

The Rose Tree

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Once upon a time, long long years ago, in the days when one had to be careful about witches, there lived a good man, whose young wife died, leaving him a baby girl.

Now this good man felt he could not look after the baby properly, so he married a young woman whose husband had died leaving her with a baby boy.

Thus the two children grew up together, and loved each other dearly, dearly.

But the boy's mother was really a wicked witch-woman, and so jealous that she wanted all the boy's love for herself, and when the girl-baby grew white as milk, with cheeks like roses and lips like cherries, and when her hair, shining like golden silk, hung down to her feet so that her father and all the neighbours began to praise her looks, the stepmother fairly hated her, and did all in her power to spoil her looks. She would set the child hard tasks, and send her out in all weathers to do difficult messages, and if they were not well performed would beat her and scold her cruelly.

Now one cold winter evening when the snow was drifting fast, and the wild rose tree in the garden under which the children used to play in summer was all brown and barren save for snowflake flowers, the stepmother said to the little girl:

"Child! go and buy me a bunch of candles at the grocer's. Here is some money; go quickly, and don't loiter by the way."

So the little girl took the money and set off quickly through the snow, for already it was growing dark. Now there was such a wind blowing that it nearly blew her off her feet, and as she ran her beautiful hair got all tangled and almost tripped her up. However, she got the candles, paid for them, and started home again. But this time the wind was behind her and blew all her beautiful golden hair in front of her like a cloud, so that she could not see her steps, and, coming to a stile, had to stop and put down the bundle of candles in order to see how to get over it. And when she was climbing it a big black dog came by and ran off with the bunch of candles! Now she was so afraid of her stepmother that she durst not go home, but turned back and bought another bunch of candles at the grocer's, and when she arrived at the stile once more, the same thing happened. A big black dog came down the road and ran away with the bunch of candles. So yet once again she journeyed back to the grocer's through wind and snow, and, with her last penny, bought yet another bunch of candles. To no purpose, for alas, and alack-a-day! when she laid them down in order to part her beautiful golden hair and to see how to get over the stile, a big black dog ran away with them.

So nothing was left save to go back to her stepmother in fear and trembling. But, for a wonder, her stepmother did not seem very angry. She only scolded her for being so late, for, see you, her father and her little playmate had gone to their beds and were in the Land of Nod.

Then she said to the child, "I must take the tangles out of your hair before you go to sleep. Come, put your head on my lap."

So the little girl put her head on her stepmother's lap, and, lo and behold! her beautiful yellow-silk hair rolled right over the woman's knees and lay upon the ground.

Then the beauty of it made the stepmother more jealous than before, so she said, "I cannot part your hair properly on my knee, fetch me a billet of wood."

So the little girl fetched one. Then said the stepmother, "Your hair is so thick I cannot part it with a comb; fetch me an axe!"

So the child fetched an axe.

"Now," said that wicked, wicked woman, "lay your head down on the billet while I part your hair."

And the child did as she was bid without fear; and lo! the beautiful little golden head was off in a second, by one blow of the axe.

Now the wicked stepmother had thought it all out before, so she took the poor little dead girl out to the garden, dug a hollow in the snow under the rose tree, and said to herself, "When spring comes and the snow melts if people find her bones, they will say she lost her way and fell asleep in the snow."

But first, because she was a wicked witch-woman, knowing spells and charms, she took out the heart of the little girl and made it into two savoury pasties, one for her husband's breakfast and one for the little boy's, for thus would the love they bore to the little girl become hers. Nevertheless, she was mistaken, for when morning came and the little child could not be found, the father sent away his breakfast barely tasted, and the little boy wept so that he could eat nothing.

So they grieved and grieved. And when the snow melted and they found the bones of the poor child, they said, "She must have lost her way that dark night going to the grocer's to buy candles." So they buried the bones under the children's rose tree, and every day the little boy sate there and wept and wept for his lost playmate.

Now when summer came the wild rose tree flowered. It was covered with white roses, and amongst the flowers there sate a beautiful white bird. And it sang and sang and sang like an angel out of heaven; but what it sang the little boy could never make out, for he could hardly see for weeping, hardly hear for sobbing.

So at last the beautiful white bird unfolded its broad white wings and flew to a cobbler's shop, where a myrtle bush hung over the man and his last, on which he was making a dainty little pair of rose-red shoes. Then it perched on a bough and sang ever so sweetly:

“Stepmother slew me,
Father nigh ate me,
He whom I dearly love
Sits below, I sing above,
Stick! Stock! Stone dead!”

“Sing that beautiful song again,” said the cobbler. “It is better than a nightingale's.”

“That will I gladly,” sang the bird, “if you will give me the little rose-red shoes you are making.”

And the cobbler gave them willingly, so the white bird sang its song once more. Then with the rose-red shoes in one foot it flew to an ash tree that grew close beside a goldsmith's bench, and sang:

“Stepmother slew me,
Father nigh ate me,
He whom I dearly love
Sits below, I sing above,

Stick! Stock! Stone dead!”

“Oh, what a beautiful song!” cried the goldsmith.

“Sing again, dear bird, it is sweeter than a nightingale’s.”

“That will I gladly,” sang the bird, “if you will give me the gold chain you’re making.”

And the goldsmith gave the bauble willingly, and the bird sang its song once more. Then with the rose-red shoes in one foot and the golden chain in the other, the bird flew to an oak tree which overhung the mill stream, beside which three millers were busy picking out a millstone, and, perching on a bough, sang its song ever so sweetly:

“My stepmother slew me,

My father nigh ate me,

He whom I dearly love

Sits below, I sing above,

Stick!—”

Just then one of the millers put down his tool and listened.

“Stock!” sang the bird.

And the second miller put aside his tool and listened.

“Stone,” sang the bird.

Then the third miller put aside his tool and listened.

“Dead!” sang the bird so sweetly that with one accord the millers looked up and cried with one voice:

“Oh, what a beautiful song! Sing it again, dear bird, it is sweeter than a nightingale’s.”

“That will I gladly,” answered the bird, “if you will hang the millstone you are picking round my neck.”

So the millers hung it as they were asked; and when the song was finished, the bird spread its wide white wings and, with the millstone round its neck and the little rose-red shoes in one foot, the golden chain in the other, it flew back to the rose tree. But the little playmate was not there; he was inside the house eating his dinner.

Then the bird flew to the house, and rattled the millstone about the eaves until the stepmother cried, “Hearken! How it thunders!”

So the little boy ran out to see, and down dropped the dainty rose-red shoes at his feet.

“See what fine things the thunder has brought!” he cried with glee as he ran back.

Then the white bird rattled the millstone about the eaves once more, and once again the stepmother said, “Hearken! How it thunders!”

So this time the father went out to see, and down dropped the golden chain about his neck.

“It is true,” he said when he came back. “The thunder does bring fine things!”

Then once more the white bird rattled the millstone about the eaves, and this time the stepmother said hurriedly, “Hark! there it is again! Perhaps it has got something for me!”

Then she ran out; but the moment she stepped outside the door, down fell the millstone right on her head and killed her.

So that was an end of her. And after that the little boy was ever so much happier, and all the summer time he sate with his little rose-coloured shoes under the wild rose tree and listened to the white bird’s song. But when winter came and the wild rose tree was all barren and bare save for snowflake flowers, the white bird came no longer and the little boy grew tired of waiting for it. So one day he gave up altogether, and they buried him under the rose tree beside his little playmate.

Now when the spring came and the rose tree blossomed, the flowers were no longer white. They were edged with rose colour like the little boy’s shoes, and in the centre of each blossom there was a beautiful tuft of golden silk like the little girl’s hair.

And if you look in a wild rose you will find these things there still.

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