

Let Down Your Hair

by Juliet Marillier

The price of my future was a bunch of lettuce. That's what my mother agreed to in a moment of weakness, when the cravings of pregnancy sent her stealing in a forbidden garden. The witch let her keep me until I was three years old, and then she took me to the tower.

The tower was tall and slender, its base in a ring of birches, its tip in the clouds. It had a door at the bottom and a door at the top, both of them locked. The witch kept the key in her pocket; for me, there was no getting out.

She didn't take me from sheer wickedness. She needed me to do a job. There was a pot to watch, an iron cauldron hanging from a three-legged stand with a hook and chain. Soup bubbled inside, but we never ate it. The witch went out foraging for our meals: a scrawny bird, a dried-up lizard. And she grew things in her special garden: golden carrots, ruby-red beets. Lettuces.

The witch never gave me a name, and I forgot my old one. As I grew bigger, I made up names for myself. Confined to the chamber at the top of the tower, I only had the images I could see, and the words the witch gave me when I asked, 'What's that called? And that?' So I named myself Willow one day, and Stream the next, and at night I was Moon or Owl.

As she stirred her bubbling brew, the witch muttered stories. Thus I learned new words and new ideas. I did not know if the world where folk fell in love and wed and had children, fought battles, slew dragons and ruled kingdoms was a real place beyond my

tower or only existed in the witch's head. The people in the tales had wonderful names, names to conjure by. I called myself Emilia, and Adelbert, and Chrysoprase. I imagined a cat for myself, a little dog, a dragon. I imagined a friend to whom I could whisper secrets.

But there were no secrets in the tower, not for all the years of my growing up. There were the locked doors, the privy in its little alcove, the pipe that came in from a rainwater barrel outside, the precarious shuttered balcony on which I was not allowed to stand. The stairs down which I was not allowed to go. The soup which I was not allowed to drink. 'Two hundred years I've stirred this poxy cauldron,' the witch would grumble, knotty hands so tight on the wooden ladle that they looked as if they'd grown from the same tree. 'Two hundred years of boredom and slavery and for what? A mess of stupid tales, so twisted and twined you can't tell the barley from the beans or the leeks from the lentils.'

'Tales?' I asked her once. 'What have tales to do with soup?'

'You'll find out,' she said darkly. 'One day, this'll be your job.'

I didn't much like the sound of that, but I was smaller than she was, so I didn't argue.

Whenever the witch went foraging, I stole the opportunity to gaze out of my high window. One day a man passed the foot of the tower, with a bundle of sticks on his back. I recognised him from the witch's stories: a woodcutter. Woodcutters were stalwart, strong and good. They killed wicked wolves and rescued girls in distress. This one walked with confidence and held his shoulders square. When he glanced up towards my window, I saw kind eyes and a sweet, shy smile. I shrank back out of sight. *Don't let anyone see you*, was one of the witch's rules. There'd never been anyone before, unless you counted spiders and swallows. My mother didn't come, not once. I imagined her at home alone, dreaming of lettuce.

The witch was quiet when she came in that evening. We shared what she had brought: a skinny chicken which we roasted in the coals, and a handful of spinach from her garden. She didn't need to bring bundles of sticks; our fire burned all by itself. I stirred the cauldron while she ate, staring at the bubbling surface of the soup. Amongst the grains and vegetables I saw things that surely didn't belong in a broth: little men in chain mail and women dripping jewels. Half-hidden by strands of cabbage and leek were crowns and swords, goblets and gauntlets, nooses and necklaces ...

'Girl!' The witch's voice was sharp. 'You're falling asleep! Pay attention!'

I grasped the ladle more tightly.

'Maybe you don't understand,' the witch said. 'Stirring this pot is the most important job in the whole world. Let the fire die down, let the soup cool and congeal, and something irreplaceable is lost. It is a grand task, girl.'

'You said it was poxy and boring,' I felt obliged to point out.

'What else are you going to do up here?' she asked, fixing me with her beady eyes. 'Spin flax into gold?'

I had no idea what she was talking about, so I stirred, and imagined I saw in the cauldron a hero coming to rescue me from the tower. He would climb up to my window and carry me away to ... to whatever lay beyond the forest. Surely it must be a better existence than this.

The woodcutter hung around. The path he took to deliver his bundles of sticks seemed to bring him to the tower at least once a day, usually at the time when the witch was out. Once he'd seen me there seemed no point in hiding, so I'd come to the window and look down. He'd smile; I'd smile back. One day he took off his hat and waved it to

me, and I waved my hand, feeling very daring. The next day he brought a little bunch of flowers, red and blue and green; I opened the balcony shutters and called my thanks to him, though there was no way I could reach them.

‘What’s your name?’ he shouted.

I hadn’t decided what to call myself that day, so I smiled and shook my head. Then I spotted a familiar figure approaching, dark cloak billowing, pointed teeth gleaming in the sun, gnarled fingers carrying a cargo of vegetables for our supper.

I stood in the shadows by the window, watching. As the witch walked up to my woodcutter, her dark cloak became a pale muslin gown sprigged with violets; her pointed teeth turned regular and white. The wrinkles vanished, the hooked nose straightened, the grey hair became a cloud of fine gold thread. He was dazzled. The lonely girl in the tower, the one who had been blessed with his shy smiles and his gift of flowers, had gone right out of his head.

As easy as one, two, three, she stole him. With her arm through his and her beautiful fair head on his strong shoulder, she led him away into the forest and out of my life. The key was still in her pocket.

Time passed. I had a supply of water, a privy, work to do. Without my jailer to forage for me, I ate the only food I had: soup. When you’re starving, you don’t balk at the fact that something’s been sitting in a pot for two hundred years.

The fire kept burning; the only fuel it needed was kind words. I tried to pretend the level in the cauldron wasn’t going down, but as summer turned to autumn I could see it was. I imagined myself wasting away, dying with my eyes on the distant shadows beyond the forest, the land of the stolen future. I made myself think. I made myself observe the

little things in the cauldron, the items that were not bean or lentil or barleycorn, but crown and cloak, sea-serpent and sailing ship. The soup held the ingredients for a fine story. Many stories. Perhaps, lacking the cabbages and turnips the witch's garden used to furnish, I could replace them with fantastic ideas, amazing creatures and exotic settings. I could put in love and longing and heartbreak; I could add courage and beauty and betrayal. After all, it seemed I had inherited a real job.

Seasons came and went. The forest grew thick around my tower; in the witch's garden, nettles invaded the vegetable beds and brambles choked the gooseberry bushes. I stirred the cauldron and whispered stories into the bubbling soup. I made a future for myself; I made many futures. I journeyed far, fought battles, won prizes. Sometimes I was alone in the story, and sometimes he was by my side, the only hero I had been able to imagine. I gave him a new name for every tale: Robin, Fox, Oak. But his face was always the same, kind eyes, shy smile, brown hair like autumn leaves.

My own hair grew very long. When it began to annoy me, I cut it off with the knife the witch had used for chopping vegetables. I plaited it into a rope, but it only stretched halfway down the tower. So much for escape.

The soup smelled better every day, exotic and homely both at once, like the best story in the world. Sometimes it did well enough on its own, and I could stand at my high window looking out over the trees to the distant places I would never visit except in my own head.

It was winter. The light in the window was cold and pale; its beams touched my hair, and I saw that amongst the gold there was grey. I felt my face; were those wrinkles? In my tower there were no mirrors. A picture came to my mind of a little old woman,

stirring, stirring, her eyes rheumy, her hands knotted, her nose a beak in a face as wrinkled as an old apple. In a few years' time, I would *be* the witch.

'No,' I muttered, my tears turning the winter forest to a vague wash of grey and blue. 'I can't only live in dreams, it's not fair ...'

Down below, someone shouted. 'Anyone there?'

My heart skipped a beat. I scrubbed my eyes and ran to the balcony shutters, flinging them open.

No bundle of wood; no fine young man with broad shoulders and thatch of nut-brown hair. This traveller wore a soldier's greatcoat, and he stood crooked, as if he were carrying an injury. His hair was grey; his face was lined and weary. The kind eyes and the shy smile were still the same.

'I'm here!' My voice, so long unused except for whispering, croaked like an ancient frog's. Words fled abruptly; it had been so long. How old was I, exactly?

'I've got a rope,' said Robin, or Fox, or Oak. 'Catch.'

He tried hard, but he lacked the strength to get the rope high enough. We were both older.

Robin looked up at me. 'What now?' he shouted.

'Couldn't you climb up somehow?'

He said nothing, just rolled up his trousers to show me that, below the knee, his right leg had been replaced by a length of metal, serviceable enough for walking, but not at all suited for scaling walls. 'Sorry,' he said.

He stayed. I watched him every day as he built a little house in the corner of the witch's garden. I saw the smoke from his hearth fire rising as winter turned towards

spring. He cleared away the nettles and brambles. He sang as he worked and I joined in, liking the sound our voices made together. He took off his shirt when he was digging, and I thought perhaps we were not so very old after all, for the sight of his muscular back was more than pleasing to me.

He asked me one day if he should try to break down the door to the tower, and I said no. It seemed to me the magic the witch had set on the place would turn back on us if we tried to go against it. Our happiness was too fragile to risk. ‘Wait, Robin,’ I told him. ‘Be patient.’

He told me the witch was gone. The grim satisfaction in his tone silenced further questions before they left my lips. He did not ask me about the future. He gardened, and waited.

The answer, when it came, was simple. On the first day of spring, when Robin was down below chopping wood for his fire, I stirred my cauldron and saw a key floating amidst the strands of spinach and chunks of carrot.

Quick as a flash, I thrust my hand into the soup and grabbed the prize. It hurt, and I yelped. That was only right; without pain, no quest is achieved.

The chopping sounds had ceased. ‘Are you all right?’ came his voice.

He was still staring anxiously up at the window when I came out the door at the bottom of the tower.

‘You’re here!’ He took my hand as gently as the breeze captures a feather. His touch was more thrilling than anything in my stories, for it told me I was truly alive. I observed the lines around nose and mouth, the desperate worry in his kind eyes. He looked ... real. He looked wonderful.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ he whispered. ‘I’m sorry I left you. More sorry than I can say.’

‘I forgive you,’ I said, drinking him in. ‘But you need to understand that I can’t go off and have adventures. There’s nobody else to stir the soup.’

‘This is an adventure,’ my woodcutter said.

We took hands and went back into the tower, but we left the door open behind us.