Once upon a time there lived a king and queen who were ever so unhappy, because they had no children; so unhappy I can’t tell you. They went to all the spas to drink the waters there, gave presents to all the saints, went on pilgrimages, and always said their prayers; everything was tried and nothing worked. But at last the Queen did become pregnant, and had a baby daughter. They held a beautiful service for her to be christened; all the fairies they could find in the country were to come (there were seven of them), to be godmothers for the little Princess, which meant that each would bestow a gift on her, which was the custom for fairies in those days, and then she would be as perfect as you could possibly imagine.

When the christening service was finished, all the guests went back to the royal palace, where a banquet was to be given in honour of the fairies. Each of them had her place laid magnificently at table with a solid gold case, which contained a knife, a fork, and a spoon made out of pure gold, and decorated with diamonds and rubies. But as everyone was sitting down to table, they saw an aged fairy come in, who had not been invited, because for more than fifty years she had never left the tower she lived in, so that she was believed to be dead, or under a spell. The King had a place laid for her at table, but there was no means of giving her a case of solid gold like the others, because only seven cases had been made, one for each of the seven. The aged fairy believed herself insulted, and muttered threatening words between her teeth. Sitting beside her, one of the younger fairies heard what she said, and guessed that the gift that she would give
to the little Princess might be dangerous for her; so she went and hid behind a tapestry on the wall as soon as the meal was finished, in order to speak last of all, and prevent if possible any harm that the old fairy might do.

Meanwhile the fairies began to present their gifts to the Princess. The gift that the youngest fairy gave was that she would be the loveliest person in the world; the next one’s gift was that she would be as clever as an angel; the third gift was that she would do everything with all the grace imaginable; the fourth that she would dance to perfection; the fifth that she would sing like a nightingale; and the sixth, that she would play beautiful music on all kinds of instruments. When it came to the turn of the very old fairy, whose head was shaking, but not so much from age as from bad temper, she said that the Princess would prick her hand on the point of the spindle on a spinning-wheel, and that she would die.

This terrible gift made the whole company shudder, and they all began to weep. It was then that the younger fairy stepped out from behind the tapestry, and in a loud voice she spoke these words: ‘Oh King and Queen, be reassured; your daughter will not die, although it is not in my power to undo completely what the older fairy has done. The Princess will prick her hand on a spindle, but instead of dying, she will fall into a deep sleep. It will last for a hundred years, and at the end of that time the son of a king will come to waken her.’ In order to try to prevent the disaster announced by the old fairy, the King at once had an edict proclaimed, by which every person was forbidden to spin wool on a spinning-wheel or keep a spindle at home, on pain of death.

Fifteen or sixteen years went by, and one day, when the King and Queen were on a visit to one of their summer residences, it happened that the Princess, in running about the castle and going from apartment to apartment, went higher and higher up a tower. She came to a tiny attic room and found an old woman sitting
alone, spinning wool from her distaff. This good lady had never heard that the King had forbidden everyone to use a spindle.

‘What is it that you are doing there, good woman?’ asked the Princess.

‘I am spinning, my pretty child,’ said the old woman, not knowing who she was talking to.

‘What fun!’ the Princess said then, ‘how do you do it? Give it to me and let me see if I can do it too.’

She took the spindle; and because she was hasty and impulsive, and in any case the fairies’ decree had decided what would happen, no sooner had she done so than she pricked her hand and fell down in a faint. The good woman was very upset and cried out for help; people came from everywhere, and splashed water on the Princess’s face, loosened her clothes, slapped her wrists, and rubbed her temples with eau-de-cologne; but nothing could revive her. The King had come at once on hearing all the noise, and remembered the fairies’ prediction. He realized that it had to happen, because the fairies had said it would, and ordered that the Princess should be placed in the finest apartment in the castle, on a bed embroidered with gold and silver. You would have said she was an angel, she looked so beautiful. Fainting had not taken away the fresh colours from her face; her cheeks were rosy pink and her lips like coral. It was only that her eyes were closed; but you could tell that she was not dead because she could still be heard breathing gently. The King gave orders that she was to be left to sleep in peace until the time for her to be awakened should arrive.

The good fairy who, in order to save her life, had condemned her to sleep for a hundred years, was twelve thousand leagues away in the Kingdom of Matakin when the Princess had her accident, but she was given the news in an instant by a little dwarf with seven-league boots (these were boots in which you could go seven leagues in a single stride). The fairy set off at once and appeared at the castle an hour later in a chariot of fire drawn
by dragons. The King went to help her down from the chariot, and she gave her approval to everything he had done; but, possessing great foresight, she reflected that when the Princess awoke from her sleep she would find things very difficult all alone in the old castle; and this is what she did. With her wand, she touched everyone in the castle except the King and Queen: governesses, maids of honour, ladies’ maids, gentlemen of the household, stewards, footmen, cooks, scullions, turnspits, guards, pages, doormen; she also touched all the horses in the stables, the ostlers there, the great guard-dogs in the stable-yard, and little Puff, the Princess’s lapdog, who was lying beside her on her bed. As soon as she touched them they all fell asleep, not to wake up until their mistress did, so as to be ready to serve her when they were needed. Even the spits in front of the kitchen fire, all covered with pheasants and partridges, went to sleep, and the fire did too.

This all happened in a moment; fairies did not take long over their work. Then the King and Queen, after having kissed their daughter without awakening her, left the castle. They issued orders that nobody should come near. But the ban was not needed, because within a quarter of an hour so many trees had shot up, large and small, all around the castle park, with brambles and thorns all intertwined, that neither man nor beast could have got through. All that could still be seen was the top of the castle towers, and only from a long way off. No doubt this was another of the fairy’s devices to make sure that the Princess would have nothing to fear from inquisitive visitors while she was asleep.

A hundred years later, the son of the king then ruling, who was not of the same family as the sleeping Princess, went hunting in that region. Seeing some towers rising above a tall dense wood, he asked what they were. Everyone present answered according to what he had heard tell. Some said that it was an ancient castle where ghosts were seen to walk; others, that all the witches round about held their sabbaths there. The commonest opinion was that
it was where an ogre lived, and where he brought all the children he could catch, in order to eat them in peace without being followed, since he alone had the power to make his way through the wood. The Prince did not know what to believe; but then an elderly peasant began to speak, saying: ‘Your Highness: more than fifty years ago, I heard my father say that in the castle there lay a Princess, who was the most beautiful in the world; she was to stay asleep for a hundred years, and would be awakened by the son of a king, for whom she was destined.’ The young Prince took fire at the old man’s words: he took it for granted at once that it was he who would succeed in this splendid adventure, and inspired by love and glory he resolved to find out at once how things stood.

He had scarcely taken his first step towards the wood than all the great trees, brambles and thorns drew aside of themselves to let him pass. He set out towards the castle, which he could see at the end of a long avenue ahead, and was a little surprised to see that none of his servants had been able to follow him; the trees had closed behind him as soon as he passed. He continued on his way regardless, for a young and ardent prince is always full of courage. He came into a great forecour, where everything that met his eyes was such as to freeze his blood with fear. The silence was terrible, and the look of death was all around. Nothing was to be seen but the bodies of men and animals lying stretched out, who appeared to be dead. He could tell nonetheless, from the blotchy noses and flushed complexions of the Swiss guards,* that they were only sleeping, and the dregs of wine left in their glasses showed clearly enough that they had fallen asleep in the middle of having a drink.

Through a great court paved with marble he went, up a flight of steps, and entered the guardroom, where the guards were standing in line, their guns on their shoulders, and snoring with all their might. He passed through several rooms full of gentlemen and ladies, all asleep, some standing and some sitting; he came
to a room that was all of gold, and saw on a bed, with its curtains drawn back to leave it open, the most beautiful sight that he had ever seen: a Princess who seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen years old, and who in her radiant splendour had something luminous and divine about her. Trembling with wonder and admiration, he approached and knelt down beside her.

Since the end of the enchantment had come, the Princess woke up, and gazing at him with greater tenderness in her eyes than might have seemed proper at a first meeting, she said: ‘Is that you, my prince? What a long time you have kept me waiting!’ Delighted at these words, and still more by the tone in which she said them, the Prince did not know how to express his gratitude and joy, but he told her that he loved her more than himself. Although what he said was badly expressed it pleased her all the more; the greatest love is the least eloquent. Of the two of them, she was the less tongue-tied, which is not surprising since she had had the time to think of what she would say; for it is likely (though history is silent on the matter) that during her long sleep the good fairy had seen to it that she enjoyed sweet dreams. Be that as it may,* they spent four hours talking to each other and still had not said the half of what they wanted.

In the meantime, the whole palace had awakened with the Princess. Everyone’s thoughts were on getting back to work, and since they were not in love, they were all dying of hunger. The lady-in-waiting, famished like the rest of them, grew impatient, and said loudly to the Princess that her meal was served. The Prince helped the Princess to her feet; she was fully dressed and her clothes were magnificent, but he took good care not to tell her that she was dressed like Grandmother in the old days, with a starched high collar; it did not make her any the less beautiful. They went into a hall lined with mirrors, where they had their supper, and were served by the officers of the Princess’s household. The violins and oboes played old pieces of music, which
were excellent, even though they had not been played for almost a hundred years. After supper, without wasting time, the High Chaplain married them in the castle chapel, and the lady-in-waiting drew the bed-curtain. They slept little, for the Princess had little need of it, and the Prince left her as soon as it was morning to return to the town, since his father would be anxious about him.

The Prince told him that he had got lost in the forest while out hunting, and that he had spent the night in a hovel belonging to a charcoal-burner, who had given him cheese and black bread to eat. The King, who was a good soul, believed him, but his mother was not convinced. She noticed that he went hunting almost every day, and always had some excuse to give when he had slept away from home for two or three nights; so she became certain that he was carrying on some love-affair, for he lived in this way with the Princess for more than two whole years, and had two children with her. The first was a girl, and was named Dawn; and the second, who was a boy, was called Day, since he looked even more beautiful than his sister.

The Queen said to her son several times, in the hope of drawing him out, that one should enjoy oneself in life, but he never dared to entrust her with his secret; although he loved her, he was afraid of her, because she came from a family of ogres, and the King had married her only because of her great wealth. It was even whispered at court that she herself had ogreish tendencies, and that when she saw small children going by she found it almost impossible to prevent herself from jumping on them, which is why the Prince would never say anything. But when the King died, which happened after another two years, and the Prince was in command, he made his marriage public, and went in a grand procession to fetch the Queen his wife from her castle. A magnificent reception was held for her in the capital, where she made her entrance into the town accompanied by her two children.
Some time later, the new King went to war against his neighbour the Emperor Cantalabutto. He left the government of the kingdom in the hands of the Queen his mother, asking her to take special care of his wife and children, for he was to be away at the war for the whole summer. As soon as he had left, the Queen Mother sent her daughter-in-law and the children to a summer residence she had in the forest, so as to satisfy her horrible desires more easily. She went there herself a few days later, and said one evening to her steward: ‘Tomorrow evening for supper, I want to eat little Dawn.’

‘Alas, my lady!’ said the steward.

‘That is my wish,’ said the Queen, and her tone was the tone of an ogress who wants fresh meat, ‘and I want to eat her with onion and mustard sauce.’ The poor man, realizing that an ogress was not to be trifled with, took a great knife and went up to little Dawn’s room. She was then four years old, and came across the room skipping and laughing to embrace him and ask him for sweets. Tears came to his eyes, the knife fell from his hands, and he went down to the farmyard and cut the throat of a small lamb, which he served up to his mistress with such a good sauce that she assured him that she had never tasted anything as good. He had taken away little Dawn at the same time, and gave her to his wife to hide in their lodgings at the end of the farmyard.

A week later, the wicked Queen said to the steward: ‘I want to eat little Day for my supper.’ He did not protest, but resolved to trick her again as he had before. He went to look for little Day, and found him with a small sword in his hand, practising fencing against a fat monkey, although he was only three years old. The steward took him to his wife, who hid him with little Dawn, and instead of the little boy he served up a tender young kid, which the ogress found excellent.

Everything had gone well until then, but one evening the wicked Queen said to the steward: ‘I want to eat the young Queen, cooked in the same sauce as her children.’ This time the
poor steward despaired of being able to deceive her: the young Queen was more than twenty years old, not counting the hundred years when she had been asleep, and her skin was somewhat tough, although it was fine and white. How was he to find, among the animals kept for eating,* one as tough as that? He took the decision, in order to save his own life, to cut the Queen’s throat, and went up to her room with the intention of getting it over and done with. He worked himself up into a rage and entered the Queen’s room with his dagger in his hand. However, he did not want to kill her without any warning, and told her, with great respect, of the orders he had received from the Queen Mother.

‘Do your duty,’ she said, stretching out her neck; ‘carry out the command you have been given. Then I shall see my children again, my poor children, whom I loved so much.’ She believed them dead, because, when they were taken away, nobody had told her anything.

‘No, my lady, no,’ said the poor steward in tears, ‘you will not die, and I will make sure that you do see your beloved children, though it will be in my house, where I have hidden them, and I will deceive the Queen again by giving her a young doe to eat instead.’ At once he took her to his house, where he left her to embrace her children and weep with them, and went to prepare the doe for cooking; the Queen ate it for supper with as much relish as if it had been the young Queen. She was very pleased with her cruel deeds, and meant to tell the King, on his return, that ravening wolves had eaten his wife and the two children.

One evening, when she was prowling about the castle’s courtyards and farmyards as usual, in order to catch the scent of any fresh meat, she heard little Day who was crying in a basement room, because the Queen his mother had said that she would have him whipped for being naughty; she could also hear little Dawn, who was pleading for her brother to be forgiven.
The ogress, recognizing the voices of the young Queen and her children, was furious to have been tricked.

The next morning she ordered, in a dreadful voice that made everyone shudder, that a huge cauldron was to be brought into the middle of the main courtyard and filled with toads* and vipers and snakes of every sort, for the young Queen and her children to be thrown into it, together with the steward, his wife, and their maidservant; she had given the order to have them led out with their hands tied behind their backs.

They were standing there, with the executioners getting ready to throw them into the cauldron, when the King, who was not expected so soon, rode into the courtyard; he had changed horses at every stage for speed. In amazement, he asked what this horrible spectacle could mean. Nobody dared to explain. And it was then that the ogress, maddened by what she saw before her, flung herself head first into the cauldron, and was devoured in an instant by the horrid creatures she had put there. Despite everything, the King was upset: she was his mother; but he soon consoled himself with his beautiful wife and children.

THE MORAL OF THIS TALE

For girls to wait awhile, so they may wed
A loving husband, handsome, rich, and kind:
That’s natural enough, I’d say;
But just the same, to stay in bed
A hundred years asleep—you’ll never find
Such patience in a girl today.

Another lesson may be meant:
Lovers lose nothing if they wait,
And tie the knot of marriage late;
They’ll not be any less content.
Young girls, though, yearn for married bliss
So ardently, that for my part
I cannot find it in my heart
To preach a doctrine such as this.