



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Greta and the Black Cat

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One day a woodsman named Peter was chopping down a tree when he saw swinging from one of the branches a bundle. Dropping his ax, he climbed up, and to his surprise, when he opened the bundle, he found in it a baby girl asleep. Peter hurried home with the baby to his wife. "Look, Martha," he said. "I have found a baby girl to be a sister to our son Robert. We will name her Greta and they shall grow up as brother and sister."



But Martha did not want the baby. "We have three mouths to feed now," she grumbled. "Why should we care for a child we know nothing of?"

But Peter would not hear of putting the child out-of-doors and so Greta lived with Peter and Martha and grew up with Robert.

Poor little Greta had anything but a happy life, for Martha treated her kindly only when Peter was in sight, and that was seldom.

Robert, seeing that his mother did not treat Greta well, began to order her to wait upon him as soon as he was old enough and treated her as a servant.

Greta had to weed the garden and bring in the water and the wood. She had to wash the dishes and make the beds and do all the work excepting when Peter was at home.

One day when Peter was going to the woods he told Robert to chop a pile of wood in the yard and have it finished by the time he came home.

When Peter was out of sight Robert told Greta to chop the wood. "That is what you are here for—to do the work," said Robert. "You would have been eaten up by the bears if we had not taken you in. Now go to work and chop that wood."

Greta began to cry and said she could not handle the ax; she was too small. But Martha boxed her ears and told her she should not have any dinner if she did not do as Robert told her.

Greta went to the woodpile and picked up the ax, but it was no use. She could

not chop the wood. And fearing a beating if she did not do it, Greta ran away. On and on she ran until she came to a turn in the road which led into a forest. Here she decided to stop for the night, and she was just lying down by a rock when she heard a pitiful “me-ow.”

Looking in the bushes close by, Greta saw a big black cat holding up one paw as though it was hurt. “Poor cat!” said Greta, taking the cat in her arms. “You look as unhappy as I feel. Let me bind up your paw.”

Greta tore off a piece of her dress and bound up the cat’s paw, and then, to her surprise, the black cat spoke to her.

“Come with me and I will show you where to sleep. You will have to carry me, for my paw is very painful,” said the cat.

Greta picked up the cat, too surprised to be frightened, and went through the woods as the cat directed her.

When they reached a big rock with an opening in it the cat said: “Here is my home. Take me in and you will find a place to sleep and food as well.”

Creeping in on her hands and knees with the cat under her arm, Greta found herself in a big room with a table in the center and on it plenty of food.

In one corner of the room was a bed and on this Greta saw a queer-looking old woman with a hooked nose.



She was asleep and did not notice them until the cat said, “Eat your supper.”

Up jumped the queer-looking old woman when she heard this, for she was the witch.

“You, and a mortal with you,” she screamed, as she reached for her crooked stick.

Greta ran to the door, for she thought the old witch was about to strike her; but the black cat, who was sitting on the floor near by where Greta had put it, said: “Don’t you dare touch this girl; she has saved my life, and from this hour you are in my power, for a mortal has held me in her arms.

“If you would live call the good fairy that has been looking for me all these years. I shall find her, anyway, but it will save time if you use your magic power, and you will regret it if you do not obey me.”

When the old witch heard this she began to tremble and hobbled to the door of the cave and tapped it three times with her crooked stick.

The rock opened so she could walk out, and Greta followed to see what she did, for she was no longer afraid; she knew the black cat would protect her.

The old witch gave a peculiar cry when she was outside, and Greta saw the next instant a tiny creature dressed in pink gauze, holding a wand of gold in one little hand, standing on a bush beside the old witch.

"Here I am, Witch Terrible," said the fairy. "What can I do for you? You must be in great danger or you would not have called for one of us."

The cat when it heard the fairy speak ran out off the cave, limping, and lay down in front of the fairy. "Help me, my good fairy," said the black cat. "I am the Prince for whom you have looked so long. The old witch changed me into a black cat and took away my power to speak until I was held in the arms of a mortal."

"I know her secret, and, though she dared not kill me, she wanted me to die, so she turned me into the forest to starve, and if it had not been for this girl, good fairy, the old witch would have had her wish granted."

"When she changed me into a black cat she said I should never speak until a mortal held me, and that I could not regain my own shape until a fairy changed me, but something has happened since then, and to save herself she obeyed me and called you, for I know her secret, and that is why I did not have to hunt for you, my good fairy."

The fairy touched the black cat with her wand and Greta saw in place of the big black cat a handsome man dressed in black velvet, with gold trimmings. "Now tell me the secret you know about the witch," said the fairy.

The old witch threw up her arms and cried for mercy. "Remember, I called the fairy," she said; "you would have hunted a long time if I had not. Be merciful!"

"I shall not forget," said the Prince. "This woman is only half a witch," he said. "She is part mortal, and every night at twelve o'clock she has to become a mortal for an hour because she tried to change a water nymph into a frog. The river god, the water nymph's father, called on a very powerful ogre, who was his friend, and the ogre was about to change her into a rock, but she begged so hard he made her half mortal and left her to her fate."

"Which means she can never leave this forest," said the fairy, "and as she does many of her magic deeds at night when she rides abroad on her broomstick she is not a very powerful witch."

"Yes, that is it," said the Prince, "and she does not want it known among the fairies or the goblins or any of the magic-power folks. That is the mercy for which

she begs.

"I hope you will keep her secret, good fairy, for she saved me so much time and trouble in calling you."

"I will keep her secret from all but the fairies, but one of the fairy family will come here every night to make sure no mortal has been harmed by her, for some one might stray in here just as this girl did and be changed into some other form."

"I have one more favor to ask of you, good fairy," said the Prince. "I wish to make this girl my wife if she will marry me, and I would like to have the proper clothes for a princess, so that I may take her to my palace at once."

"What do you say, my dear?" asked the fairy. "Will you marry the Prince?"

Greta felt she must be dreaming, but she was sure she would love the handsome Prince if she were awake, so she told the fairy she would, and the next instant her ragged clothes dropped from her and she stood before the Prince in a beautiful green velvet riding-habit, with a long feather in her hat, looking every inch a princess.

That night a great feast was held at the palace of the Prince in honor of his return and to celebrate their wedding, and the very next day Greta and the Prince rode to the home where she had once lived to give Peter a bag of gold.

"He was the only person who ever treated me kindly until I met you," Greta told the Prince, "and I shall never forget him."

Greta was not recognized by Martha or her son Robert, for they little thought the beautiful Princess was the poor girl that had once been their slave. But Peter, who had loved her, looked after the coach as it rolled away. "It looked a little like her," he said, "but, of course, it could not be." Many gifts did Greta and the Prince send to Peter, and in his old age he was given a comfortable house and plenty to eat, and, though Martha and Robert shared his good fortune, they never knew who sent it.

The Prince told Peter who the Princess really was one day, because the poor old man had never ceased to sorrow because Greta could not be found, but not a word did he tell of this to Robert or Martha, but kept his secret all to himself as long as he lived.

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