

The Magic Purse

by Beth Sutton

At the edge of a great meadow lived an old farmer and his wife. Though they had wished for a large family, they had but one small child born late to them in their sunset years. Upon this little girl they showered all the love and care that they had. So, though they were poor, the little girl was always well fed on greens and fruits from the garden. And, too, she was clothed, in a deep-red dress, as light as butterfly wings, so that the breezes could dance through and cool her on the hot summer days. In her hair she always wore tiny yellow ribbons, and in her pocket she kept a small, dark green purse.

All spring long the old farmer and his wife would walk out across the great meadow to gather the fresh greens and fruits for the family. As they worked, they peered across the meadow and watched the yellow ribbons on their daughter's head bobbing up and down as she played in front of the small house.

Every day, the little girl climbed on the tree trunk and swung on the limbs, her deep-red dress swinging in the wind and cooling her legs. She climbed higher and higher and sat high in the tree's arms, took out her little purse, and filled it with leaves and acorns to make a tea party. Every day just before her mother and father came home, she set the leaf mats on her stump table below, and set the acorn cap dishes on the leaf mats, and filled the little dishes with jeweled pebbles from the yard. When her mother and father came back across the meadow, all three sat together to share in the tea party, and eat the fresh greens and fruits from the garden.

One day in the heart of summer, the sun beat down hard and the air lay still and heavy. No breezes twirled; no winds rolled by. The old farmer and his wife walked slowly across the great meadow, pushing against South Wind at every step. As they picked the last of the drying foods, they looked across the meadow for their little girl, but through the waving hot air they could hardly make out her yellow ribbons bouncing about the yard. Slowly, they gathered what they could and, backs bent to shield their faces from the scorching sun, they walked back across the hot, dry meadow. Watching her mother and father through the rippling hot air, it seemed to the little girl that they would never be able to cross the meadow at all. For a long time, the little girl sat alone at her tree stump tea party. But finally they were home and they gave their little girl the last of the withered greens and small wrinkled fruits, and they went inside.

Each day grew hotter and drier, and the only wind that blew was hot and heavy and drank up the last of the water on the ground. Sun's rays beat hard and cracked the dry ground. Mother and father did not try to cross the meadow; the garden was dry now. The little girl tried to swing from the tree so the breeze would dance through her deep-red dress and tousle the yellow ribbons in her hair, but the hot air pressed against her face until she could hardly breathe. The meadow grasses reached deep into the soil in search of water, but the earth was bone dry. They began to wilt and burn under the sun's fierce rays. Across the meadow, the garden crops lay dry and dead. The family's food began to dwindle.

Finally, the old farmer said to his wife, "I have heard that there are magic leaves that come when all else is dry. They grow on long deep-red stalks and wear tiny yellow flowers."

“But husband,” replied the farmer’s wife, “this is not the time to gather flowers for our daughter’s hair. This is not the time to walk out in the hot sun. As the sun bakes all the land to dust, we must think only of water.”

“Yes, yes,” replied the farmer. “But these are magic leaves and magic flowers. They grow in the driest of times and hold water and food deep inside.

*“Purslane grows in the driest of times,
Green purses hold their water inside.
Upon their open hands so green,
Tiny flowers of yellow are seen.”*

“The leaves would surely quench our thirst and their sweet seeds will feed us for many a day. I shall venture across the meadow and search for the magic leaves of the purslane,” the old farmer told his wife.

“Husband, we have grown old and can longer go into the scorching wind,” said his wife. “It will dry out all the water left and you will wither like the garden plants.”

The little girl listened to her parents. She felt the dry air parching her throat. She looked at her tired parents. “Mother, Father, I have grown tall and strong. The hot sun cannot stop me. I am strong enough to go across the meadow and bring back the magic leaves of the purslane. We shall have water to quench our thirst and seeds to fill our tummies.”

“Oh no, child,” said the father. “It is true that you are tall and strong, but in the meadow lives the South Wind. South Wind will not let you go forward, nor will she let you return.”

“Father,” laughed the child, “I do not fear the wind. The wind rolls across the plains with me, and ripples through my deep-red dress and cools me with its dance. It blows the grass in rolling waves and sings to me when I climb high in the trees. I have no fear of the wind. What harm could the South Wind bring to me?”

The old farmer took the little girl with him into his rocker; and while they rocked, he explained the ways of South Wind. “South Wind is not like the other winds who come to cool us and to dance and sing. South Wind waits until the sun is high in the sky. She watches until the sun has nearly scorched and dried everything below. Then she begins her journey, silently sucking up the last of the water. Then she blows her hot breath at all who pass until they lie at her feet, hot and lifeless.

“No,” said her father, “You are but a child. We will make do with the bits of food and drops of water that we have.”

The little girl looked at her father growing pale and weak. She looked at her mother growing tired and thin. And she begged to go across the great meadow. She begged and begged from dawn to dusk. As she begged, she sang the song of the magic leaves:

*“Purslane grows in the driest of times,
Green purses hold their water inside.
Upon their open hands so green,
Tiny flowers of yellow are seen.”*

Finally, the father handed the girl a basket with the last of their fruit and a small jar containing the last few drops of their water. “Go across the meadow and search for the magic purslane. Take these with you so that you might have a little food and a little water as the sun beats down upon you. I don’t know where you will find them but look for the full round leaves and the tiny yellow flowers. Look for the deep red stalks.

“But beware of South Wind. You must listen for her call and run home if you should hear her. Don’t wait for she will steal your breath and turn you to dust lying at her feet.”

The girl took the small basket and promised to listen carefully for South Wind and to return home quickly. She started on her journey across the meadow, singing softly as she went:

*“Purslane grows in the driest of times,
Green purses hold their water inside.
Upon their open hands so green,
Tiny flowers of yellow are seen.”*

The little girl walked quickly to the edge of the meadow. Dry grasses stood before her and she carefully pushed them aside. Each dry, brown blade tore at her red dress and scratched at her arms and legs. But the little girl walked on. She walked deeper and deeper into the dry meadow grass, listening for South Wind. But all she heard was the whoosh of the dry grass tearing at her dress.

The sun rose higher and higher, and the air grew hotter and hotter. The air grew too hot to breathe, but the little girl struggled on. Finally, she came to the edge of the garden. There before her all the plants lay brown and wilted. The fruits lay shriveled on the ground, dry. A tear formed in her eye, but in an instant it was gone, and all that was left was the sting of the hot wind in her red eyes. The little girl lifted her head to see who had taken her tear so quickly. Hot air blasted her face. She struggled to breathe but every gasp burned in her throat. The little girl fell to the ground among the dry, brown garden plants.

“Hello,” a soft voice whispered beside her. “Come closer, child, come closer.” The little girl looked around, startled to hear a voice in this lonely, hot place. Beside her knelt an old woman, dressed in deep-red, with a thick green cape that protected her from the hot sun. On her head sat a bright yellow hat. The little girl crawled over and the old woman whispered, “Come child, come inside my cape. South Wind cannot touch you here.” The little girl crawled right inside. And the old woman wrapped her cool cape round her. From deep inside the child could hear South Wind blasting her hot breath at the old woman:

*“I hear a child wand’ring past.
Through the thickest meadow grass.”*

*I'll blow and blast her breath around;
Till she falls lifeless on the ground."*

The little girl could feel the woman bend and sway, but inside the cape up against her cool deep-red dress, the little girl began to breathe freely once again and soon she had regained her strength. South Wind could not touch her. Finally, South Wind had blown herself out and went off to find someone else to dry.

The old woman opened her deep green cape. She waved her long arms over the ground and said, "Look, child, look. It is here, close to the ground that you will find what you seek." The little girl looked before her. All over the garden, twisting their way among the dried out vegetables and fruits, were small, dark green purses, growing on long deep-red stalks. Hidden among the clusters of green were tiny yellow flowers. The girl gasped. The old woman put her soft, round hand on the child's yellow ribbons and said, "Go quickly, child, South Wind will not be gone long. Open each purse and drink your fill; you will need your strength to get back home."

The little girl crawled quickly among the purslane and the juicy leaves as quickly as she could. But just as she started to fill her basket to take home to her parents, she heard South Wind puffing towards her:

*"I hear a child wand'ring past.
Through the thickest meadow grass.*

South Wind pushed closer and closer, but the old woman called out, "Hurry! Hurry! Crawl into my cape, South Wind is coming!"

The little girl quickly crawled into the old woman's open cape. No sooner was the thick green cape closed safely around her, than she felt South Wind buffeting the old woman. South Wind rolled round them. South Wind roared blasting heat into the old woman's eyes. But the old woman only swayed softly. South Wind drew in a long breath and sucked the last of the moisture from the air. But the little girl was safe resting against the cool deep-red dress, inside the old woman's cape; and South Wind could not touch her. Finally, South Wind had blown all she could and she went off to look elsewhere.

The old woman opened her cape and said to the girl, "Quickly, quickly! Before South Wind comes back, fill your basket with the water purses, gather the seed from the yellow flowers. Hurry back home!"

The little girl scurried among the dry garden plants as quickly as she could. She tried to gather the small thick green purses and the tiny, rich seeds. But each place she reached she found herself tangled in the rough branches and vines of the dried garden plants. She tried and she tried, but then she felt the ribbon in her hair begin to blow and she heard South Wind begin to blast out again:

*I'll blow and blast her breath around;
Till she falls lifeless on the ground."*

The little girl wanted to run back home. But the old woman called to her. “Come, child. You cannot cross the meadow while South Wind roars. Come, child, come.” And once again the little girl hid safely inside the old woman’s cape while South Wind blasted fiercely. It seemed that South Wind would never leave. From inside the cool cape the little girl could hear South Wind roll and roar, buffeting all around. She could hear the wilted garden leaves dry up and crackle as they flew in the wind. She could hear the dry earth turn to dust and whip around them. But inside the cape she was cool and safe. Finally, South Wind rolled on across the desert, looking for someone else.

When all was quiet again, the old woman opened her cape and smiled. The little girl looked out and saw what South Wind had done. All around, the ground was covered in little green purses with tiny yellow flowers. No dry vines or twisting branches; all had turned to dust under South Wind’s blast.

“Hurry,” whispered the old woman, “Gather the thick green leaves! Gather the tiny seeds! Fill your basket! South Wind is not finished here!” The girl did as she was told and filled her basket as quickly as she could. When she was done, she turned around to thank the old woman and hurry home. But before she could speak she saw the endless, bare land before her – not a trace of her coarse meadow grasses remained. North, South, East, and West, there was nothing but endless bare land.

The old woman whispered loudly, “Look, child, look. Where once you crossed the rough brown grasses, now you can run home freely. Hurry, child, hurry. The little girl thanked the old woman and ran as quickly as she could across the open meadow.

In no time at all, the farmer and his wife saw the little girl’s yellow hair ribbons bouncing across the land. They laughed for joy and ran to meet her, and they all called out together:

*“Purslane grows in the driest of times,
Green purses hold their water inside.
Upon their open hands so green,
Tiny flowers of yellow are seen.”*

From that day on, they had plenty of food and water and by the time the rains returned, all three were strong once again, and they headed out together to plant their garden.

Purslane Science for the Teacher:

Purslane, also known as Little Hogweed or Pusley, is an annual succulent in the Portulaca family, as such both leaf and stem hold water. It has smooth, reddish, mostly prostrate stems and alternate oval shaped, dark-green leaves, clustered at stem joints and ends about 1 inch across. The tiny, yellow flowers have five regular parts and are up to 0.6 cm wide. Blooms first appear in late spring and continue into mid fall. The flowers open singly at the center of the leaf cluster for only a few hours on sunny mornings. Seeds are formed in a tiny pod, which opens when the seeds are ready. Purslane has a taproot with fibrous secondary roots and is able to tolerate poor, compacted soils and drought. Purslane is by far one of the toughest, most drought tolerant plants for our dry season.

It is a native of India and the Middle East, which now grows over most of the world. It can reach 6 inches in height, but spreads out to 24 inches long. Common purslane emerges from a heavy taproot.

Although purslane is considered a weed in the United States, it can be eaten as a leaf vegetable. It has a slightly sour and salty taste and is eaten throughout much of Europe and Asia. It can be used fresh as a salad, or cooked like spinach, and due to its mucilaginous quality it is also suitable for soups and stews.

Purslane contains more Omega-3 fatty acids than any other leafy vegetable plant. It also contains vitamins (mainly vitamin C, and some vitamin B and vitamin A), as well as dietary minerals, such as magnesium, calcium, potassium and iron.

It has been boiled and eaten in Indian, and it proves very nourishing on long journeys - 2 or 3 OZ. a day are quite sufficient for a man, even while undergoing great fatigue.

Purslane in ancient times was looked upon as one of the anti-magic herbs, and strewn round a bed was said to afford protection against evil spirits. We are told that it was a sure cure for 'blastings by lightening or planets, and burning of gunpowder.'