

THE MAGIC KERCHIEF

By Kirby Larson

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ONCE UPON A TIME, on a small farm not far from a village, lived a woman named Griselda.

Each day she toiled alone in her field. Each night she rocked alone by her fire, darning or braiding rags for rugs.

There was one reason only for Griselda's solitary days and nights. She held her tongue for no one, not even the Lord Mayor.

"Paah," she would say as he strode through town. "A donkey on two legs is still a donkey."

Had anyone courage enough to ask Griselda to soften her tongue, she would have said, "Paah. Handsome words don't butter the cabbage."

Yet when she saw her neighbors working in one another's fields and heard their laughter and singing, she felt the weight of her loneliness. But her tongue had nettled so many for so long that not even the village priest included Griselda in his prayers anymore.

"Paah," she would say as people crossed the lane to avoid her. "At least my words are not all vine and no fruit."

One night as Griselda bent to her mending, she heard a knock at the door.

There stood an old woman wearing the loveliest kerchief Griselda had ever seen. It looked like a wreath of spring flowers.

"Good evening," the woman said. "Have you room by your fire for a traveler?"

"My fire is meager," snapped Griselda.

"You speak the truth," said the woman, stepping inside. "But one ember easily warms old bones."

"I suppose you've nowhere to sleep tonight," groused Griselda as the traveler warmed her toes by the fire.

“Your words are true. But don’t bother about me,” pleaded the visitor.

“Humph, and have half the village know I turned an old woman out into the night?” Griselda flurried around, making a small bed on the floor by the fire.

But the visitor was already sound asleep on Griselda’s bed, with Griselda’s quilt tucked snugly under her chin.

“It is warmer by the fire anyway,” Griselda decided. Crawling into the makeshift bed, she was soon asleep herself.

GRISELDA’S ROOSTER woke the two women at sunrise.

“A thousand thank-yous for your kindness,” the visitor said, sipping the hot tea Griselda had set before her. “I have no way to repay you...except...” The woman untied her colorful kerchief and placed it in Griselda’s hands.

For once, Griselda had no words, sharp or otherwise. She had never owned a garment so lovely.

“Just one thing more,” said the woman as she stepped out onto the stoop. “There is magic in that kerchief.”

“Then why did you not use it yourself,” mocked Griselda, “and travel by enchanted coaches instead of tired feet?”

“There are many kinds of magic. I tell you: While you wear this kerchief, you will find great riches.”

“Paah,” spat Griselda. “Magic is for children.”

The other woman only smiled and was soon a small speck on the road.

“Paah,” repeated Griselda. As it was market day, she gathered her basket and trade goods. “Riches!” she grumbled. Had her visitor thought her a fool? But magic or not, the new kerchief was charming. Griselda tied it on snugly as she set off for the village.

Her first stop was the baker’s stall.

“Frau Griselda, what an enchanting kerchief you wear today,” the baker’s wife called bravely. The baker stood behind his wife, wincing against the anticipated sting of Griselda’s reply.

“Paah,” sputtered Griselda. She started to tell the baker’s wife that flattery could not freshen stale loaves.

But those words did not come.

“Your kind compliment is nearly as delicious as your fresh bread. A loaf of your pumpernickel, please.”

The baker blinked. His wife blinked. Griselda blinked.

She tried again. This time she meant to scold the baker for the heavy loaf that had caused her stomach such suffering. “That last loaf was such a bargain—it lasted the week through!” And let me have two of your honey buns as well.”

The baker blinked. Griselda blinked. The baker’s wife quickly handed over the loaf and honey buns, then snatched up Griselda’s coins.

Confused, Griselda clutched her basket close and hurried down the lane.

A young mother with a new babe came around the corner.

“Good day, Frau Griselda,” she said as she edged toward the other side of the lane.

A pink and wrinkled infant fussed under the blankets in its mother’s arms. It looked like a sausage gone bad, and Griselda intended to say so.

“Ah, what a plump little sausage you have there.” Griselda stamped her foot. What business did her mouth have spitting out this babble?

The surprised mother looked again, as if making sure it was really Griselda speaking. “Why, th-thank you. I do think he is rather precious.”

Griselda shook her head. “Precious, indeed!” Furthermore, the babe looked colicky, a most disagreeable trait. Griselda’s mouth opened, but again her tongue betrayed her.

“A bit of peppermint calms the colic,” she said. Worse yet, her hands took on a life of their own, rummaged in the market basket, and presented the mother with a bundle of peppermint—the very peppermint Griselda had meant to trade for more darning thread.

Griselda spun on her heels, holding her aching head. Who should cross her path at that moment but the Lord Mayor?

“Good day, Griselda!” He doffed his hat, looking all the more foolish. “How is your health today?”

Griselda wanted to tell him what his airs did to her stomach. Of course, nothing of the kind came out.

“My aches and pains disappear when I run into an old friend,” she answered. Quickly, she covered her mouth.

The Lord Mayor stumbled on a cobblestone. He rubbed his eyes. “It warms my heart that our friendship brings you such comfort,” he stammered in reply.

Griselda clamped her lips as tight as a beggar’s fist around a gold coin. She desired nothing more than to tell him just what kind of comfort his friendship brought, but she dreaded what her traitorous tongue might do. She could stand no more and returned home as quickly as her legs would carry her.

At her cottage she took off her walking shoes and untied her kerchief.

“Paah, riches indeed!” scoffed Griselda, tossing the kerchief aside. “The only reward I gathered this day is an aching head.”

The next morning, she woke with the cock’s crow. She ate her meager breakfast, carefully tied on her own worn kerchief, and stepped outside.

“Frau Griselda,” a voice called out, “good day!” Up the path came the young mother from the village. “My babe had such a good night’s sleep, thanks to your peppermint.” She presented Griselda with a bouquet of wildflowers.

“But—it was nothing,” sputtered Griselda.

“Perhaps to you,” answered the young mother, “but it made a world of difference to me.” She kissed Griselda’s cheek and went on her way.

Griselda found her hoe and turned over some weeds as she turned over the young mother’s visit in her mind. At midday she looked up from her work to see the baker and his wife huffing up the path.

“Good friend Griselda, we baked far too many honey buns this morning and thought you might enjoy some with your tea.”

“But this is such a long way—”

“Nonsense.” The baker handed Griselda the buns. “Tomorrow I am baking my special strudel. I will set some aside just for you.”

“But—but—” stammered Griselda, her usually quick tongue thick and slow.

“We must get back to our ovens.” The baker and his wife started off. “Until tomorrow,” they called.

Griselda stared after them. Perhaps they were bewitched. Perhaps the whole village was under a spell. Perhaps...She shook her head. It was difficult to

understand. But the flowers brightened her little cottage, and the honey buns smelled delicious.

When the sun had set and she had cleaned the supper dishes, Griselda was surprised yet again.

Up to the front gate swept the Lord Mayor in his carriage.

“Dear Griselda,” he called. “Let me come sit by your fire, and we’ll talk as we did when we were children at our nursie’s knee.”

Griselda invited him in—after all, they *had* been childhood friends. They nibbled honey buns and sipped tea and talked about old times.

Later, when the Lord Mayor had gone, Griselda remembered the kerchief. She looked in the wash basket, under the hearth rug, and in every corner of her little cottage.

It was nowhere to be found.

“Paah,” said Griselda. “No matter. Magic, indeed.” She blew out the candle and climbed into bed.

From that day forth, though Griselda still toiled in her fields by day and rocked by her fire at night, she was rarely alone.

“Two heads are better than one,” she told the baker’s wife as they watched the Lord Mayor collect eggs. Griselda gave a broad wink. “Even if one is a cabbagehead.”