

The Little Old Woman Who Lived in a Vinegar Bottle

Tips for Telling

Children love the repetitiveness of this tale. They will soon repeat with you the second half of the fairy's retort: "Well, if that's what she wants ... that's what she'll get!" The little old woman should be very whiny, of course. Don't worry about the house description. As long as she keeps moving up in the world, she can live in any kind of dwelling. Be sure to keep the fairy's north/south/east/west bit. It is rhythmic and makes a pleasing respite within the story.

There are many variations of this story. One version suggests that the "vinegar bottle" is in fact an "oast house", a round English building with a pointed roof. It is used for drying hops, an essential ingredient in good beer. Living in an oast house would be like having a grain silo for a house.

The Brothers Grimm version has a fish grant the wish to a man whose wife demands ever-greater homes. A British version has the fish grant the wish directly to the woman. This version uses the magic of a fairy.

The Story

There once was a little old woman who lived in a vinegar bottle.

Don't ask me why.

It was a common old vinegar bottle,
but unusually large of course.

Still, it did make a very cramped house.

Every day the old woman would sit on her front step and complain about her house.

"Oh what a pity!

What a pity, pity, pity!

That I should have to live in a house such as this.

Why, I should be living in a dear little cottage with a thatched roof.

And roses growing up the walls."

Just then a fairy happened to be passing by.

When she heard the old woman she thought:

"Well, if that's what she wants ...
that's what she'll get."

And going up to the old woman she said,

"When you go to bed tonight,

turn around three times

and close your eyes.

When you open them in the morning,

see what you shall see."

Well the old woman thought the fairy was likely batty.

But when she went to bed that night,

she turned around three times

and closed her eyes.

"It's just what I've always wanted," she said.

"How content I'll be living here."

But she said not a word of thanks to the fairy.

Well the fairy went north,

and the fairy went south.
The fairy went east
and the fairy went west.
She did all the business she had to do.

Then the fairy remembered the old woman.
"I wonder how she's getting on in her cottage?
She must be very happy indeed.
I'll just stop by for a visit."

But when the fairy came near,
she saw the old woman sitting on her front step ... complaining.
"Oh what a pity!
What a pity, pity, pity!
That I should have to live in a cramped little cottage such as this.
Why, I should be living in a fine row house,
with handsome houses on either side,
and lace curtains at the window,
and a brass knocker on the door!"

"I can do that," thought the fairy.
"If that's what she wants ...
that's what she'll get."

And to the old woman she said,
"When you go to bed tonight,
turn around three times
and close your eyes.
When you open them in the morning,
see what you shall see."

The old woman didn't have to be told twice.
She went right to bed.
She turned around three times,
and closed her eyes.
In the morning when she opened them ...
she was in a spanking new row house!
With neighbours on either side,
and lace curtains at the window,
and a brass knocker on the door.

"It's just what I've always wanted," she said.
"I'll be so content living here."
But she never said a word of thanks to the fairy.

Well the fairy went north,
and the fairy went south.
The fairy went east
and the fairy went west.
She did all the business she had to do.

Then the fairy thought of the old woman.
"I wonder how the old woman is doing these days?"

The one that used to live in the vinegar bottle.
I'll just stop around a see."

But when she came to the old woman's fine house,
the old woman was sitting in her shiny new rocking chair,
rocking and complaining.

"Oh what a pity!
What a pity, pity, pity!
That I should have to live in a row house like this,
with common folk on either side.
I should live in a mansion on the hill,
with a maidservant and a manservant to do my bidding.
That's what I deserve."

When the fairy heard that she was much amazed.
But she said,

"If that's what she wants ...
that's what she'll get."

And to the old woman she said,
"When you go to bed tonight,
turn around three times
and close your eyes.
When you open them in the morning,
see what you shall see."

So the old woman hopped into bed.
She turned around three times.
She closed her eyes.
And in the morning, when she opened them again ...
she was in a mansion on the hill!
With a maidservant and a manservant to do her bidding.

"This is just what I've always wanted," said the old woman.
"How contented I will be here."
But it never occurred to her to thank the fairy.

Well the fairy went north,
and the fairy went south.
The fairy went east
and the fairy went west.
She did all the business she had to do.

Then she remembered the old woman again.
"I wonder how the old woman is doing now?
The old woman who used to live in a vinegar bottle.
She must be quite happy in her new mansion."

But when she came near, she saw the old woman
sitting in her velvet chair ... complaining.
"Oh what a pity!
What a pity, pity, pity!
That I should have to live all alone in this old mansion.

Why, I should be the queen.
I should be living in the palace,
with a ladies in waiting for company,
and musicians to entertain me.
That's what I deserve."

"Good heavens!" thought the fairy.
Will she never be content?
Well if that's what she wants ...
that's what she'll get."

To the old woman she said,
"When you go to bed tonight,
turn around three times
and close your eyes.
When you open them in the morning,
see what you shall see."

So the old woman hurried to bed.
She turned around three times,
and closed her eyes.
And in the morning ...
she was in the palace!
With ladies in waiting to keep her company
and musicians to entertain her.

"This is what I've always wanted," said the old woman.
"I will be very content living here."
But she entirely forgot to thank the fairy.

Well the fairy went north,
and the fairy went south.
The fairy went east
and the fairy went west.
She did all the business she had to do.

Then she began to wonder about the old woman again.
"I wonder how that old woman is getting along ...
The old woman who used to live in a vinegar bottle?"

So she stopped at the palace to see.
There sat the old woman on her throne,
and she was ... complaining!
"Oh what a pity!
What a pity, pity, pity!
That I should be a queen of such a tiny kingdom.
Why, I should be the Pope in Rome.
The Pope rules the Holy Roman Empire.
Then I could rule the minds of everyone in the world!
That's what I deserve."

"Well!" said the fairy.
"If that's what she wants ..."

that's what she'll *NOT* get!"

To the old woman she said,
"When you go to bed tonight,
turn around three times
and close your eyes.
When you open them in the morning,
see what you shall see."

So the old woman went right to bed.
She turned around three times,
and closed her eyes.
And in the morning when she opened them ...
she was right back in the vinegar bottle.

"And there she shall stay," said the fairy.
"If she's not content here,
she won't be content there."

After all, contentment comes from the heart,
not from the house.