.

After breakfast he went out of the house saying: “Clean the house, make the beds, cook the dinner.”

“But there is no dinner to cook,” said poor Babette.

“Find it,” was all the reply she could get out of him.

Now Babette had not been remarkable for obedience and docility, and if anyone had spoken to her like that at home, she would have rebelled at once; but she felt instinctively that her safety here lay in doing exactly as she was told. The man was half-mad she feared, and if she aroused his wrath, he might do her bodily harm.

The tears came into her eyes; she felt quite in despair; but she was a brave girl and determined to make the best of things.

The vegetables in the garden occurred to her. She would cook some carrots; that was easy. Stewed plums would do for pudding; but what about the soup and the joint?

At this point of her deliberations a hare was thrown over the hedge. This settled the question. Evidently the man did not wish to starve.

“But how shall I get its fur off?” thought Babette. “Bah! I shall never be able to skin the creature!”

Just then she heard to her joy a “caw caw,” seven times repeated, and there she saw her dear ravens sitting on a

tree just outside the garden.

Now the limit of invisibility did not exist for the witch's favourites. They flew at once to Babette; she told them her troubles, and showed them the hare.

"That is an easy matter," said the ravens, "the hare has seven skins; we are seven ravens, each of us will take off one skin, and may we have the pickings?" said the greedy fellows.

"Anything, anything you like! Please take it away and bring it back again all ready to pop in the pot!" said Babette.

"Potted or jugged hare famous!" said the ravens, and they laughed hoarsely.

"Be quiet, be quiet, or the wizard will catch you!" she said in a warning tone.

Now the dinner was all ready on the stove. Potatoes she had dug out of the garden. "Hare and carrots and stewed plums, what can anyone want more?" she thought, and felt very proud. But suddenly soup occurred to her. How could she make soup? She had heard that soup was made of bones and water; but she had no bones, and those nice little halfpenny packets for making soup out of nothing were not invented in those days.

She put on some hot water with a few carrots and a little chopped parsley in it and plenty of pepper and salt. She tasted it, as a good cook should, and said to herself: "Not bad, I have tasted worse."

She laid the table, and punctually at one o'clock the man came in. Babette trembled. He proceeded at once to business; that is, he sat down to dinner.

Soup came first, which was unfortunate. "Bah!" he said, making a horribly wry face, "what stuff, child, do you want to make me sick?"

"No-o-o," said poor Babette.

"Never make such soup again, or I shall fetch my sister, and she will cook you," he said with a terrible look.

However the hare was tender, and when a pot of red-currant jelly produced itself, seemingly from nowhere, it was quite a fine dinner.

The carrots were hard, and “not scraped,” as the wizard said severely. “Plums too much sugar.”

But in spite of all this grumbling she felt immensely proud of her morning’s work. The house was not cleaned; neither were the beds made; but this he did not seem to notice. He lay on the sofa by the window, covered himself up with a bear skin, and snored loudly with his mouth open.

Babette made up the fire, and put the kettle on to boil for tea. Then she strolled out into the garden. She climbed up into a pear-tree. From her perch in its branches she could see far into the woods. She wondered when her friends would come and rescue her.

Then she saw to her delight Lucky and some of her favourite cocks and hens wandering about in search of her. They came scuttling up at once. She held up one finger to enjoin silence. She feared that her capturer might take a fancy for roast fowl if he should see them. So they hid under the hedge.

“Now I can make scrambled eggs for supper,” thought Babette joyfully.

Fotchen and Silverpaws had likewise no rest when their mistress was gone, and they too set out in search of her. When they reached the briar hedge, Babette was indoors making tea. They began to miew and made a great noise.

“The old woman’s cats, by Thor!” said the wizard. “They know a thing or two. I’ll go and let them in.” So saying he again parted the hedge with his wand, and let them through. Although Babette was very pleased to see them, she felt a little anxious as to their welfare.

However the wizard scratched their heads, and was quite affectionate to them. He had, it seemed, a partiality for cats.

Babette felt a little happier now that her pets were with her; yet her heart was sore. She thought of her lovely house, of her kind, good foster-father, and of all her friends, and the tears stood in her eyes.

Several weeks passed away, and Babette cooked and scrubbed every day in fear and trembling, like a regular little Cinderella. Being German, she was used to helping in the household, and was not so inexperienced as many English girls would have been. But never a word of praise did she get from her queer companion; but if anything were amiss, then he opened his mouth and scolded the poor girl roughly.

PART III

A young man was returning home after a day's hunting. He was the son of the knight of a neighbouring castle, and his name was Sir Rudolf of Ruppertshain. It was a hot afternoon; the sunlight made a chequered pattern through the forest trees. His bag was heavy with game, and he whistled merrily as he strode between the oak-trees and bracken fern. He had a light heart and an easy conscience, few enemies and many friends, and added to these advantages was the exhilarating feeling of youth and perfect health.

Suddenly he stopped and looked around him, startled. He heard a sweet voice singing. The notes were clear and distinct as those of a bird, and yet it was no bird. Who could it be in this lonely spot? He could distinguish the words of the song as he held his breath to listen:

“A lonely maiden, I,
Sit here and sob and sigh;
No man my face can see,
Ah, who will rescue me?
O lack-a-daisy-me!

O wasted life of mine!
Here must I sadly pine;
My young life hid must be
From all humanity.
O lack-a-daisy me!

O were a knight so bold,
As in the time of old,
In days of chivalry,
He would deliver me!
O lack-a-daisy-me!”

Rudolf's eyes were trained by hunting. He searched the woods carefully round that place, and peered behind every bush and tree; but nothing was to be seen. His heart beat fast, this was a real adventure. Surely if a wood-nymph or fairy were to appear to him here in this lonely forest, it would hardly seem strange.

So he summoned up his courage and addressed the wood-spirit as he thought. "Who are you? Where are you?" he said. "Be you wood-sprite or fairy, I fear you not. I am ready to do your bidding; for your sweet voice and your distress have touched my heart: appear, O appear!"

Babette (for of course it was she) trembled with excitement. This was really a chance of escape. She had seen the young huntsman from her perch in the pear-tree, and had made up the impromptu song. She thought it was even more original than her cooking. Now she answered eagerly:

"Alas it is impossible for me to appear unto you; for I am as invisible as if I had on Siegfried's cap of darkness. I was stolen by a horrid wizard when I was walking in the forest with my nurse. Surely you have heard of me?"

Now of course Sir Rudolf had heard of Babette,—the story of whose kidnapping was told all over the country, and became more wonderful with every telling. Some people said that the devil himself had carried her off; this was really unkind; for Babette, though lively, was not a bad girl, as we know.

"Are you Babette, the witch's granddaughter?" said the young man hesitatingly.

"O don't, don't say that, I want to forget that!" said Babette, and he heard a slight sob. "I am the adopted daughter of Count Karl of Eppenhain, and O, a wicked wizard holds me here invisible under a powerful spell. Just think," said Babette crying again, "I slave for him all day and cook and do all the house-work, and never a kind word or look do I get from him in return. It is a shame. O dear! O dear!"

"Please don't cry, I really cannot bear it, when I cannot even see you to comfort you," said Rudolf tenderly. "Tell me what to do! Shall I shoot the wizard?"

"No, of course not; besides, he is invisible, too. You might walk through us all, and notice no difference, so subtle is the spell," said Babette.

Rudolf was one of those specially gifted mortals in whom the sense of things unseen is as clearly developed as the senses of sight and hearing. He never doubted Babette's reality, though I think a more up-to-date youth would certainly have done so, and have thought that his imagination was playing tricks with him. He felt much distressed and perplexed, but could think of no way out of this strange dilemma.

But an inspiration came to Babette.

“Go to Mother Holle,” she said, “if you really wish to help me. She was an intimate friend of my grandmother’s, and she is a powerful fairy and can perhaps help us. What is your name, brave youth?” she continued. “Sir Rudolf of Ruppertshain,” he answered. “Why, then, I know your mother quite well; but you were away travelling with your father, when I visited your castle. But quick, we must not delay matters by conversation, though it is dreadfully nice to talk to a real human being again.” Her voice sounded near and yet far away; “a curious kind of conversation,” Rudolf thought it was.

“Where can I find Mother Holle?” said Rudolf. “And will she not drop pitch on my head? I should be no good at shaking feather beds, you see!”

“Nonsense, she won’t expect you to do anything of the sort. She is very kind and friendly; she lives on the Rossert Mountain, quite near to your Castle. Hush, hush, go now! my tyrant is waking up; if he were to suspect us! Go!—go!”

A complete and somewhat unnatural silence followed, like one of those awkward pauses in the conversation when we entertain stiff callers for the first time.

Then Rudolf took the precaution of marking the position of the trees in that part of the woods.

Three tall fir-trees raised their heads among the beech and oaks. He cut a cross thus, on each one of them, because trees are so deceptive. This mark is the old symbol of the Mithras cult, two axes placed sideways signifying the striking of fire. It is an old sign known and respected by the fairies; so he hoped that the good folk would see it and further his quest.

On one of the firs the ravens were assembled. They caw-cawed seven times to indicate their willingness to lend Rudolf their aid.

The wizard looked at Babette closely that evening. The new-born hope, perhaps, too, the sight of the handsome stranger had given an extra colour to her cheeks. “I may have trouble with her yet!” he said to himself, and cleared his throat with a rumbling sound.

I must tell you that the cocks and hens had betrayed themselves. They were silent all through the night, but when the dawn broke, they could not resist one cock-a-doodle-doo! Then the wizard chuckled and brought them in; but nothing had happened to them as yet.

Babette lived during the next days in a state of suppressed excitement. She felt that something must happen for good or evil; but she did not know what. Patient waiting! a hard lesson for all of us to learn, but harder still for a maiden of seventeen years who had been kept so long in that dull hole. She had passed her birthday in that horrid place! just think of it, and not one birthday present did she get. She made up for it afterwards by having two birthdays at once; but it was not quite so nice.

Meanwhile Sir Rudolf had turned homewards pondering on his strange adventure, and fully determined to seek Mother Holle's aid. Should he go first to the Castle of Eppenhain and tell Babette's foster-parents that he had found out where Babette was imprisoned? He felt that, credulous though they were in those days, they would only laugh at him, and consider the story as outside the range of possibility. They might even suggest that a cask of Rhine wine had clouded his intelligence; no, he would go home to Ruppertshain Castle and have supper, and think it over. So he returned home, and was so silent and dreamy, and his appetite, which was usually of heroic proportions, was so small that his mother felt quite anxious about him.

"You are not bewitched, Rudie dear?" she asked anxiously, just as we might inquire if he were a little upset.

"I am not sure, mother, maybe I am!" he answered to the good lady's dismay.

After sprinkling him with various herbs, she insisted on his drinking some nasty aromatic tea when he went to bed. As she had put some spider's legs in it and a few choice things of that sort, Rudolf asked to be allowed to take it upstairs with him. Then I regret to say he deceived the good lady by pouring it out of the window. I rather think that you or I might have done the same thing under the circumstances, though it was undoubtedly wrong.

The full moon was shining into the little window in the gable of the turret. He shook off the very natural sleepiness and fatigue consequent on his night's hunting, took off his soiled clothes, and dressed himself in his fine velvet Court suit with the beautiful lace on the collar.

He opened the little window, squeezed himself (it was lucky that he was slight for a German knight) through the iron bars, and climbed on to the roof with some difficulty, not to say danger. Then he crawled noiselessly

along the Castle walls, fearing to be challenged by the warder of the Castle on his nightly rounds. But the warder was just enjoying his seventh glass of lager beer, and was not very keen on the look-out.

As he dropped outside the walls, his favourite dog began to bark and beg to go with him; but Rudolf did not dare to let him out for fear of creating a disturbance.

He soon gained the little path which led through Eppenhain, and then through fields to the woods that clothed the Rossert. Great clouds had obscured the moon; but he was not afraid; he was so used to the woods and could distinguish one creature from another simply by its movements.

In his hand he carried a dark lantern. A rough path covered with rocks and stones led to the summit of the mountain. As he walked cautiously along, a bat hit him in the face as it blundered along. "Hi, ho, steady there, old fellow!" said Rudolf. He now entered the part of the woods where the beeches and oaks grow so closely together that at midday the sky seems green, rather than blue. The moon shone out suddenly, and he saw by its light a gruesome-looking head without a body that seemed to grin at him from among the undergrowth. His heart stood still for a moment, and then he laughed at his fears; for he saw that it was only a grotesque old tree-stump, such as one so often sees in the woods.

Suddenly he saw a bright light through the trees, as if one of the bushes were on fire, or was it merely the brilliant moonbeams shining on a wet clearing?

For a moment all was still; then lightning played across his path, revealing a huge clumsy-looking giant who stood with club uplifted in the way, looking as if he would dash his brains out. Brave though Rudolf was, he did not wish to court danger; so he turned aside into the woods hoping to find another path before long that was not thus barricaded. Then voices seemed to mock him and to laugh at him, and he had the unpleasant sensation of dark shadows, moving as he moved, shadows unaccompanied by substance.

The rain came down, pouring, drenching rain, such as the forests love. In a few minutes he was wet to the skin, as wet as if he had plunged into the river with his clothes on. Naturally his vanity was to blame for this; in his stout hunting clothes and thick leather boots even a deluge could not have wetted him through. To add to this, the air was close and stifling, and he had lost his way. All this for the sake of an unseen maiden. What if she were as old and ugly as Fräulein Kunigunde of whom Heinrich von Kleist has written? Somehow he felt that was impossible; but even if it had been so, his natural gallantry would not have deserted him, and we will hope that he would still have sought to deliver her.

A Christian knight is ready to help all women, be they young or old, rich or poor, plain or pretty.

The rain had ceased; but there was a sense of something oppressive in the atmosphere. An owl with eyes that looked like live coals glared at him from the branch of an oak-tree, vanishing as he approached. A fox? No, it was too large for a fox; it was a wolf (there were really wolves in the Taunus woods in those days!) came up to him snarling. Rudolf had his gun ready, but the creature moved away into the darkest shades, snarling and growling as it went.

Altogether I cannot say it was a pleasant walk. I do not think any one of us would have enjoyed it all alone at the dead of night, do you?

At this moment came a flash of lightning that struck down a tree just before Rudolf's eyes. He crossed himself involuntarily and muttered a paternoster.

A lull followed the storm; the heavens were clear again. Rudolf made out by the light of his lantern a triangular spot made by three footpaths crossing. It was bare of all vegetation; black ashes were heaped up in the middle as if gipsies had lately lit a fire there.

An irresistible impulse made him enter this triangle, though he felt as if long ghostly arms were trying to hold him back.

No sooner had he stepped on to this spot than he fell into a deep sleep or faint. When he awoke, he saw a wonderful light near him, and in the midst of the light which seemed to radiate from her presence, was a beautiful lady, with long rippling fair hair.

"You are safe now in my kingdom," she said. "You have passed the boundary between the good and evil powers,

and have left the dangers of the night behind you.”

“O can you tell me where to find Mother Holle, beautiful fairy?” he said.

“Easily enough, for I am Mother Holle!” she answered. “I know why you have come here, and I am ready to help you.” She took him by the hand, and he leapt to his feet, making a low bow to the lovely lady. All the evil dreams that had perplexed him, fled as the night before the day, and he could have shouted hurrah! for joy and gladness.

He had the unshaken confidence in the final victory of good over evil, that is so necessary to help us to any measure of success in this world with its chequered lights.

He walked with Mother Holle a little way, till they came to an arbour made of honeysuckle and wild roses, surrounded by banks of evening primroses, round which luminous moths were fluttering. Into this they entered, and she sat down and gazed at him, till he was quite overwhelmed with her beauty. He had expected to see an old witch hobbling along with a stick and to have feather beds to make! Feather pillows, indeed, there were in the arbour, very cosy and soft. It was delightful to have a chat with such a woman in such a place, even if there were no Babette in the world.

Mother Holle began to speak, her voice sounded like the murmur of the fir-trees.

“I have heard that pretty little Babette has fallen into the power of a bad man. He stole the magic book from her grandmother’s house at a time when the old lady was ill and feeble, shortly before her death. He has been only able to make out a few of the spells—that, for instance, for rendering things invisible. He is not a real wizard, so that if you obtain the book, the power will be yours. But I strongly advise you to have nothing to do with magic; it is very dangerous; but to return the book to me, to whom, in fact, it rightfully belongs.”

“Have no fear of that,” laughed Rudolf. “I don’t want it, I would not touch it with the tongs if I could help it.”

“Now listen carefully to my instructions! At the foot of one of the fir-trees, grows a red toadstool, spotted with white. On it sits an ugly old toad. Take this handkerchief (she gave him a lovely gauze scarf), wrap the toad in it, and cast it to the ground. Pull up the toadstool. Then the whole place will become visible, and you will be able to consult with Babette as to how to overcome old Squint-eyes, as she calls him.

“Hold this candle alight in your hand”—she gave him the young pointed top of a fir-tree—“it will keep off evil

spells. When you have overcome the man, bind him with this grass." So saying, she gave him a bundle of silvery woodland grass. "Then tie him up to the tallest of the three fir-trees and leave him to us. We will punish him according to his deserts, and teach him to behave better in the future."

"Can you tell me anything about the fair young lady herself? Is she really the granddaughter of a witch? I could well believe it; for verily she has bewitched me; but who were her parents? I wish to know for her own sake," asked Rudolf anxiously.

"The old woman was really her nurse," said Mother Holle. "It is true that the woman had fairy blood in her veins and was learned in magic, but she never used her powers for any evil purposes, and as for riding on a broomstick, she abhorred such practices. Babette is the granddaughter of the great Baron of Siebenbergen. The Baron brought his children up strictly as became their rank; but his youngest son ran away from home, and married a village maiden much beneath him in rank.

"His father was exceedingly angry and refused to acknowledge her. The young wife died when Babette was born. The father went off in despair to the wars. He entrusted the tiny baby to the care of an old woman who had formerly been his own nurse. This old woman, who was spoken of later as Babette's grandmother, had been nurse to the children in Siebenbergen Castle for many years; but she had been dismissed suddenly in her old age, because evil tongues had denounced her as a witch. The Baron did not believe in the charge, but, nevertheless, he was obliged to send her away. He had his own reputation in the country to think of, and the charge of witchcraft was no light one in those days, and not so easy to disprove. He gave her a handsome pension, and a comfortable house and troubled himself no more about her.

"Babette's father lost interest in life on the death of his dearly beloved peasant wife. He fought recklessly in the front of the battle, and fell, covered with many wounds. His body was brought home for burial and there was a grand funeral in Siebenbergen. Everyone praised his heroism, and lamented his early death, but no one inquired after his peasant wife, or knew of the existence of his baby daughter.

"The notice of the marriage and the certificate of Babette's birth are to be found in the church of Eppenhain, all duly registered and complete.

"The old nurse became very feeble and was hardly fitted to bring up such a wild, high-spirited child as Babette. That is all I can tell you; you must find the papers, and test the accuracy of the story for yourself."

Rudolf was deeply interested; his heart beat fast. Babette became more and more interesting, wrapped round in a web of romance. He wanted to ask more questions of Mother Holle; but she faded slowly away. As she vanished, a voice said: "Adieu, follow the light path, and nothing can molest you."

A long stream of light shone out from where she had stood and illumined the way through the woods. It shone on and on in one great bright path, like the moon shining over the sea. Rudolf reached home walking like one in a dream, his head full of strange and marvellous fancies.

PART IV

Rudolf awoke rather later than usual; for he was thoroughly tired out. His mother did not feel so concerned about him when she saw the amount of breakfast he consumed; but he was still silent and abstracted. His adventures seemed to him like a wild dream. It seemed almost absurd to seek for the three firs; but yet an irresistible longing led him thither.

On the stroke of twelve at midday he stood beneath them, and recognised his own sign, and O joy! saw the toadstool with the toad sitting on it.

Without a moment's hesitation he took the handkerchief ("which was in itself a proof of the reality of the story," he said to himself) and seized the horrid shiny toad (how it wriggled and squirmed like some evil thing!) and cast it to the ground where it sprang into a thousand pieces. These pieces took root in the earth, so to speak, and came up again as a multitude of toadstools quite wonderful to behold. Perhaps you may see them if you ever come across this spot in your excursions to the Taunus Mountains.

Then Rudolf took hold of the red and white toadstool on which the toad had sat. Surely never before had a fungus been so firmly planted in the earth! The whole ground seemed to shake and tremble as he tugged at it; trees were uprooted in the forest; the earth moved up and down like the waves of the sea. At last it was out, and bump down fell Rudolf. One of the great fir-trees fell as well, luckily in another direction, or he might have been crushed beneath it.

When he got up again, he saw to his joy a little red-roofed house and a pretty maiden sitting in a pear-tree.

Babette had been watching him all the time; but she could not make out what he was doing. She had nearly fallen off the tree as he pulled up the toadstool. Now she climbed carefully down and came to the hedge and

their eyes met. Need I say that they fell in love, or, at any rate, Rudolf did, at first sight. The hedge parted to let him through. Perhaps this was caused by the fairy candle, or perhaps it was Mother Holle's doing—who knows?

"Hush, he is asleep, you have come just at the right moment," said Babette.

"We must secure the magic book first of all," said Rudolf, holding the fir-branch firmly in his hand, "and would you kindly light this candle for me?"

Babette laughed. "A funny candle," she said.

"A fairy candle," he whispered, "to keep off evil spells. Mother Holle recommended it."

Babette felt inclined to dance for joy. "Can you really see me?" she whispered. "O how untidy and ragged I am, you must think me a perfect fright!"

"I think you are the most beautiful lady I have ever seen," said Rudolf sincerely, and Babette blushed at the compliment, and felt very grown-up and important.

"I will light the candle for you at the kitchen fire. Come, we will go together softly and try and get the magic book. I know where it is. It is under the sofa where Old Squint-eyes is asleep. Follow me. Throw all that grass away," she said in her old imperious way.

"Let me give it to you to hold," said Rudolf. "It is also a gift from Mother Holle, and may come in useful."

They walked together towards the house, Babette holding the bunch of silvery grass, and entered the kitchen. Here Babette lit the fir-branch.

"It smells just like Christmas; there must be good times coming for poor little me," she said.

Then they peeped into the parlour, and there was Mr Wizard fast asleep in spite of the earthquake. Rudolf could hardly help laughing; he looked such a funny sight with his mouth wide open, his nose very red, and his hair hanging over his face.

Babette lifted up the bear-skin rug and pulled out the heavy book; but, as soon as she touched the book, the wizard awoke and seized her by the arm and sprang to his feet with many curses.

When he saw Rudolf, he let go of Babette's arm and tried to seize the young man. Rudolf was fully prepared

and threw him off with all his force. A wrestling match began, and it might have ended badly for Rudolf; for his adversary was tremendously strong and agile, but that he had unexpected assistance. The ravens flew in at the window, and beat themselves against Rudolf's opponent, nearly blinding him. The cats stood on the cupboard, with their backs up and hair bristling ready to spring if necessary. The cocks and hens crowded on the window-sill in war-like attitudes.

Meanwhile the fumes of the fir-candle which Babette had lit, filled the room, and Mr Squint-eyes could not abide the smell of burning fir. He grew weaker and weaker, and more and more confused, and at last Rudolf threw him down with such force that he was partially stunned.

Rudolf then took the woodland grass from Babette, and as he touched it, it wound itself in his hands into strong cord. He bound the man up with Babette's assistance, and gagged him with Mother Holle's handkerchief.

The two of them then lugged him into the wood, and tied him up to the biggest of the fir-trees as Mother Holle had directed. Then they fetched the magic book and placed it under the uprooted fir-tree, which instantly stood up again as if nothing had happened, burying the book beneath its roots.

They looked at the man they had tied up, bound like a martyr to the tree. He could not curse and swear as his mouth was stopped up; but he rolled his eyes and squinted so violently that he was horrible to look at.

Then Rudolf and Babette ran off together. Breathlessly they ran and ran. Babette was afraid Old Squint-eyes might wriggle out after all; he was so thin and wiry, and she had no fancy for serving him any more. Not until they came to a main road through the woods leading to Eppenhain Castle, did they pause to look at one another.

Then impetuous Babette (she was half a child still, you must remember) flew at Sir Rudolf and gave him a kiss. She turned red and white when she realised, what she had done. "I couldn't help it," she said. "You are such a dear. I am so very, very grateful to you for all you have done for me, an unknown and even unseen maiden."

"Please, don't apologise, dearest lady," he said. "I liked it very, very much. Won't you give me another?"

"Never," said Babette firmly. Subsequent events however caused her to revoke this determination.

Rudolf did not answer, but offered her his arm, which she took shyly, glancing at him from time to time out of

her deer-like eyes with the long-fringed lashes. Ragged and untidy as she was, she looked like a princess; and he in his fine clothes, soiled and torn as they were, looked nevertheless like a real fairy-tale prince!

He took her straight home to Eppenhain Castle, and you may imagine the excitement there! The Count clasped Babette in his arms and could hardly speak for emotion. Then he turned to Rudolf saying: "We shall never be able to reward you enough."

"I shall only want one reward, and that is the little maiden herself," said Rudolf.

The Countess wept and cried over her darling child, and said she would never scold her any more.

Nurse said: "Well, Miss Babette, you do look a fine sight to be sure—and to come home with such a pretty young man, too! Come upstairs with me, and let me make you clean and tidy." And this Babette was only too glad to do.

A great company of retainers were sent out by the Count to capture the so-called wizard; but they were unable to find either the fir-trees with the mark on them or the man, or the wood cottage. Neither Babette nor Rudolf set eyes on them since that day. I cannot say that they were altogether sorry.

The papers proving Babette's parentage were found to be in order, and her father's name and fortune became hers, so that she was not poor, despised Babette any more—the witch's granddaughter—but a maiden of good rank and birth with pin-money of her own.

A short time afterwards there was a grand wedding in Eppenhain, and two happier mortals never lived than Rudolf and Babette on that day, and, let us hope, for ever afterwards!

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