

“Mother Hulda”

A fairytale collected by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm
in the early 1800s in Germany, and retold by Eric Miller

Once upon a time there was a widow who had a daughter and a step-daughter. The daughter was lazy, and the step-daughter was industrious. However, the woman was much fonder of the lazy girl, because she was her daughter. The step-daughter was made to do all the work of the house. Also, every day the step-daughter was sent out of the house to sit by the well and spin yarn by hand, until her fingers would bleed.

One day the blood from her fingers fell on the spindle, so the girl decided to draw some water from the well with which to wash the spindle. As she was doing so, the spindle slipped out of her hands and fell into the well. The girl ran home and told what had happened. Her stepmother scolded her harshly, and said in rage, “You let the spindle fall into the well, so go and get it!”

The girl went back to the well. Not knowing what else to do, she jumped into the well. Down, down, down she fell. As she was falling, she lost consciousness. When she awoke, she found herself in a beautiful meadow where the sun was shining and flowers were growing all around her.

She walked across the meadow. Soon she came to a baker's oven that was full of bread. The loaves of bread cried out to her, “Please take us out of the oven, or alas, we shall burn! We are baked enough already!” So she picked up the baker's iron tongs and one by one took all of the loaves out of the oven, setting the loaves on a nearby table for them to cool.

The girl walked on and came to a tree with many apples hanging from every branch. The tree called out to her, “Please shake me, shake me! My apples are ripe and heavy!” The girl shook the tree, and the apples came falling down like rain. She kept shaking the tree until not a single apple was left on its branches. Then she carefully gathered the apples together, and walked on again.

After some time, the girl came to a little wooden house that had a thatched roof. An old woman was standing in the doorway, looking out. The woman's teeth were very large, and this terrified the girl, so the girl turned to run away. But the old woman called after her, “Do not be afraid, dear child! Stay with me. Things will go well for you if you will do the work of my house properly. For example, when you make my bed you must shake the mattress thoroughly, so that the feathers fly about. It is then that it snows in the world, for I am Mother Hulda.”

The old woman spoke so kindly that the girl summoned up her courage, and consented to work in the house. The girl did her best to do everything to the old woman's satisfaction.

Indeed, every time she made the old woman's bed she shook it with all her might, so that the feathers flew about like snowflakes. The old woman never spoke angrily to the girl, and every day there was plenty of good food for the girl to cook for the two of them. The girl lived with Mother Hulda for a long time, but then she began to feel homesick. Although she was a thousand times better off with Mother Hulda than she had been at home, still she wanted to see her mother and sister. So at last, one day when the girl and the old woman were sitting in the house together, the girl said to her, “Mother Hulda, you have been most kind to me, and I have been very contented here, but now I want to return to my own home.”

Mother Hulda answered, "I am pleased that you want to go back to your people. And as you have served me so well and faithfully, I will help you go." With that, Mother Hulda gave a large empty cloth bag to the girl, and gestured for the girl to walk out of the house's front door.

As the girl passed through the door, flakes of gold fell from the roof down onto her. The gold kept falling, until the girl had filled her bag with the gold, and the bag was very heavy.

"This gold is yours," said Mother Hulda, "It is your reward for your hard work and good spirit." Mother Hulda then handed the spindle that had fallen down the well to the girl, and waved goodbye.

The girl waved back, as she turned to go and leave the house, the girl instantly found herself back in her ordinary world, close to her mother's house. As the girl entered the courtyard, a rooster who was perched on a fence, called out, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! Your golden daughter has come back to you!"

The girl went in the house, to her mother and sister. The girl had the spindle -- and a large heavy bag of gold -- so her mother and sister welcomed her warmly. She told them all about everything that had happened.

When the mother heard about how the girl had come by her great riches, she thought she would like her lazy daughter to go and get rich also! So she made her lazy daughter go and sit by the well and spin. Her lazy daughter would not spin yarn enough to make her fingers bleed, so the mother had the lazy daughter prick her finger on a thorn-bush and drop a few drops of her blood on the spindle. Then the mother told her lazy daughter to throw the spindle into the well, and jump in after it. The lazy girl had no choice, and did as her mother commanded.

Like her sister, the lazy girl lost consciousness as she fell, and awoke in the beautiful meadow. She walked across the meadow until she came to the oven. Just as before, the loaves of bread cried out, "Please take us out of the oven, or alas, we shall burn! We are baked enough already!" But the lazy girl answered, 'No, I might burn my hands if I took you out of the oven.' And she walked on.

The lazy girl came to the apple tree, which once again had many apples hanging from every branch. The tree called out to her, "Please shake me, shake me! My apples are ripe and heavy!"

The lazy girl answered, "Do you think I am going to dirty my hands for your sake? And anyway, some of the apples might fall on my head." So she just walked away.

Finally the lazy girl came to Mother Hulda's house. She had heard all about Mother Hulda's large teeth from her sister, so she was not afraid. She began her service in the old woman's house without delay.

On the first day, the lazy girl was very obedient and industrious, and did everything that Mother Hulda asked of her, because she was thinking of the gold she would get in return.

The next day, however, the lazy girl began to dawdle over her work. On the third day, she was more idle still. On the following days, she would lie in her bed in the mornings and refuse to get up. Worse still, she neglected to make the old woman's bed properly, and forgot to shake it so that the feathers might fly about.

Mother Hulda soon told the lazy girl that it was time for her to return home. The lazy girl was delighted, and thought to herself, "Now the shower of gold is coming!"

Then the lazy girl stepped out through the front door, and -- Something fell on her, but it was not flakes of gold! It was only a very horrible-smelling mixture of dirt, tar, and poop! This dirty mixture got all over her!

The next thing she knew, she was back in the ordinary world, close to her mother's house. The lazy girl came running into the courtyard, looking for some water to wash herself with.

The rooster who was perched on a fence, called out, "Cock-a-doodle-doo! Your dirty daughter has come back to you!"

The lazy girl found some water and spent a long time scrubbing herself, but the mixture was very sticky, smelly, and dirty -- so she might be scrubbing herself even until today!