

## CLEVER JILL

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Once upon a time there was a shepherd with four daughters. Three of them were soft and pretty, and soon caught the eyes of three wealthy traveling merchants. The third was tall and plain and scrawny, but she was known as Clever Jill, for it was said she could get the best of any bargain she made. When it came time for the three pretty daughters to travel to the city and wed their betrothed, each of them took their most precious possession along with them. Clever Jill decided to accompany them, for, she said, “perhaps I shall find my fortune along the way.”

After an hour of walking, her eldest sister grew hungry, for she'd forgotten to bring any food.

“I will trade the mutton in my pack for your walking stick,” said Clever Jill.

Her sister frowned. “I carved this walking stick myself. It's long and solid and will last for many years. How dare you ask me to sell it for a simple hunk of mutton?”

“That's the price,” said Clever Jill.

The eldest sister grumbled and groaned, but she traded her walking stick for the mutton. “In a few days I will be married and rich, and I shall be carried everywhere on a fine litter, but you will still be alone,” she spat. “It's a pity you can't trade your scarecrow figure for my beautiful curves!”

Soon the grassy fields of the shepherds ended, and the sisters walked on into sun-dappled woods. After another hour of walking, the second oldest sister grew hungry, for she too had forgotten to bring any food.

“I will trade the biscuits in my pack for your bow and arrows,” said Clever Jill.

Her sister frowned. “I have had this bow since I was child. I trained for hours each day to become a great archer. How dare you ask me to sell it for a few dry biscuits?”

“That's the price,” said Clever Jill.

The second oldest sister grimaced and grouched, but she traded her bow for the biscuits. “In a few days I will be married and rich, and I shall have a fine bow made for me by the best craftsman in the city, but you will still be alone,” she sneered. “It's a pity you can't trade your mousy brown hair for my lush black locks!”

Soon the sun-dappled woods ended, and the sisters walked on into a deeper, darker forest. After another hour of walking, the third oldest sister grew thirsty, for though she had remembered to bring food, she had neglected to carry with her even a drop of water.

“I will trade my water skin for your magic whistle,” said Clever Jill.

Her sister frowned. “This whistle has been in our family for generations. It can summon rain from the clouds themselves. How dare you ask me to sell it for a mouthful of water?”

“That's the price,” said Clever Jill.

The third oldest sister eyed a gap in the trees, through which she could see a blue and cloudless sky. Growling, she traded her magic whistle for the water. “In a few days I will be married and rich, and I shall have central plumbing,” she snarled. “It's a pity you can't trade your ugly brown eyes for bright and beautiful green ones like mine!”

Soon the deeper, darker forest ended, and the sisters came to a place where the trees were black and twisted, and no songbirds chirped, and not a leaf rustled.

“Scary or not,” Clever Jill said, “this is the quickest way to the city.”

“We will take the long way,” her eldest sister said.

“We will take the safe way,” her second oldest sister said.

“We have plenty of food to last the journey,” her third oldest sister said, “but now *you* have none!” And, laughing, the three sisters left to find a safer, longer path, while Clever Jill had to walk forward alone into the black and twisted place.

After another hour of walking, Jill grew hungry, but she hadn't a crumb of food. She grew thirsty,

but she hadn't a drop of water. She began to wonder if perhaps, this time, she'd bargained foolishly.

Eventually she came to the lowest point in a low, low gully. There were trees here which were heavy with strange purple fruit, and the branches of the trees were filled with crows. Night was fast approaching, and thunder rumbled in the distance. And yet, in the middle of this very strange wood, there sat a finely polished dining table, long enough to seat a banquet. The thought of food made Clever Jill lick her lips and clutch her empty, shrunken belly.

"Hungry?" boomed a voice. Jill turned. Standing behind her was an towering ogress, seven feet tall and thickly muscled, with a long, wild mane of black hair, a handsomely chiseled face, and eyes as red as coals. She wore a coat of wolf-hides sewn together, but they strained at the seams, for the ogress was as big around as a cow and as fat as a prize pig.

"Don't worry," said the ogress. "I promise I have no interest in eating anyone as scrawny as you. Besides, I have no need to eat travelers at all since I came into possession of this magic table."

She stepped past Clever Jill and rapped on the table three times with her immense knuckles.

*Table, table, use your spell,  
If you're able, feed me well!*

In a puff of smoke, a feast appeared upon the table. Thick, juicy slices of meat, fresh, warm bread, bottles of the finest wine, fresh vegetables, and sweets and pastries of every description.

"It can only be used once a day," the ogress admitted, "but that is more than enough to keep me well-fed." She patted her enormous belly and sighed. "If only I had company! Won't you sit down and eat with me?"

Clever Jill could barely speak, she was drooling so at the sight of the food, but she knew that ogresses and ogres were seldom kind and never gave something for nothing. She also knew, however, that they never broke a promise once given.

"If I eat with you," Clever Jill said, "you must help me to get where I'm going."

"Agreed," said the ogress. "I promise."

And so Clever Jill sat at the table, inhaled the magnificent aromas, and ate, and ate, and ate. She ate until her stomach ached. She ate until she was forced to undo the laces on her breeches. She ate until she could hold not a single bite more, and then she sat back with a sign and a belch and rubbed her stomach in contentment.

"Surely you aren't full already?" the ogress said. "Why, you've barely eaten anything!"

"If I eat any more, I'll burst!" Clever Jill said. "Give me a few moments to rest, and then you may help me along."

"You aren't going anywhere until you've finished eating," the ogress said with a wicked grin. "Perhaps I forgot to mention the other enchantment on the table. Once you sit down to eat, you cannot leave while food remains."

Indeed, Clever Jill felt certain that she could not stand up. She had thought it was merely because she'd overeaten, but now she felt the telltale tickle of magic at work, wriggling around in her bulging stomach like a snake and holding her to her chair like an anchor. She looked at the mountains of leftover food.

"Aren't *you* eating?" Clever Jill asked. "You don't look at all like the sort who skips meals."

"When *you* are done eating," the ogress said, "I will eat you!"

"But you promised you wouldn't eat me!" Clever Jill protested.

"I promised I had no interest in eating someone scrawny," the ogress said, "and by the time you're done, you shall be as plump as a goose."

"You promised you would help me get where I'm going!"

"You are going to my belly," the ogress agreed, "and I will help you get there!"

Jill tried to push the food away, but it would not pass beyond the edge of the table. She tried to pick up a dish of soup and fling it to the ground, but instead she found it pushing against her lips, and she could not lower it until she'd drained every drop. Her stomach felt ready to burst.

"I cannot eat any more!" she groaned.

"You must," said the ogress, "or I'll stomp you into a pancake!"

"No," said Clever Jill, "I cannot, for this table is too long, and if I cannot move from my spot, how can I ever reach the dishes on the other side?"

"That's easy!" the ogress barked.

"No, it isn't," Clever Jill said. "Nobody could reach those dishes, not even you. If I must eat them before I stand up, I shall surely starve to death before I grow plump!"

The ogress growled at the thought of her scrawny meal withering away still further. "I will show you," she grunted, plopping down at the table with a meaty thud. She gripped one side of the table in each hand and lifted it up, up, tilting it toward her. Clever Jill, still stuck at the other end, was lifted into the trees, her legs dangling into thin air and her tunic riding up over her belly.

"This is how you do it," the ogress said, scooping up enormous handfuls of food and stuffing them between her plump lips. Legs of lamb and hunks of ham, rashers of bacon and buckets of raspberries, bowls overflowing with gooey half-melted iced cream and lumps of chocolate.

"And don't think you've tricked me!" she sneered around an entire roast chicken. "I've had plenty of practice polishing off a tableful of food, and once it's gone, I'll break your arms and legs and then make you eat twice as much tomorrow!"

Clever Jill shuddered, for indeed the ogress tore through dish after dish, discarding the plates, licked clean, onto the ground, where they poofed into smoke and disappeared. Soon the entire table would be clear.

Suddenly, she remembered the walking stick. Quick as can be, she pulled it out of her pack and began thrashing at the branches around her. Heavy, ripe fruit began to fall all around her, some on the ground, but most on the table. Dozens of pieces—scores of them—hundreds of them, plummeting to the polished oak and rolling rapidly towards the ogress' relentless maw.

"Your arm is strong," said the ogress, "but not strong enough!" She began to snatch the fruits and stuff them into her mouth as well. She ate and ate and ate, until hundreds of pieces became scores—dozens—only a few. Her mouth and hands were stained purple, and her bloated stomach bulged over the tabletop, but she was nearly finished, and there was no more fruit on the trees.

Then Jill remember the bow and arrow. She pulled it out of the pack and took aim. There was a squawk, and a crow spiraled to the table, stone dead. Another followed, then another, as Clever Jill fired quickly as she could.

"Your aim is good," hiccuped the ogress, "but not good enough!" She began to snatch the birds and stuff them down on top of the banquet and the mountains of fruit. She ate and ate and ate as fast as Clever Jill could shoot, until the clever girl reached into her quiver and found not a single arrow left. The ogress' lips were sticky with blood and feathers, and her stomach was so swollen her fur tunic ripped in two, but there only a few birds left now.

At last, Jill remembered the whistle. Drawing it forth, she looked up into the overcast sky and blew. At once the clouds burst and water drenched the table. It filled the glasses. It filled the bowls. It filled tureen and trenchers, cups and saucers, with so much crystal clear water it sloshed over the sides.

"So, magic!" belched the ogress. "But that, my girl, won't save you either!" She picked up the largest tureen and drained it in a few gigantic gulps. She sipped her way through the glasses and chugged her way through the bowls. All the while, the whistle kept playing its shrill little song, and the clouds kept pouring out more and more water.

"Give up?" Clever Jill gasped.

"Never!" gurgled the ogress. Her stomach was so full of water she sloshed when she spoke. She looked as if she'd knelt down and guzzled the entire ocean in one monstrous drink. She drank and drank and drank until she'd downed every drop of water, and then she collapsed flat on her back, so bloated that her belly reached the lowest branches of the trees. The table fell sideways into the mud, and Clever Jill quickly jumped free.

The ogress could barely blink now, so tightly was she filled, and she *certainly* couldn't move. Clever Jill walked over to her and shoved one vast flank. The ogress moaned.

"I'll do that again," Clever Jill said, "unless you give me your table and any other treasure you might have, *and* tell me the way to the city, *and* promise not to harm me ever again."

"No!" the ogress moaned. "This table is mine!"

"That's the price," said Clever Jill, and the helpless ogress reluctantly agreed. The town proved to be about three days by raft through the twisty river canyons of the lifeless desert, and so Clever Jill turned the table on its front, loaded it with treasure, and off she went.

She rowed for a day, until she grew so hungry she could row no more, and she stopped by the side of the river. There was nothing to eat in the lifeless desert, so she had no choice but to rap on the table and say,

*Table, table, use your spell,*

*If you're able, feed me well!*

At once the table was filled with food, and Clever Jill sat down to eat. It took her one whole week to eat up all of the food, and when she had finished every scrap, she was as plump as a hen.

She rowed for another day, but she soon grew hungry again. She was still surrounded by the lifeless desert, and so she rapped on the table again and said the magic words. This time, it only took her five days to eat every bite, and when she'd finished, she was as plump as a pig.

She rowed for one more day, and though she could see the spires of the city in the distance, she was simply too weak to make it without food. She filled the table one more time, and ate, and ate. Three days later, she finished. She was now almost as plump as the ogress herself.

Clever Jill arrived in town at last, and with the treasure she bought a fine home and plenty of well-tailored clothing to replace her torn rags. She invited her sisters to call. They were now rich girls, it was true, but not nearly as rich as Clever Jill. When they saw the size of the house, they goggled and nearly turned green, but when they saw the size of its owner, they burst out laughing.

"Jill, you're *enormous!*" said the eldest daughter.

"You're as big as a house!" said the second oldest daughter.

"However did you get so...so *fat?*" asked the third oldest daughter.

Clever Jill gave them a clever, clever smile and gestured to her dining room, where her sisters could see a long, elegant, and very expensive-looking oak table.

"Sit down. I will tell you the whole story over dinner."