



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Little Maid Who Was Wise

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Long ago there lived a merchant who had three daughters. Every year at a certain day of a certain month he went away to a distant city to collect money on an account. His wife and daughters remained at home, and all went well until one sad day the wife died. That year the merchant looked forward to his journey with dread for he would have to leave his daughters alone.

"I cannot bear to go away," he said to them. "My heart is filled with fear lest some evil may befall you during my absence."

He worried about the matter night and day. The business was most important and there was no one whom he could send to transact it for him.

However, the question of leaving three such pretty girls unprotected was a thing not to be regarded lightly.

"Do not be afraid to leave us, dear father," said his daughters. "Nothing will harm us while you are away."

"How do you know?" asked their father. "I am older and wiser than you are and I know that there are many evils which might come upon you. There are many bold thieves in this city, for instance, who would be only too ready to take advantage of my absence and rob my home of all I possess."

"We can lock ourselves securely in the house and not let any one enter," said the three daughters.

"Be sure that you admit no one," commanded the merchant.

They gave him their promise and he started on his journey. Nevertheless, he went with an anxious heart.

Now, outside this city there was a band of bold robbers. The captain of the band had watched the merchant's departure, and when he was safely away the thief dressed himself in the disguise of an old beggar. When it was evening he led his band into a nearby street and in his disguise approached the merchant's house. He knocked at the door.

"Have pity upon a poor unfortunate one!" he called out. "It is raining outside, and no one with mercy in his heart could turn away one who begs shelter from the storm. Let me enter, I pray you, to pass the night under your roof."

"It's surely a terrible storm outside," said the merchant's eldest daughter, as the wind rattled the tiles of the roof and the rain beat in torrents against the doors and windows. "I think we ought to take pity on a poor beggar a night like this."

The second daughter peeped out of the window at the beggar.

"He is old as well as poor," she said. "Our father has always taught us to show mercy and kindness to the aged."

"Remember our promise to our father!" cried the youngest one. "We gave him our word that we would admit no one. We can give this poor beggar some alms and send him away with a blessing."

The eldest daughter frowned. "It is not for the youngest and most childish one of us to make the plans," she said.

The second daughter added. "We two are older and wiser than you are. It is for us to determine what shall be done. If we decide to show mercy to this poor beggar it is not for you to oppose it."

"But we should not forget our promise to our father!" cried the youngest daughter.

However, in spite of all she could say, the elder sisters opened the door and admitted the beggar. They led him into the kitchen to dry his clothes. Then they made ready a bed for him to sleep upon. They gave him his supper in the kitchen and then they ate their own.

"It is a fearful night to send away a beggar," said the eldest sister while they were eating.

"I am glad we have made him comfortable for the night," remarked the middle sister.

"I am thinking that our dear father would be anxious if he knew that we had broken our promise so easily," said the youngest sister.

"For shame!" cried the eldest.

"I don't think it was breaking our promise to show kindness to a poor old beggar," said the middle one.

"A promise is a promise, nevertheless," said the youngest.

While they were talking, the beggar had taken the apples which the girls were to eat for dessert and had sprinkled a sleeping powder over them. The two eldest ate their apples, but the youngest could not eat that night. She threw the apple away.

As soon as they had eaten, the girls went to their room, and the two eldest were

overcome with sleep almost before they had time to get into bed. The youngest one was so frightened that she could not sleep a single wink.

Soon she heard footsteps. The beggar entered the room. The youngest one pretended that she, too, was asleep. The man went to the bed of the eldest sister and stuck a pin into her foot to see if she were completely unconscious. She did not stir and he knew that the sleeping powder had thoroughly done its work. Then he went to the bed of the second sister and did the same. She was as completely unconscious as her sister. It hurt terribly when he stuck the pin into the foot of the youngest, but she did not stir. The robber thought that she was as completely overcome by the sleeping powder as the others.

The youngest sister peeped through her long heavy eyelashes and watched the beggar. She saw to her surprise that he had laid aside the heavy ragged old coat which he had kept wrapped about him even while he ate. Underneath he was dressed like a robber with a sword, pistols and dagger. She was so terribly frightened that it was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering.

She heard the robber go about the house picking out the valuables which he wanted to steal. Then she heard him go down the stairway and unbolt the heavy doors which led into the store. She quietly got up and crept out of the room to hear him more distinctly.

On a chair in the dining room she saw the sword which he had taken off. He had evidently thought that, with all three girls so sound asleep, he'd not need to use his weapons.

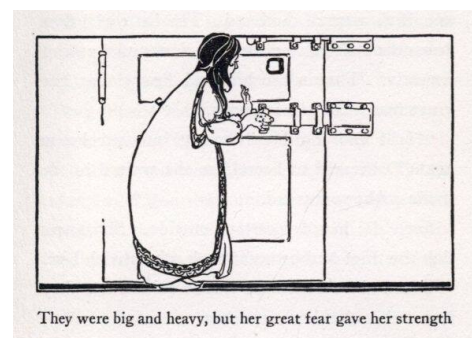
Soon she heard the heavy outer doors of the store unbolted. The robber had gone outside to call the rest of the band. The little girl flew down the stairs and closed the doors of the store securely. They were big and heavy, but her great fear gave her strength.

"He'll find it difficult to get into our house again," she said to herself as she waited to see if the robber returned.

Soon she heard footsteps outside. She knew that the thief had brought back others with him.

There were frightful words said when they found that the door was shut.

"It was the youngest one who deceived me!" cried the robber chieftain. "I knew all the time that she did not want to let me in. I was suspicious of her from the first."



"Perhaps you can outwit her yet!" cried another. "She may not be so wise as she appears. You never can tell."

The leader of the band of thieves went up close to the keyhole and whispered: "Kind lady of the house, have pity on me."

The merchant's daughter at first did not answer; but, as he kept on calling to her, she finally asked him what it was that he wanted.

"I have left my charm behind!" he cried. "Pray let me enter to get it. I promise you I will do you no harm."

"I do not trust your promises," replied the little maid. "You shall not come into my father's house."

"Pass the charm out to me, then," said the robber.

"It's in the fire," replied the girl.

"Go throw vinegar on the fire and put it out," said the captain of the thieves. "Then you can pull my charm out in safety."

Now it happened that there was a little hole in the door just large enough for a man's hand to enter. It is the hole through which beggars often thrust outstretched hands, asking for alms.

"Put your hand through the hole in the door," replied the little maid. "Then I'll give you your charm."

She quickly ran upstairs and got the robber's sword which he had left on a chair in the dining room. When she returned, his hand was sticking through the hole in the door. She struck it with all her might with the great sword and cut it off.

The cries and curses of the robbers filled the air. They tried in vain to break down the great doors. The doors were strong and held securely. At last it was daylight and the band of thieves had to flee.

In the morning the effect of the sleeping powder wore off and the two elder sisters awoke. When they heard their sister's story they were filled with amazement.

"I don't believe a word of it!" cried the oldest. "You are making it up."

"You had a bad dream," said the second. "I had such a nightmare myself that I have a headache this morning."

It was not until their little sister had shown them the robber's hand and the great sword that they were convinced that she had told them the truth.

"Oh, why did we ever let the man into our house!" cried the eldest.

"Oh, why didn't we keep our promise to our father!" cried the middle one.

When at last the merchant returned from the distant city where he had been to collect money he was delighted to find his house and his three daughters safe.

"I see that no harm befell you in my absence," he said as he embraced them fondly. "All my worries about you were foolish."

The eldest daughter blushed and hung her head. "Great danger threatened us while you were away," she said. "Thanks to our youngest sister, we are safe."

"Our little sister was wiser than we were," said the middle daughter.

When the merchant had heard the whole story, he said: "After this we must all give ear to the wisdom of this little maid. She is wise beyond her years."

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