

Ashpet

(A Retelling)

Once upon a time, there was a woman who had two daughters, and they kept a hired girl to help around the house. The woman and her daughters treated this girl poorly. They wouldn't buy her any pretty clothes or new shoes and she had no bed. She had to sleep right up against the fireplace to keep warm at night, and she got ashes all over her every night, so they called her Ashpet. The woman and her daughters were jealous of Ashpet because they knew she was prettier than the old woman's two girls. If anybody came to the house, they always shoved Ashpet onto the back porch.

One day, the old woman and her mean daughters were getting dressed to go to church, and they noticed the fire had gone out. The house was getting colder and colder. The woman said to her oldest daughter, "Darling dear, go on over the hill to the neighbor lady's house and ask for a coal to start our fire up again."

The neighbor was an old, old woman who lived alone and everyone thought she was a witch. The oldest daughter pouted and fussed, but she walked up over the next hill and back down to the neighbor. The daughter looked at the weeds around the stoop and the broken down log cabin and she thought, "I won't go in this dirty house!" So she stuck her hand through a crack in the logs and said, "I came for a coal to start up our fire again."

"Come in and comb my hair," called the old neighbor woman, "and I'll give you some."

"I won't put my pretty, clean hands on your comb and brush!" cried the oldest daughter.

"You'll get none from me then. Run along back home!" said the old neighbor woman.

She went home, and the house was still cold. The mother sent her second daughter over the hill and back down to the old neighbor woman. She put her hand through the same crack and said, "I came for a coal to start up our fire again."

"Come in and comb my hair," called the old neighbor woman, "and I'll give you some."

"Put my nice clean hands on your comb and brush?" cried the second daughter, "I'll never!"

"Run along home then," called the old woman, "You'll get none from me!"

The second daughter ran all the way home and cried to her mama about how mean the old neighbor woman was. Her mother hollered for Ashpet to go get a coal for the fire. Ashpet ran over the hill and back down and straight into the old neighbor lady's home. The old lady greeted Ashpet by name and asked Ashpet to comb her hair. Ashpet combed the old lady's hair gently. The old lady thanked Ashpet and gave her some fire in an old dried toadstool. Then the neighbor lady asked Ashpet, "Are you going to church tonight then?"

"No," replied Ashpet, "I have to get the fire going, milk the cows, feed the animals, chop wood, carry water, and cook the supper. I won't be finished until church is all over. But I would love to go to church tonight. I would like it best of all!" And Ashpet ran back over the hill to do all her chores and help the two girls get ready for church. As

soon as the mean woman and her two girls started off down the road to the church, that old neighbor lady came hobbling right into the house and straight into the kitchen.

“Ashpet,” said the old lady, “You stay right by the door.”

Ashpet peeked into the kitchen through the doorway; the old woman put all the dirty dishes on one end of the table and the dishpan full of hot, soapy water on the other end. She pointed to the dishes and said, “Wash, dish, wash!” Ashpet watched in amazement as all the dishes and cups and knives and forks jumped into the hot water and washed themselves and then jumped up dry and sparkling on the shelves. Then the old woman went all around the house, and everywhere she pointed, Ashpet’s chores did themselves. Ashpet watched as all her chores were finished as quickly as a flash of lightning, and she laughed and clapped her hands in delight.

When all the chores were done, the old woman went out to the back stoop, opened her apron pocket and took out a mouse, a piece of old leather, a string and a rag. The old woman pointed at them and before Ashpet could blink, there stood before her a pretty little horse, with a new saddle and bridle.

The old woman pointed to the old leather and the rag and said, “Shut your eyes, Ashpet, and think really hard about the shoes and dress you want to wear to church tonight.” Ashpet closed her eyes tightly and wished with all her might. When she opened her eyes, the old woman was holding in one hand the prettiest red dress Ashpet had ever seen. In the other hand, she had a pair of pretty little shoes. Quick as a wink, Ashpet washed up, brushed her hair, put on the pretty dress and shoes, and got on the pretty little horse. Then Ashpet trotted off, lickety-split, right to the church.

At the church, no one recognized Ashpet as the pretty girl with the clean dress and shining hair, and she looked at the beautiful church and she sang like she never had before. Now, the Mayor’s son was there, and he couldn’t stop staring at Ashpet. When the service was over, Ashpet ran to her pretty little horse so she could get home before the mean old woman and her two mean daughters. As she jumped up onto her little horse, one of her pretty little shoes came off. The little horse took off quick as lightning toward home; she galloped so fast that Ashpet had to hang on with all her might.

Now the Mayor’s son watched Ashpet run to her horse, and he saw her shoe slip right off. He grabbed it up and ran after her, just in time to watch her gallop down the road. Quick as a wink, he was up on his horse and galloping after her.

When Ashpet arrived home she hid the little horse in the woods behind the house. Then, she slipped off her pretty dress and put her old ashy clothes on again. She swept up the hearth and before long, she looked her familiar self. It was just in time: the mean old woman and her mean daughters tromped into the house that very moment. They were all talking at once about the beautiful girl who was at church and how the Mayor’s son had galloped after her down the road. As the mean old woman and her daughters chattered on, they heard the sound of hoofbeats coming toward the house and then the Mayor’s son calling, “Hello! Hello!”

The old woman and the two girls grabbed Ashpet and pushed her out onto the back porch, then they ran out to the front porch to see the Mayor’s son jump off his horse and run up onto the porch. He pulled out the little shoe and said, “This shoe came off the prettiest woman I’ve ever seen and the one it fits is the one I’ll marry.”

The two girls shucked off their shoes and both grabbed for the little shoe in the Mayor’s son’s hand. One after the other, the girls tried on the shoe, but no matter how

they pushed and twisted, neither could get the shoe to fit their feet. The Mayor's son looked all around the porch, and peered into the windows of the little house.

"Who else lives here?" he asked. The old mean woman and her mean daughters shook their heads so hard their pretty hats flew off and into the yard. Disappointed, the Mayor's son stepped down into the yard toward his horse.

Just at that moment, Ashpet's pretty little horse trotted out of the woods and straight up to the Mayor's son, and grabbed the little shoe straight out of his hand. Quick as a flash, she trotted off to the back porch. The Mayor's son followed her around the back of the house, and as soon as he got around the corner, he saw Ashpet sitting on the back porch, on an upside-down old washtub. The little mare dropped the little shoe in Ashpet's lap and Ashpet gasped with surprise and slipped it onto her bare foot.

When he saw that the little shoe fit perfectly, the Mayor's son dropped down to one knee and said, "This shoe came off the prettiest woman I've ever seen, and she's the one I'll marry!" With that, Ashpet shyly drew out the matching shoe from her apron pocket and slipped it on her other bare foot.

As soon as she slipped it on, the Mayor's son took both Ashpet's hands and helped her to her feet. The Mayor's son lifted Ashpet up and set her gently on her little mare, and then got his horse. Together, Ashpet and the Mayor's son rode off down the road, toward the son's fine big house, leaving the mean old woman and her mean daughters standing on their front steps, too surprised to fuss.