

The Witch's Cottage

Laura continued down the path as on either side the surrounding tree trunks grew thicker and closer together. Leafy vines and thorny brambles twined around the trees, sometimes sending a shoot across the path that she had to step over or bend to pass beneath. She grew weary but hesitated to stop for a rest by the roadside. Though she could not see the sun through the wood's thick branches, she knew from the fading of the light that filtered down through the leaves above her head that soon darkness would come to the forest. She must continue on while she could still see the way in front of her. With foreboding she thought of her plight if she should be trapped in the deep forest at the fall of night, when the wolves came out to hunt.

She came to a place where there was a bend in the track she was following, turning towards the south. She sighed at the thought of being led out of her way. There was little hope, now, of gaining the other side before sunset. Thirsty, hungry and tired, she would have to make her bed for the night among the brambles that lined the narrow path.

A narrow beam of sunlight glinted on something white, almost hidden by a thorny thicket. Directly in front of her, a flat white stone was set into the earth. Careless of the thorns, she pushed the bushes aside to see that this was the first of a line of large flat stones, making a paved path leading straight ahead. Relief flooded her mind. This could be a path that would take her directly across and out of the wood. She climbed over the brambles to set her feet on the new path.

It was not long before she started to wonder if she had made a mistake. The path had soon abandoned its westward direction and began to wind between the trees, until only the setting sun gave her any idea of which way she should travel. Should she turn back to the track or continue onwards? Before she could make up her mind, the final rays of the sun died away and she was left completely in the darkness. She could go on no longer; she would have to pass the night here in the silent darkness of the deep forest. Then with surprise she saw a little flickering light, still some way ahead of her. What could it be? Was it possible that she was not so far from the edge of the forest as she had feared? Or was it just a firefly or glow-worm, betraying travellers into deadly swamplands with its nightly flutter?

She moved towards the light with a growing hope as around her the trees grew more widely spaced. Soon she entered a clearing, and to her delight she saw a little wooden house with a candle burning in the window. This was the flickering flame she had seen. As she walked across the open ground she was startled by a sudden noise that sounded very loud

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in that quiet place. It was the bleat of a goat, that she now saw was tethered to a stake in the ground, not far from the cottage door. Again the goat bleated, loudly, as if giving warning of her approach. Would whoever was within give her shelter for the night? She was aware that, armed as she was, she would present a fearsome figure. Many would be reluctant to let her into their home in the dark of night. Mindful of this, she made her knock at the door a gentle tap.

At once the door was opened by an old, old woman, who peered at Laura as if she was half blind. She was dressed all in black and her white hair was bound up at the back of her head. Her face was ravaged by a myriad wrinkles and her deep-set eyes were so pale it was hard to distinguish the irises from the yellowed white that surrounded them.

“A traveller!” the old woman crowed, “come in, my dear, come in.”

The room within was warm and bright, lit by the candle in the bare window and by a fire burning with a cheerful crackling sound. The chairs were covered with faded cloth; the tables were of dark old solid wood. A haven of comfort indeed in the cold dark forest! Laura spoke politely to the old woman. “I am sorry to disturb you at this time of night, Madam. I had hoped to be out of this forest before nightfall, but I have lost my way and cannot continue in the darkness. I can pay you well for a bed for the night, if it will not be too much trouble?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of taking any money! A young girl like you, alone and lost in the wood after dark! Of course I will help you. Sit down by the fire, my dear, and I’ll bring you some of my home made cake. I expect you are hungry?”

Without waiting for an answer, the old woman moved to a cupboard on the wall and took out a cake. Thanking her, Laura sat down in the armchair by the fire. It was so large and comfortable she thought she could happily go to sleep in it, now, without even taking off her boots. But her mouth watered at the thought of the old woman’s home made cake.

“I am called Mother McNamara. What is your name?” the old woman asked.

“Please, call me Laura.”

“I’m sure you would like a glass of wine, Laura,” the old woman said as she took a bottle and a glass with a long stem from the cupboard. The wine was a delicate pink colour and bubbles frothed to the top as the glass filled. She put a large slice of cake, with the wine, on a small carved wood table that stood beside the armchair. “Eat and drink, my dear,” she said, “you are welcome here.” The cake looked delicious. It was covered with pale pink icing that somehow smelled of wild roses. The wine smelled faintly of vanilla. Laura stayed awake just long enough to eat the cake and drink the wine. Both tasted very good but she

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thought she could detect a slightly bitter aftertaste as, thanking the old woman again and assuring her that she was quite comfortable in the armchair, she fell asleep.

Laura woke up suddenly with the realisation that she was not in her comfortable bed at home. Neither was she in Mother McNamara's comfortable armchair where she had fallen asleep. Her head ached, though she was sure she had drunk only one glass of wine. Her mouth was dry and she had a raging thirst. Her shoulders and back hurt as if she had passed the night in a painful position and it felt as if she was sitting on a cold bare floor. Her eyelids were stuck together and she could not move her arms. From somewhere close to her came a soft sound; a little plaintive mew. "A kitten," she thought. With an effort she forced her eyes open and saw the first light of the dawn sky coming in through a window in front of her. She looked round at a small chamber, bereft of furniture. She was sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall, her hands tied together at the wrists. A thick rope tied the cord round her wrists to a heavy iron ring mounted on the wall, as if for tying up a horse. On the floor beside her was a wicker basket lined with a cloth, containing not one but three tiny kittens.

With some difficulty, because her hands were tied, she dragged herself to her feet. Her legs were stiff after all the walking she had done the day before, but she knew she had to find a way to get out before whoever had tied her up came back. It was hard to believe that kind old Mother McNamara had turned against her. Standing up, she could see out of the window. In front of her were the leafy branches of trees; she must be in an upstairs room of the cottage. Below her in the clearing she could see the tethered goat still tied to its stake.

She turned to survey the room which was her prison. On a shelf at the other side of the room, something gleamed in the early morning shadows. It looked like a pair of scissors. If only she could reach them, she could free her bound wrists! She tugged at the rope with all her strength but the iron ring held fast to the wall. A movement on the floor caught her eye. One of the kittens had managed to climb out of the basket and, barely able to walk, was fumbling its way across the floor towards her. She bent to pick up the little thing in her cupped hands but almost dropped it when she felt in her hands not the soft warm fur of a baby animal but cold smooth stone.

Stretching the rope as far as she could, she just managed to reach the basket and return the kitten to its warmth and shelter. Curious to see if they would all feel hard and cold, she touched another kitten with the tips of her fingers. At once she pulled back in shock. Her fingers felt as if she had thrust them into a fire. As she hastily pulled away her hand brushed the fur of the third kitten. It felt as wet and cold as ice. To soothe her burning fingers she stroked them through the third kitten's fur again and again. It felt as if she was

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plunging her hand into icy water. She did not stop until she was in danger of losing all sensation in her fingers.

“What strange enchantment is this?” she thought, “A kitten that seems made of fire, a kitten of water and a kitten of stone?”

With the rope stretched to its limit, she pulled the basket of kittens towards her. She moved towards the wall and the iron ring, taking the basket with her. Sitting against the wall under the iron ring, she held her hands so that the rope touched the head of the kitten of fire. Within seconds the rope was on fire, just a foot away from her hands. Soon the rope had burned through enough that she could break it with a tug. At once she pushed the burning end of the rope attached to her wrists into the fur of the kitten of water, praying that the flame would be extinguished without causing harm to the tiny creature. With a hiss the fire went out. Now she was free to cross the room and pick up the scissors from the shelf. Holding the scissors in both hands she managed to twist them into position to cut the cord that bound her. Soon she was free, with just a scratch on her hand from the sharp blades.

She noticed some writing on one of the blades. In tiny letters it said, “Mal Este.” As she watched, the letters began to glow with a white light and then rearranged themselves to form the new inscription, “Steal me.” “Very well,” said Laura, “I will,” and she put the scissors into her pocket.

She could smell smoke. The other end of the rope, the end still tied through the iron ring, was still on fire. The flames climbed up the rope as if it was a fuse. The old dry timbers of the wall began to burn. Picking up the basket of kittens, she ran out of the room and down a steep narrow flight of stairs, through the room where she had eaten the old woman’s cake and out of the door, stopping only to take her sword from where she had left it by the armchair. The goat was bleating wildly, pulling at its rope in a vain attempt to get away from the flames that were eating up the wooden walls of the cottage. Taking the scissors from her pocket, she cut the rope that held the creature captive. Before she could decide which way to run, Mother McNamara came out of her cottage and with astonishing speed grabbed Laura by the arm. She pulled one of the kittens from the basket Laura was holding.

“Magic of water, mine to command!

Let the water flow from my right hand!”

She howled out the words, and, letting go of Laura, pointed with her right hand at her burning dwelling. A jet of water sprang from her hand as if from a pipe, and fell onto the flames. The goat, no longer tethered, tugged with its mouth at Laura’s sleeve. She

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climbed onto the goat's back and with a leap it soared over the thicket of brambles that formed the boundary of the clearing. One of the remaining kittens fell out of the basket and Laura turned to look back in time to see a large black cat run from the shadows at the edge of the wood and take up the little kitten with its mouth.

The goat ran westwards from the cottage, as if it knew which way Laura needed to go. They sped between the trees, leaping over any obstacles that blocked their way. Before long they came to a path which looked very much like the track that Laura had been following through the forest. The track veered to the north and they followed it. As the goat reached the track its steps became slower, then became uneven and Laura found herself sliding from the goat's back. But it was no longer a goat. For an instant she was riding piggy-back on a young man and then they both were falling to the forest floor. The man rolled over and lay on his back, breathing hard. Laura picked herself up and looked down at him.

"Who are you?" Laura asked, wondering how a goat had suddenly changed into a young man with untidy red hair.

"My name is Ciaran. The old witch changed me into a goat, but you probably guessed that. I think she wanted to eat me; she kept talking about mutton chops. I tried to warn you not to go in there, but you didn't understand me."

"I'm Laura. I think she drugged my wine, or maybe it was the cake."

"Cake! That sounds good. All I've had to eat is grass."

They laughed together. "It's lucky I've found the path again, I wish I'd never left it in the first place," Laura said, "I was trying to take a short cut."

"So was I! I left the path and got lost, so I thought I'd better keep walking towards the west and try to find my own way through."

"I'm going west too, trying to get to a mountain. I think I'd better follow the path this time, however long it takes."

"If we're going the same way, we may as well travel together," said Ciaran.

Laura waited for him to say that he would be able to protect her on the journey. If he did she would retort that if it wasn't for her he would still be a goat tied to a stake outside the witch's cottage, but he said nothing of the sort and she agreed that, yes, they might as well walk on together for a little while. The time passed more pleasantly now she had a companion and Laura had to admit that with Ciaran by her side the forest did not seem quite so fearsome.