

'An Italian Woman Spinning Flax',  
1847, by Uno Troili (1815-75).  
Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, Sweden.



# The Miller's Daughter

Kathleen Murphey

Once upon a time, in a sleepy little kingdom, there lived a Miller who had a beautiful daughter named Rose. Rose could cook and sew and spin well. She could spin yarn so thin it was like thread. In fact, one of the local seamstresses bought this thread-like yarn to use in her dressmaking.

One day the Miller travelled to the palace to deliver a particularly large load of flour and cornmeal. In the kitchens with some of the other tradesman, the Miller listened to them boasting about their children and, unable to restrain himself, he bragged about Rose's skill at spinning wheel.

"My daughter, Rose, can spin very finely. She can spin flax into thread," he said. As few of men seemed impressed by this, he added, "Aye, and she can spin straw into gold." This was met with disbelief.

"Tom, you're full of it. You wouldn't be here delivering flour and cornmeal if Rose could do that," said the Cheesemonger dismissively.

"It's foolish talk, Tom," warned the Candlemaker. "You could land Rose in a world of trouble if the wrong person took you seriously."

"But it's true," protested the Miller.

The men fell silent and finished the small repasts the cooks had set out for them, and then headed back to their respective homes with emptied wagons. The bout of boasting was about to be forgotten, except that someone had heard. The head Housekeeper had heard, and though she thought the story about Rose hogwash and the vanity of men overwhelming the poor Miller, she nevertheless passed the story on to the King.

Now the King was greedy. A good quantity of gold would protect his reign and his country, and he hoped to get it through the Miller's daughter.

"You realise, your Majesty, that the young woman probably can't spin straw into gold," said the Housekeeper.

"That will be too bad for the Miller and for his daughter," answered the King.

When the summons arrived, the mortified Miller had the unpleasant task of telling his daughter. Rose was standing at the kitchen table peeling potatoes when he came home.

"Rose, I am so sorry. I have done a stupid thing. I am so very, very sorry," the Miller said, staring at the floor and wringing his hands.

"What have you done, father?" Rose asked, wondering at his obvious distress.

"The men were talking in the palace kitchens. You know the way they do – all swagger about how great their children are," he paused, still refusing to look at her and wringing his hands.

"Go on," she said, her heart sinking slightly. Her father didn't like to be upstaged.

"Well, I joined in," he continued. "I said you could spin really well – too well really."

"Too well? What do you mean?" she said softly.

"I ... I said you could spin straw into gold," he choked out.

"You said I could do what?" she cried.

"I said you could spin straw into gold. I am so sorry," he added.

Rose stared at her father. He still refused to look at her, and then she realised why.

"And someone heard you? Someone important? What have you done, father?" she said angrily.

He still refused to look at her, but tears started running down his cheeks. The blood drained from Rose's face. She staggered to a chair and sat down.

"You're to report to the palace in the morning," he managed to whisper, and though they managed to eat some dinner that night, they didn't speak again – each consumed by regret and sorrow.

As demanded, the Miller's daughter arrived at the palace the following day. Rose was full of dread. Her father had put her in an impossible position. Now she was being greeted by the head Housekeeper, who eyed her curiously and led her to the King. The King looked at her too, but the look was calculating and dark. He himself led her to a large room filled with straw and a beautiful spinning wheel.

"You have until sunrise tomorrow to spin this straw into gold," the King said sternly.

"And if I cannot?" Rose asked in a shaky voice.

"Then you will die," the King answered, and he left the room, locking Rose in with the straw.

Rose tried to spin the straw, but it wasn't fine nor long like flax fibres. There was no way to get the straw pieces to twirl around each other to make any kind of useable twine or yarn – let alone gold. Rose tried desperately for about an hour, and then gave up, curling into a ball in some straw and starting to cry.

"Mistress Miller, why are you crying?" said a soft voice.

Rose lifted her head and saw a tiny woman standing before her. Rose looked at the door and then at the woman. The woman laughed in response, the sound like special bells tinkling in celebration. "Human doors don't limit the travels of the Fae Folk," she answered. "Come, child, what is wrong?"

"The King has ordered me to spin this straw into gold, and I can't do it," Rose answered, miserably, gesturing to the mounds of straw that filled the room.

The little woman looked at the straw and then back at Rose. "What is your name, child?"

"I am Rose, the Miller's daughter."

"Well, Rose, I am Lylia, of the Fae Folk," the woman responded. "What will you give me, if I do this for you?"

Rose's hands went to her neck. Her father had wanted her to look her best for the King and had dug out her mother's necklace for her to wear. "I have this necklace," Rose replied.

Lylia looked at the necklace, "Very well." Rose took the necklace off her neck and gave it to the woman, who placed it in a pocket. Then the faery sat at the spinning wheel and whir, whir, whir, she turned the straw into gold one spindle at a time. Rose tried to stay awake. She told Lylia all kinds of stories and sang to her. But try as she might, Rose fell asleep and awoke with a start when she heard the King approaching the door. She stared around her wildly. All the straw was gone, and Rose was surrounded by spindelfuls of gold yarn. And Lylia was gone too. It was just Rose who faced the astonished but very pleased King. He led her to the kitchens and had the cooks feed her while he raced back to have the stable hands fill an even larger room with straw.

The King led a miserable Rose to this new room and ordered her to spin all the straw in the room into gold, like she had done the night before. She nodded mutely as she was locked in the room. She threw herself down on the straw and started to cry. Lylia again appeared. Rose had her mother's ring, which she offered to Lylia if she would spin the straw into gold. Lylia took the ring and began spinning the straw into gold. Again, Rose told her more stories and sang to the faery while she worked. A nagging thought was nudging its way into her mind. How long would this go on? Would the King be satisfied with this new room of gold? And if he wasn't, she had nothing left to trade. The necklace and the ring had been the only things of value her family had.

"Why are you helping me?" Rose asked suddenly.

Lylia stopped spinning and looked at Rose. Seeming to sense Rose's train of thought, Lylia answered, "Tomorrow, the King will ask you to turn an even bigger room full of straw into gold, and then he will ask you to be his wife. After you are married, you will have a child." She paused, letting that information sink in. "I want that child, Rose, to grow up among the Fae Folk."

Rose stared at her in disbelief, "You want ... my child? Why?"

"The Fae Folk live a long time, Rose, but it is very hard for us to have children. I have never had one, and it is my heart's desire to have just one. Your child would be very precious to me, to us. You could see the child from time to time. We would not deny you that. You will be able to have many children, Rose. I have made, or will make by the day after tomorrow, your King a very wealthy man, and by helping you, I will make you the Queen and have saved your life. I know I ask for much, but ask I do," she paused. "I don't need your answer now. If you cry for me tomorrow, I will take that as your acceptance of my offer. Don't cry, and I won't come."

"But if you don't come, the straw will remain straw, and the King will have me killed," Rose said bitterly.

"I ask a lot, but so have you," Lylia answered, and she began to spin again. Rose was consumed with her own thoughts, and before she knew it, she was asleep again, jolting awake when she heard the King approach.

As before, the King led her to the kitchens where the cooks had prepared a sumptuous breakfast for her. For a fleeting moment, she hoped she could eat quickly and slip away, but she saw that guardsmen stood at the doors of the kitchen and knew she would not be allowed to leave. What Lylia had predicted was about to come true. The King returned, and he led her to a new room, even bigger than the last one, and told her that if she spun the straw to gold by morning, she would be his wife. Rose twisted her hands miserably, as she was locked in the room. She paced the room. How could she give up her child? How could she not? Would she really be willing to die rather than make the promise to give up one child? Would the King really kill her if he found the room full of straw instead of gold? Yes, she thought emphatically. What kind of husband was that? She sank into the straw and started to cry.

Lylia was there in a moment. "Do you agree?" asked the little woman.

"Yes, I agree, but how will it be accomplished? How will you take the child? Won't the King try to find it?" she asked.

"Children die in childbirth all the time," Lylia said sadly.

"So do their mothers," added Rose, an idea coming to her.

"What are you suggesting?" asked Lylia, curiously.

"Could I come too?" she replied immediately.

"You would step away from being Queen?" asked Lylia.

"I would step away from a husband who threatened to kill me three times for failing to do an impossible task. Why wouldn't I?"

"You could fall in love with him," countered Lylia.

"I will not," Rose answered firmly.

Lylia laughed again, that tinkle of bells sound, "Well, my child, we will see when the time comes," and with that, Lylia settled herself spinning the straw into gold. Rose, instead of telling Lylia stories or singing, peppered Lylia with questions about the Fae Folk.

"Will it be strange for me to live among you?" she asked.

Lylia paused in her work and looked at Rose. "It will be different for you. We don't live by the narrow rules you mortals impose on each other. You will have much more freedom with us. Fae Folk of both genders hunt and forage. There will be much for you to do, and if you come, you and I will tend to your child. You will give up much, my child, but you will be welcome among us. Will you miss your father, your life here?"

Rose looked troubled for a moment. She loved her father, the old fool, but he had put her in this predicament. And the King! Her life would be turned upside down if she became Queen. She could imagine the contempt from the courtiers – a mere commoner elevated beyond her station. She nodded her head slowly.

“I will miss my father,” she said sadly. “But I have no desire to be Queen. Living among you has to be better than staying here,” Rose added.

“I think you will be pleased with your choice,” Lylia replied, and then went back to her work, whir, whir, whir, turning the straw into gold.

Rose felt slightly apprehensive. She would be the Queen for a while. That would be strange. And she would need to be bedded by the King. That made her skin crawl. But it would be temporary, and then she and the child would be free among the Fae Folk. She could live with that. A calm washed over her, and she fell asleep.

She startled awake at the approach of the King. He opened the door and smiled broadly at all the gold in the room.

“Mistress Miller, will you be my wife?” asked the King.

“On one condition,” Rose said. “That you never make me spin straw into gold again.”

“Done,” he answered promptly.

So the King married the Miller’s daughter, and she became his Queen. The Miller was overjoyed at his daughter’s good fortune, but he kept his mouth firmly shut, having learned a painful lesson. About a year later, the Queen went into labour, and a terrible thing happened. The baby and the Queen died in childbirth. The King had the country observe a year of mourning, and then he married a noblewoman who gave him many children. And no one mentioned the Miller’s daughter again, which was just as she had hoped.



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