

The Walnut Tree

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Once, when the world was younger than it is now, there lived a young girl. Her father worked in the fields for the lord of the manor and her mother spun wool. They were poor and their house was cold and damp. Often there was little to eat and no wood for the fire.

One day her father took ill and died, and soon after her mother died too. The little girl did not know what to do. It was winter; she had no food and no proper clothing, and no one would take her into their home and look after her. She went to the lord's manor and begged for food and shelter, but they turned her away, saying: "You're too young to work, and those who don't work, don't get!"

She went down to the river and sat beneath a walnut tree. "What am I to do?" she wept.

"Climb up and pick a nut," said a voice.

She looked around and saw nobody.

The voice spoke to her again: "It's me, the walnut tree. Climb up and pick a nut."

So the young girl climbed the tree and picked a nut. It was just a little nut, but very heavy. She opened it and a whole meal popped out and spread itself upon the branches. On one branch stood a teapot with hot tea. On another was a plate with fresh bread and butter, and on another was a bowl of hearty stew. The little girl was amazed—but it did not take her long to start eating! No matter how much she ate there was always more.

At last she finished. She hadn't ever had such a good meal. She closed the walnut, put it in her pocket, and went home and fell asleep.

In the morning she opened the nut again and out popped ham and eggs and piping hot scones. Whenever she needed to eat all she had to do was open the nut and out came the best of food.

It wasn't long before others noticed that she was well fed and they sent someone to spy on her. The spy looked in the window at supper time and saw what happened when she opened the nut.

That night the lord of the manor came to her house and demanded she open the nut in his presence. She did so and a great feast appeared. He took a copper coin from his pocket, threw it on the ground in front of the girl, and took the walnut away.

"The king is coming soon," he said. "I shall give this magic nut to him as a present." Then he turned his back and went away.

Soon the young girl was hungry again. She went to the manor to beg for food, thinking they might be kinder to her, but they slammed the door in her face, shouting: "Why should we give you anything? You have nothing to give to us!"

The girl went back to the walnut tree. She sat down and wept bitterly. "What am I to do now?" she sobbed.

"Climb up and pick a nut," said the walnut tree.

She knew who was talking this time, and climbed up the tree and picked a nut. It was even heavier than before. She opened it and inside sat a golden coin. She took it out—but it was hardly in her hand before another one took its place. She was surprised and took that one out too, but again another coin sat in the nut. No matter how many coins she took out there was always another to take its place.

The girl went and bought food and warm clothes to wear. But it wasn't long before people began asking how such a young girl should have money to spend and to spare. The lord of the manor appeared on her doorstep very quickly once he heard of this. Once again he made the girl show him how she came by her money. He threw a small coin on the ground before the girl and took the walnut from her.

"The king will be pleased with this," he said. "He shall make me a knight and my daughter will surely marry the king's son. I shall be a powerful man in this land."

It was not long before the girl was starving again. She went to the manor to beg for food, but again they slammed the door in her face. She went to the walnut tree and told the tree her tale. For a while the tree was silent, then it said: "Climb up and pick a nut—but don't open it."

So she picked a nut and climbed down the tree. No sooner had she reached the ground when the lord of the manor grabbed her arm. He took the nut and locked her in his dungeon.

That night the king arrived. With him came his son, the prince. The lord of the manor greeted them with smiles and bows and fine words. They sat down for the feast, but before the lord of the manor could present the nuts, the king said: "I hear there is a young girl who picks special walnuts."

The lord of the manor was surprised. "Someone must have told the king already," he thought, and so he said: "Yes, your Excellency. I took them away from her. She is too young to know what to do with such things."

"Indeed," said the king. "Too young to want to eat, and too young for warm clothes, I suppose?"

The lord of the manor blushed but said nothing.

"Bring the girl here," commanded the king, and the lord of the manor was forced to get her from the dungeon himself and bring her before the king. She was dressed in rags and was as thin as a rake.

The king was angry. "Is this how you treat my subjects?" he thundered.

The lord of the manor quivered in his boots and hung his head.

"Bring me the walnuts," commanded the king.

They were brought, and the king said to the young girl, "Open the first."

She did so, and out came a feast such as the king himself had never seen.

"Open the second," said the king to the girl. Again she did so, and gold coins spilled out onto the floor like a river.

Then the king pointed to the lord of the manor, and commanded: "You open the last one."

The lord of the manor trembled. He took up the nut and opened it. A black snake slid out of the nut. It hissed and bit him on the hand and killed him instantly. Then the snake slipped back into the walnut and the two halves closed together again.

"Now you open it," said the king to the young girl.

She took the walnut from the dead man's hand and opened it. Out tumbled a dress glittering with precious jewels, and along with it came a crown glittering with diamonds.

"If you wish, you may live with me," said the king to the young girl, and seeing that the king was a just and wise man, she did, and was happy.

Years later, when she was a woman and the king a gray-haired old man, they sat beside a fountain and talked.

"Remember how you asked the lord of the manor to open the last nut?" she said to the king, and the king nodded. "What would have happened if you had asked him to open one of the other nuts?"

The king grew quiet and serious.

"It is well I did not ask such a thing," said the king. "There are powers in the world far greater than death and sometimes it is best to let sleeping dragons lie."