



The Daring Princess

There are princesses, and then there are *princesses*. The *princesses* swan around in palaces making gowns out of silk and gossamer. Or they sit in towers and sing to bluebirds, while dreaming of being rescued.

Bessie knew she definitely didn't want to be *that* kind of princess.

This fairy tale is based on a story called 'The Iron Stove' which was retold by the Brothers Grimm.

The other kind of ‘princess’ is much more ordinary. These princesses have royal parents and live in palaces and sew and sing (but not to bluebirds). They are very polite and good and always have spotlessly clean clothes. Bessie knew she didn’t want to be *that* kind of princess either.

Bessie was happiest in the stables, grooming her old pony, or chatting to the royal blacksmith, watching him at work. Over her skirts she kept a tool belt. She knew how to pick a lock, make a horseshoe and even forge a sword.

But Bessie’s parents were increasingly unhappy that their daughter was turning out to be such an unusual princess. Just that morning, her mother had asked when she was going “to start learning to sew?” and her father had complained that she wasn’t behaving “as a princess should.”

“And don’t think we approve of your tool belt,” added her mother. “It’s not ladylike. And it’s *definitely* not princess-like.”

Then her parents had sighed and looked disappointed and muttered things about “duty” and “changing her ways.”

Bessie had a horrible feeling that her days of gallivanting around the castle grounds were numbered. Soon, her parents were going to make her start sewing and singing and ban her visits to the blacksmith. That thought had made her want to get as far away from the castle as possible. She had fled to the royal forest... and now she was lost.

Bessie looked around, hoping to find a tree or a path she recognized, but she had never been so deep in the forest before and she had no idea where she was. And all the time, the sky grew darker and she tried very hard not to think of prowling wolves and what might lie hidden in the shadows.

At last, after hours of wandering, she came across a tiny wooden cottage, with a thatched roof and a little crooked chimney.

“With luck,” Bessie thought, “whoever lives here can help me get home.”

She knocked three times but there was no answer, only a strange muffled sound, like a voice calling from far away.

“Hello?” Bessie said,
and the muffled sound
came again.

She lifted the latch
and the door swung open.
The cottage had just one
room, and it appeared to
be empty. There was a
wooden chair in the
corner, a faded rug on
the floor, and bunches

of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. On the worktop she could see a pestle and mortar for grinding, and shelves lined with glass bottles, which glowed green and purple and amber. In the middle of the room was a very large and rather rusty iron stove.

“Help,” said a voice from inside the stove.



“I’m trapped in here. Please! Let me out!”

Bessie darted forward, and then stopped. She looked again at the glowing glass bottles and saw they were full of curious things, like frogs’ legs, eyeballs and a green snake, twisted and coiled.

“I must be in a witch’s cottage!” cried Bessie.

“You are,” came the muffled voice from the stove.

“Then how do I know you’re not an evil spirit? Or a gremlin? Or a troll?” asked Bessie.

“I’m not. I’m a prince,” said the voice. “Prince Alfred. There’s a tiny crack halfway down. You can see for yourself.”

Bessie bent down and peered through the crack. “Goodness!” she cried. For there, inside the stove, was a rather squished-looking young man.

“Definitely not a gremlin or a troll,” thought Bessie. “You poor thing!” she said out loud. “Don’t worry. I’ll get you out!”

She took a knife from her tool belt and began to scrape away at the iron stove until there was a small hole.

“Hurry,” said Prince Alfred. “Please hurry! The witch may be back at any moment!”

Bessie kept going, even though her fingers were sore and her arms ached, until the hole was big enough for the prince to reach out his arm... and then a leg...

“Only a little more,” pleaded the prince.



Bessie worked as the night drew in and the moon came out, until at last, the prince stood free.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” he said. “I owe

you my life. A witch has trapped me here – until our wedding day. She said only a princess could save me.”

“Well she was right,” said Bessie, returning her knife to her tool belt. “I am a princess.”

“You’re quite an *unusual* princess,” said Prince Alfred, staring at the belt. “I’ve never met a princess before who carries tools with her.”

Bessie sighed. “You sound just like my parents. They don’t think being unusual is a good thing for a princess. They want me to learn to sing beautifully and make cushion covers.”

But Prince Alfred was smiling. “Only an unusual princess could have saved me,” he said. “I’m very grateful it was *you* who found me. No amount of sewing would have freed me from this stove.”

The prince opened his mouth, as if he were about to speak again, but at that moment the cottage door swept open. A foul-smelling green wind howled its way into the little room. When it cleared, there stood a woman in a long black cloak,

with flowing hair. She had yellow fingernails as sharp as knives and glaring eyes, one green, one blue. Bessie knew her at once for the witch.

“Did you think you could escape me so easily?” she snarled, striding towards the prince.

There was a great clap, like thunder, and a flash of light. When Bessie looked again, both the witch and Prince Alfred had vanished.

Stumbling out of the cottage, all she could see were the dark shapes of the trees. “I must find the prince,” she vowed. “Perhaps if I climb a tree, I’ll be able to see where he’s gone.”

A great oak tree grew beside the cottage, with branches low enough for her to climb.

Bessie clambered from branch to branch until she was peeking out, over the treetops. There was



no sign of the prince, but she did see a light, twinkling between the trees, not far off.

“I’ll follow the light,” she decided. “Perhaps it will lead me to someone who can help...”

So Bessie climbed down from the tree and felt her way through the darkness, towards the light.

At last she came to a little house with grass growing all around and a pile of wood by the small front door. Bessie bent down and peered through the window. Inside, she could see a group of toads. Some were big, some little, and they were sitting at a beautifully laid table, with one little toad on the floor. There was a white tablecloth, a dish of roasted meats and silver cups.

Bessie knocked loudly and heard the largest toad call out:

*Little green toad,
Get up from the floor!
Pull back the lock and open the door.*

❧ The Daring Princess ❧

At once, the door opened and Bessie stepped inside. The toads all rushed to welcome her.

“Please, sit down,” said the largest toad. “What are you doing so deep in the woods, so late at night?”

Bessie told them her story, about the prince and the iron stove and how the witch had come and whisked him away. “Now I don’t know where the prince has gone or how I shall ever find him,” she finished.

“Well now,” said the largest toad, “you have come to the right place, for we are able to help you. But first, you must rest.”

Bessie was given food and then taken to a beautifully made bed with silken covers, woven with gold and silver thread. When the next day was dawning, the large toad turned to the little toad again and said:

*Little green toad, now try your best.
Get down from the table and open the chest.*



The little green toad did just as the big toad asked and threw open a chest that stood in the corner. Out of it, the large toad took six enormous darning needles, a cartwheel and three nuts.

“You will need to cross an ice mountain, a field of slashing swords and a great lake. When you have passed these, you will find the prince again. Take these objects. You can use them to help you on your journey.”

Bessie thanked the toads and left with the first light of day.

It wasn’t long before she came to a towering mountain made of gleaming ice. Bessie tried to

climb it, but it was so steep, and so slippery, that no sooner had she taken a few steps than she slid down again. “I’ve failed already!” she thought. “I’ll never rescue the poor prince.”

Then she remembered the needles the toads had given her. She pushed three into the side of the mountain, placed her foot on them and began to climb.

With each step, she had to pierce the ice with the needles and then pluck them out again. The needles were so sharp they slid in easily, but it was slow work and the sun was already setting by the time she reached the very top.



“At least getting down will be quicker,” thought Bessie. And, with a whoop, she slid all the way down the other side.

Bessie camped in a glade that night, for it was too dark to go on. But when morning broke, she saw that beyond her lay the field of slashing swords.

The field sloped downwards, stretching endlessly towards the horizon. The swords were closely packed and whirled over the ground, round and round, as if powered by invisible hands. Their blades flashed and dazzled in the sun and Bessie knew there was no way she could walk across and come out unharmed. Then she remembered the cartwheel the toads had given her..

Plucking up her courage, Bessie balanced on the wheel, arms outstretched, and rolled it through the sword-filled field. It took her all day. By the time she reached the other side she knew it was too dark to go on. This time, she lay down to rest on a sandy beach, and went to sleep to the sound of waves, lapping against the shore.



Plucking up her courage, Bessie balanced on the wheel, arms outstretched, and rolled it through the sword-filled field.

The next morning, by the light of dawn, Bessie saw that she was at the edge of a great lake, which seemed as deep and wide as the sea. Not knowing what else to do, she cracked open the first nut. Inside was a tiny boat, no bigger than a pea. She placed it on the water where it grew and grew, until it was large enough for Bessie to climb inside.

She sailed across the lake and landed on the far shore, in the shadow of a magnificent castle.

Night was drawing in, but in one of the tower windows a light flickered. Stepping closer, Bessie saw the witch, silhouetted against the window. She saw her long flowing hair and her long yellow fingernails. The witch was gazing at herself in a mirror and laughing.

Bessie saw her reach for a small glass bottle. The witch gulped down the liquid inside and a moment later she was transformed into a beautiful young woman. With a smile, she placed a dazzling crown on her head.

“If the witch is here, then maybe the prince is

here too,” thought Bessie. “I have to find him.”

Taking a deep breath, Bessie pushed open the great front door and crept into the castle.

There was a huge hall and a sweeping staircase, and to her left and right, long, narrow corridors that seemed to go on forever. The castle was filled with servants, hurrying back and forth, carrying dishes piled high with food.

“Excuse me,” said Bessie, stopping one of the servants. “Why are you all rushing so?”

The servant looked at her, surprised. “We’re preparing for the wedding, of course,” he said. “The princess is marrying Prince Alfred tonight.”

“And where is the prince?” asked Bessie.

The servant looked around, as if to make sure no one could hear him, then he bent down to whisper in Bessie’s ear. “He’s sleeping in the topmost tower,” he said. “He’s been sleeping ever since he got here... almost as if he’s under a spell. The princess visits him each night, bringing him one of her potions.”

“How would I find my way to the tower?” asked Bessie.

“At the end of this corridor is a turret staircase. Keep climbing till you reach the very top,” the servant whispered, and then he hurried away.

Bessie walked the great length of the corridor. When she reached the foot of the staircase, she plucked a candle from the wall and began to climb.

Up and up and up she went, as if climbing to the clouds. The turret seemed to be getting narrower all the time, the stairs almost twisting back on themselves, but at last she reached a little door, right at the very top.

Bessie pushed open the door and there, on a narrow bed, the prince lay sleeping.



Bessie called out to try and wake him, but he didn't stir. She shook him, once, twice, three times, but still the prince slept on.

"You have to wake up!" cried Bessie. "Please! Wake up! The witch is here and she's going to make you marry her."

Nothing that Bessie did would wake him.

Then she remembered her gifts from the toads; she still had two nuts left.

Bessie cracked one open and saw that inside was a thick golden liquid.

She held the nut to Prince Alfred's lips and let the liquid drip between them.

After one drop, the prince's breathing quickened. After another, his eyes fluttered open and as the third passed his lips, he sat up and looked at Bessie.



"You came!" he said.

"I did," replied Bessie. "Even though I had to climb an ice mountain, pass through a field of slashing swords and cross a lake to reach you."

"You are the bravest princess I know," said Prince Alfred. "You have saved me again."

"We aren't safe yet," Bessie replied. "I saw the witch through the castle window. She drank a potion and transformed herself into a beautiful young woman."

"I know," said the prince. "She works all day in her tower, stirring up magic and perfecting her horrible potions. Then she comes to me each night at nine, just as I wake, and makes me drink her potions again."

Even as he spoke, the castle clock began to chime.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!
Ding! Ding!

❧ The Daring Princess ❧

“Then what are we waiting for!” said Bessie.

Hand in hand, they rushed down the stairs and out of the castle door. There was the boat, waiting for them. Together, they sailed across the great lake, and together, they crossed the field of swords and climbed the ice mountain.

“We’re not far now from my parents’ castle,” said Bessie. “It’s just on the other side of this forest.”

But behind them came a howling green wind, and on the wind they heard a cackling cry.

“The witch!” shouted Prince Alfred. “She’s coming for us. We’ll never outrun her.”

“It was all for nothing,” thought Bessie, until she remembered she still had one gift left from the toads. She reached into her pocket, pulled out the last nut, and cracked it open.

Out sprang a white stallion, pawing the ground and tossing its mane.

Bessie and the prince leaped onto its back and galloped through the forest. The green wind raged after them, but it was no match for the stallion.



They heard the roar of the wind weaken, until it was no more than a whisper, fluttering through the leaves.

At last, they reached the castle gates. Bessie pulled up the stallion, its flanks heaving, while her parents came rushing out of the castle to greet them.

“You’ve come back to us,” cried Bessie’s father. “We thought we’d lost you forever.”

When Bessie and the prince told their story, Bessie’s parents beamed with pride.

“And where is your home?” Bessie’s mother asked the prince.

Prince Alfred shook his head sadly. “My home is on the other side of the ice mountain. Soon after my parents died, the witch came to our castle and claimed it as her own. She cast a spell on my brothers and sisters. I don’t know what happened to them or where they went. She locked me in an iron stove, saying I had to stay there until I was ready to marry her.”

“We’ll keep you safe from the witch now,” said Bessie. “And together, we can search for your brothers and sisters.”

They didn’t have to look far. The next day, the king and queen threw a party to celebrate Bessie’s return. Everyone in the kingdom was invited.

One family looked strangely familiar. They all smiled at Bessie and shook her hand. But when they saw the prince, they rushed into his arms.

“My brothers and sisters!” cried Prince Alfred. “Where have you been?”

“The witch turned us all into toads,” said the eldest sister. She looked at Bessie. “When you freed our brother from the castle and brought him to your home, you broke her spell. You were brave and strong and true.”



“Three cheers for the daring princess!” cried the king. “The very best kind of princess of all.”

Everyone raised their glasses and cheered, “To the daring princess. Hip hip hooray!”

The king and queen never again suggested Bessie should be better behaved. She was allowed to roam the forests and forge her swords and ride her fine white stallion. She became famous throughout the land for her courage, and after her parents' death, she ruled the kingdom wisely and well.

As for the witch – she was never seen again. The cottage in the forest stayed empty and no howling green wind returned to haunt the castle. Bessie often wondered what had happened to her, and what she was doing now with her powerful magic.

Prince Alfred, his brothers and sisters all returned home, but the younger children said they missed their life as toads. When they were old enough, they went back to live in their little house, to offer a refuge for those lost in the woods.

Bessie never forgot the prince. Whenever she had the time, she would scale the ice mountain and cross the field of slashing swords and the great lake

to see him, and they remained the very truest and best of friends.

“I will always be grateful to you,” said Prince Alfred, on one of her visits.

“And I to you,” Bessie replied. “For you opened up my life to adventure...”

