



The Three Gardeners and the Willow Tree

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Humor, Kids, Magic

Long ago, and not so very far away, a May Day feast was being planned to celebrate the beginning of summer. The king wanted nothing more than to please his only daughter, and the princess said she would like the palace filled with flowers, so the king called for the town's three gardeners and told them to grow as many flowers as they could.

The first gardener was rich. When he heard the command, he grew thoughtful. May was early for roses, but late for tulips. The dahlias in his hothouse hadn't sprouted, and the only plants likely to be in flower in May were the great bushes of rhododendron and vast arches of wisteria in his own garden, which he didn't think suitable at all. He shook his head and scratched his beard, then sent a message across the sea to a merchant in the south. Surely, he mused, if this was what the princess wanted, exotic flowers should be brought in from sunnier climes.

The second gardener was a comfortable man: neither rich nor poor. He stroked his beard and patted his belly. May was early for roses, but late for tulips. Summer flowers had been planted in his greenhouse, and snapdragon, sunflower and sweet pea seedlings rubbed shoulders with gladioli and begonia. Some would be ready by midsummer, but if they were needed for May Day, they would have to be forced. He grimaced, turned on the lamps and turned up the heat.

The third gardener was poor, but he was also resourceful and clever. He scratched his nose. May was early for

roses but late for daffodils. The hollyhocks and lupins in his garden were growing nicely, however they would not be in flower on May Day. Cow parsley, lilac and hawthorn, however, were abundant in May. He put on his boots and went out for a walk.

That April was dry but very cold, and as May approached the weather worsened; rain came, and it was solid and regular. The king's steward, who was organising the May Day celebration, was fouler than usual to everyone. He kicked a stray dog sheltering under the eaves, he whipped an errand boy for dropping a letter in the mud and he set a young scullery maid in the stocks when she cried because her hands were chapped. When he met with the gardeners, he made it clear to them the princess must not be disappointed. May Day would be celebrated in the great hall, and each bloom decorating it had to be perfect.

The first two gardeners reassured the steward their plans were going well. This, however, was not strictly true. The rich gardener's roses had been delayed at the port; now they were shivering and wilting in their carefully packed trunks. In desperation, he began to take more interest in his rhododendrons and wisteria. Meanwhile, the comfortable gardener was becoming very uncomfortable about the bill for heating and lighting his huge greenhouse. Each morning he unlocked its doors with numb hands before slipping through so as not to let the heat escape. Then he checked the plants, dusting them liberally with ash to deter whatever was chewing the leaves.

The steward paid little attention to the poor gardener – if he noticed the man at all, it was with a mixture of suspicion and contempt. Undeterred, the poor gardener continued to patrol the hedgerows. Weighty lilac blossoms bent their branches, cow parsley sprung up rapidly and the hawthorn trees were covered in buds. Their timing was perfect.

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As May Day drew near, the rich gardener's roses arrived. They had not opened, but their heads had wilted. He sighed at the huge bill that came with them and put them on the compost heap. Then, with a heavy heart, he turned to the wisteria and rhododendrons.

The comfortable gardener's plants were doing quite well, although the heating bill was growing faster than the flowers. He heard about the rich gardener's misfortune and decided to pay him a visit. They met and agreed they would work together, cut out the poor gardener altogether and tweak up the price.

Next, they called a meeting with the steward. Both frowned and rubbed their beards and warned him the cost

of the floral arrangements had grown by forty percent. The steward's only alternative, they pointed out, was to employ the poor gardener, however his rustic displays would bring shame and ignominy on the kingdom.

The steward went to see the poor gardener anyway. The poor gardener showed him samples of the beautiful arrangements he had designed – a bough of white hawthorn to go outside over the entrance to the great hall, fat lilac buds for the rafters and pale clouds of cow parsley tied with ribbon. The steward saw red. He pointed out that lilac was common, hawthorn was unlucky and cow parsley was a weed. The poor gardener flushed, stared at his boots and muttered that weed or not, cow parsley was good enough for many a country wedding. With that the steward took the bouquet of cow parsley, ground it into the floor with his heel and flounced out. He returned to the other two gardeners with bitterness in his heart and agreed to take their flowers and pay their price.

May Day arrived, and the great hall looked just as the princess wanted. This made her father, the king, happy. Tall spikes of gladioli adorned the pillars, whilst boughs of soft wisteria straddled the arches and the red and yellow of snapdragons sung out against acid fronds of fern. A great feast was prepared, and all the townsfolk were invited.

Only one person was unhappy. The poor gardener had been ridiculed by the townsfolk and his floral arrangements scorned. Moreover, he had not received an invitation to the feast. He vowed to have his revenge. He took his grievance to the fairy folk who he had grown to know well from spending so much time wandering in the countryside.

When the fairy king heard the poor gardener's story he was delighted. Now, at last, he had the perfect excuse to make mischief. That night, when everyone had come home from the feast and were sound asleep in their beds, the fairies visited the town. First, they went to the comfortable gardener's greenhouse, threw open the doors and ran inside, loosing caterpillars and big, juicy snails as they went.

Next, they visited the rich gardener's home, set up camp beneath the great rhododendrons and made a fire. After this they pretended to be moles and did some digging on the main lawn, then they ran back and forth waving dandelion clocks.

Finally, the fairies went to the steward's house, and then to every other house in the town and removed the laces from all the men's boots. They took these and tied them all together to make a rope.

The next morning, when the two gardeners saw what had happened, they both guessed who had visited them in the night, and they thought long and hard about what they had done to the poor gardener. Meanwhile, the perplexed townsfolk scratched their heads and clumped about their business. Some of the men went barefoot, whilst others took to wearing their winter socks peeled back over their boots to keep them on. In the morning they avoided one another's eye. In the afternoon they sulked. By evening they were brawling in the streets.

The next night the fairies came back. They visited all the homes in the town again. This time they removed all the buttons from the men's shirts. The next morning waistcoats were worn tightly over shirts, despite it being a warm day. By afternoon the men were shirtless and sulky. By evening they were brawling.

On the third night the fairies came back again. The fairy king was having the time of his life – this time he stole all the men's belts. The fairies returned to the wood with these, tied them together and made a path leading on and on, into the heart of the wood where the ferns and toadstools grew amongst the rot of fallen trees, and the willows crowded over a stream that crawled away into the darkness.

The next morning the town was very quiet. In the afternoon it was quiet too. When evening came, the men put on their wives' dresses and came out into the streets. When the steward appeared in a dress too, flanked by the two gardeners in frocks, they all knew something was amiss, so they set out to discover what it was.

They roamed the town until dusk, then happened upon the poor gardener, who was the only man in town still wearing his own clothes. They chased him into the wood, where the fairies were hiding in the trees. The fairies lowered the rope made of shoe laces and the poor gardener climbed up into the trees and hid. Next, the fairies threw the buttons down at the men, and the men, not knowing what was hitting them, ran away down the path made of belts, and heedlessly on into the wood.

When the fairy king saw that the steward had brought an axe, he stopped making merry and became angry. He climbed down from his tree, picked up the first belt and wound the path back in, leaving the men lost in the wood.

When the poor gardener saw what the fairy king had done, he relented as it was almost nightfall and he knew the townsmen would not find their way out of the wood in the dark. He followed them, using the shoelace rope to mark the way he had come. He found them sitting amongst the twisting roots of the willow trees, looking forlorn.

When the two other gardeners saw their friend, they ran to greet him and told him they could not find the path they had followed into the wood. The poor gardener showed them the string, and their faces lit with relief. The other townsmen crowded round, all but the steward, who had grown angry and had wandered away, swinging his axe as he went.

The three gardeners and the townsmen were about to leave when they heard a roar of anger from behind them. They turned in surprise as the steward hoisted his axe back over his shoulder, swung with all his might, and stuck the biggest and oldest of the willows, cleaving its trunk almost to the ground. A deathly silence followed. Even the wind held its breath. Then, a sound began to grow; a rumble from somewhere deeper in the forest that steadily grew into a roar. As the roar grew, the turgid water by the willows began to churn, first a little, like waves lapping at the edge of a lake, then more strongly as if a storm was coming. An electric charge filled the air.

The townsmen stared at the steward and the willow. The steward, still angry, cursed in defiance and raised his axe again. It was the last thing he did. Something stirred in the dark water, and tendrils rose, wrapping first around his ankles, then snaked up, slipping around his thighs and pulling him down. As he slid beneath the surface, the water drowned his screams, leaving only echoes in the darkening wood.

The gardeners and the townsmen stood transfixed. Silence fell again. Things would not have gone well for them that night had not the fairy king, several leagues away at the edge of the wood, tugged idly on the opposite end of the shoelace rope. Away down the line, the pull was almost imperceptible, but it was enough to wake the poor gardener, who was still clutching the rope as if his life depended on it. The spell broke, and the poor gardener led the men to safety as night fell.

When the men woke the next day, they remembered what had happened, and they were all grateful to the poor gardener, and sorry they had ridiculed him. The rich gardener and the comfortable gardener vowed that in future all three would organise the May Day feast together. When they told the king what had happened, the king shook his head solemnly and thought for a while, then he asked the poor gardener if he would become his

new steward. The poor gardener accepted.

The next year he and the other two gardeners persuaded the princess that May Day was best celebrated outdoors. They carried her to the feast through country lanes lined with cow parsley and hawthorn and told her she was queen of the May. She demanded the same treatment every year thereafter, but the gardeners didn't mind as at least they got to grow their flowers in peace, and the townsfolk got their feast. The willows, meanwhile, deep in the forest, swayed by the still water and told their sad story to the wind.

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