

THE OLD WOMAN AND THE IMP

by Sophie Masson

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There was once an old woman, a rather hasty and clever old woman, who lived all alone in a small cottage.

Now this old woman had another important thing about her; for she was a champion spinner, as good as any you'd find on a long day's walk; but 'pon my word, she was a terrible cook!

That wouldn't have mattered, normally, except for this small fact—that the old woman had just landed a job as a cook in the town, not far away.

I'm afraid to say that the old woman had been less than truthful when she'd been to ask for the job; she'd told the innkeeper that she'd cooked for the king, in her time, and as she could spin words as skillfully as she spun wool, she soon had him believing her.

When she arrived on the appointed day, to take up her new duties, the innkeeper greeted her with a rather anxious face, and said, "Oh, and it's glad I am that you came! We are expecting several fine gentlemen to dinner tomorrow night, and you must start cooking the food at once!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said the old woman, not to be flustered. "Show me to my quarters first, then I'll start greasing your pans!"

Well, the old woman was taken to her room—the best in the house, with a large high feather bed, and soft carpet, and a mirror, for the old woman had let the innkeeper know, ever so softly, that the person who cooked food fit for a king must have quarters to match.

Once there, and the door closed, she threw herself back on the bed, and dozed a little, without worrying overmuch about how she was going to cook this food, for all those fine gentlemen. Then she got up and started spinning; a whir whir whir, and turn; a whir whir whir, and turn, and as she spun, she sang.

Suddenly, as she sat there singing and spinning, she heard the bedroom window creaking, ever so slightly, and the next minute, a strange creature had hopped through and was standing on the floor, grinning at her.

It was the size of a small cat, though not half as fat and shaped more or less like a person—as if it had tried to follow a person-pattern, with not much luck!

And its grin was so large it seemed to split the creature’s face, so that its sharp yellow teeth winked, a one two three, a one two three!

The old woman looked at it for a moment then calmly closed the window, went to the dressing table and began to unpin her hair.

“I’ve come to help you,” the little thing said, its grin fading just a bit, as the old woman kept ignoring it.

“Oh yes?” said she, and began combing her long grey hair, making smoochy faces at herself in the mirror. She was a clever old woman, as I’ve already told you; and she had a shrewd suspicion as to just who this little man-thing might be. But she was much too sharp to say so!

“I’m an imp,” the little thing said, trying hard to get the old woman to look at it. “I’ve come to help you cook,” it continued, sounding a bit desperate. “For the fine gentlemen.” “Oh, ah?” the old woman said, politely, but the imp was sure it had caught a twinkle in her eye.

It grew quite sulky. “If you don’t cook for these fine gentlemen, then you’ll be . . . without a home,” it finished quickly. It had nearly said, “The king will have your head off,” before realizing that was the wrong story.

The old woman turned around and looked properly at him. “I suppose you’re right,” she said at last.

“Well, then,” the imp said, rather put out.

“I can offer you a deal. I’ll cook for you for a year invisibly, so it’ll look as if it’s you doing it—and after that time, I will return and you will have to ask me three riddles. If I can guess all of them, you will come back with me to be my slave. If I can’t guess them all—even if it’s only one—you will be free. How’s that for a bargain?” It grinned, and twirled around.

“Done!” the old woman said briskly. The imp looked surprised. “Are you sure?” it said. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!” she said.

So, the next day, the innkeeper came into the kitchen to be met with an army of lovely smells: of wine and cream and onion and mushroom; of vanilla and cinnamon and chocolate. He opened cupboards and found pies, smoking delicately; dishes of fried chicken, of creamed potatoes and chocolate puddings, of butterscotch pancakes and pears in red wine. He was overcome, and sat down at the kitchen table, his legs wobbly from hunger and pride.

“Oh, my goodness gracious,” he said to the old woman, “You ARE a cook fit for a king! You will make my fortune!” “I think I’ll make my own,” the old woman snapped, and he murmured, “Quite, quite,” because everyone knows that good cooks are like glass, and must be handled carefully.

Invisible, at the old woman’s elbow, the imp stirred and mixed and whispered recipes, tricks, fancies. All the old woman had to do was to pretend to look busy—and she didn’t even need to pretend that, when the innkeeper wasn’t in the room. She had brought her spinning wheel into the kitchen, and in quiet moments could sit and spin: a whir whir whir, and turn; a whir whir whir, and turn.

Well, the fine gentlemen came, and they ate. How they ate! Their fine white shirts were splashed with gravy, and their red and blue waistcoats were stained with cream, and their belts had to be loosened several times. They praised the innkeeper and his wonderful cook, and showered them with gold.

Things went on in this way for some time. Word of the wonderful cook at the inn was soon spread far and wide. The innkeeper’s moustache grew daily more bright, his hands rubbed together with joy, and he watched the old woman tenderly, yet cautiously. He’d got it into his mind that she would make a fine wife—and, faith, she didn’t disagree!

But time must march on, and soon the year was up. One day, the imp’s voice squeaked into the old woman’s ear, “Tomorrow is the day! Tomorrow is the day!”

The old woman looked at the calendar. Sure enough, it was the last day of the year, and tomorrow would be the first day of the new one!”Remember our bargain,” the imp said, and it laughed.

That night, the imp disappeared on business of its own, and the old woman was left alone in her fine room, thinking gloomily about her bargain, and what on earth she was going to ask the imp. She racked her brains for all the riddles she'd ever known, and finally came up with two. But the third eluded her. She tapped her foot impatiently, thinking of being that little imp's slave, and how he'd likely make her spin mountains of straw into gold. Her eye fell on her own spinning wheel lying silent in one corner, and she went to it, and began spinning, just to calm her nerves. A whir whir whir, and turn! A whir whir whir, and turn! Suddenly, as she sat there, spinning, an idea came to her, and she laughed out loud.

The next morning, bright and early, the imp was there, grinning and twirling round and round.

"Well?" it said impatiently. "Well?"

The old woman looked at the imp. She smoothed her dress. She stroked her shining silver hair. Then she said, "I lie in halls of ivory, I am all of gold and snow, but no good am I to anyone until I am cracked and done."

"Oh, that's easy!" said the imp, jumping up and down and grinning. "It's an egg, an egg!"

"Well, then," said the old woman, and I must confess her heart felt a little fluttery," I am so strong and mighty, I can tear down hall and town; and yet my strength will never take me up, for I can only go down...what am I?" The imp looked at the old woman in astonishment. "I learnt that when I was but a tiny imp!" it said scornfully. "It's water, of course!"

"And now," it said, grinning wildly, "Now for the last one, and you'll be mine, my slave, forever!" It chuckled, and rolled on the ground, laughing.

Not so fast, my dear, thought the old woman. She said, "Well, imp, tell me, then—why am I always spinning?"

The imp stopped its laughing. It stopped twirling. It stood still and stared at the old woman.

"Why you are always spinning?" it repeated. "Why?" It looked desperately at the old woman's spinning wheel, where neither straw nor gold was to be seen. The light in its eyes faded.

“Well, of course everyone knows...” the imp began. Its more or less ear-shaped ears drooped. “Well, of course that’s easy,” it said defiantly. “Of course.”

The old woman smiled, and waited.

“Oh, I’m not answering such a stupid riddle,” the imp said haughtily, and, clicking its fingers, it jumped out of the window and disappeared, never to be seen again.

Although the innkeeper was a little disappointed when his new wife proved not to want to cook, he wasn’t too disappointed. For in that long year, he’d watched her as she moved from stove to table, from table to stove, and he had picked up enough recipes and tricks and fancies to become a good cook himself. Soon the fame of his cooking spread far and wide, and crowds of people filled the tables. Whenever guests came, they would notice the old woman, sitting in a corner of the grand dining room, spinning, and spinning, her wheel whirring and turning with a most soothing sound. And if they asked what she was making, she would smile, and put a finger to her lips, and whisper, “Who knows?”