



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Six Swans

From "The Fairy Book" by Miss Mulock



Once upon a time, a king, hunting in a great forest, chased a wild boar so eagerly, that none of his people could follow him. When evening came, he stopped to look about him, and saw that he had lost himself. He sought everywhere for a way out of the wood, but could find none. Then he perceived coming towards him an old woman, whose head kept constantly shaking. She was a witch.

"My good woman," said he to her, "cannot you show me the way through the wood?"

"O yes, your majesty," answered she, "that I can, but only on one condition, and if you do not agree to it, you will never get out, and must die here of hunger."

"What is the condition?" asked the king.

"I have an only daughter," said the old woman, "she is as beautiful as any one you could find in the wide world, and well deserves to be your wife; if you will make her your queen, I will show you the way out of the wood."

The king, in the fear of his heart, consented, and the old woman led him to her house, where her daughter sat by the fire. She received the king as if she had expected him, and he saw that she was very beautiful; but still she did not please him, and he could not look at her without a secret shudder. After he had lifted up the maiden beside him on his horse, the old woman showed him the way, and the king arrived again at his royal castle, where the wedding was celebrated.

He had been married once before, and had by his first wife seven children, six boys and a girl, whom he loved more than anything in the world. But, because he was afraid that the stepmother might not treat them well, or might even do them some harm, he took them to a lonely castle which stood in the middle of a wood. It was so hidden, and the road was so difficult to find, that he himself would not have found it, if a wise woman had not given him a wonderful skein of thread; which, when he threw it down before him, unrolled of itself and showed him the way. The king went out so often to his dear children, that the queen noticed his absence, and was full of curiosity to know what business took him thus alone to the wood. So she gave his servants a sum of money, and they told her the secret, and also told her of the skein, which was the only thing that could show the way. After that she never rested till she had found out where the king kept the skein. Then she made some little white silk shirts, and as she had learned witchcraft from her mother, she sewed a spell into every one of them. And one day when the king was gone out to hunt, she took the little shirts and went into the wood, and the skein showed her the way.

The six brothers, who saw some one in the distance, thought their dear father was coming, and ran to meet him, full of joy. As they approached, the queen threw one of the shirts over each of them, and when the shirts touched their bodies, they were changed into swans, and flew away over the wood. The witch's daughter went home quite happy, and thought she had got rid of all her stepchildren; but the one little girl had not run out with her brothers, and the queen knew nothing about her.

Next day, the king came joyfully to visit his children, but he found nobody except the little sister.

"Where are your brothers?" asked he.

"Oh, dear father," she answered, "they are gone, and have left me alone," and then she told him all that she had seen out of her window; how her brothers were turned into swans, and had flown away over the wood; she also showed him the feathers which they had dropped into the courtyard, and which she had picked up.

The king was grieved, but he never thought that the queen had done this wicked deed; however, because he dreaded lest the little girl would be stolen from him likewise, he wished to take her away with him. But she was afraid of the stepmother, and begged the king to let her stay one night more in the castle in the wood.

The poor little girl thought, "I cannot rest here any longer, I will go and look for my brothers."

And when the night came, she ran away, and went straight into the wood. She went on all through the night, and the next day too, till she was so tired that she could go no further. Then she saw a little house, and went in, and found a room with six little beds; she did not dare to lie down in any, but crept under one of them, laid herself on the hard floor, and meant to pass the night there. But when the sun was just going to set, she heard a rustling, and saw six swans come flying in at the window. They sat down on the floor, and blew at one another, and blew all their feathers off, and took off their swan's-skins like shirts. Then the little girl saw them and recognised her brothers, and was very glad, and crept out from under the bed.

The brothers were not less rejoiced when they saw their little sister, but their joy did not last long.

"You cannot stop here," said they to her, "this is a house belonging to robbers; if they come home, and find you, they will kill you."

"Cannot you protect me?" asked the little sister.

"No," answered they, "we can only take off our swan's-skins for a quarter of an hour every evening, and have our natural shape for that time, but afterwards we are turned into swans again."

The little sister cried and said, "Cannot you be released?"

"Oh, no!" answered they, "the conditions are too hard. You must not speak or laugh for six years, and must make for us six shirts out of stitchweed during that time. If while you are making them a single word comes from your mouth, all your work will be of no use." When her brothers had said this, the quarter of an hour was over, and they turned into swans again, and flew out of the window.

But the little girl made a firm resolution to release her brothers, even if it cost her her life. She left the house, and went into the middle of the wood, and climbed up in a tree and spent the night there. Next morning she got down, collected a quantity of stitchweed, and began to sew. She could not speak to any one, and she did not want to laugh; so she sat, and only looked at her work.

When she had been there a long time, it happened that the king of the country was hunting in the wood, and his hunters came to the tree on which the little girl sat. They called to her, and said, "Who are you?"

But she gave them no answer.

"Come down to us," said they, "we will not do you any harm."

But she only shook her head. As they kept teasing her with their questions, she threw them down her gold necklace, and thought they would be satisfied with that. But they did not leave off, so she threw her sash down to them, and as that was no good, she threw down her garters, and at last everything that she had on, and could spare; so that she had nothing left but her shift. But the hunters would not be sent away, and climbed up the tree and brought down the little girl and took her to the king.

The king asked, "Who are you? what were you doing up in the tree?"

But she did not answer. He asked it in all the languages that he knew, but she remained as dumb as a fish. But, because she was so beautiful, the king's heart was moved, and he fell deeply in love with her. He wrapped his cloak round her, took her before him on his horse, and brought her to his castle. Then he had her dressed in rich clothes, and she shone in her beauty like bright sunshine; but they could not get a word out of her. He set her by him at the table, and her modest look and proper behaviour pleased him so much, that he said, "I will marry her, and no one else in the world," and after a few days he was married to her.

But the king had a wicked mother, who was not pleased with this marriage, and spoke ill of the young queen. "Who knows where the girl comes from," said she, "she cannot speak; she is not good enough for a king."

A year after, when the queen brought her first child into the world, the old mother took it away, and smeared her mouth with blood while she was asleep. Then she went to the king, and accused her of eating her child. The king would not believe it, and would not let anyone do her any harm. And she always sat and sewed the shirts, and took no notice of anything else. Next time, when she had another beautiful baby, the wicked stepmother did the same as before; but the king could not resolve to believe what she said.

He said, "My wife is too pious and good to do such a thing; if she were not dumb, and if she could defend herself, her innocence would be made clear."

But when for the third time the old woman took away the new-born child, and accused the queen, who could not say a word in her own defence, the king could not help himself; he was forced to give her up to the court of justice, and she was condemned to suffer death by fire.

When the day came upon which the sentence was to be executed, it was exactly the last day of the six years, in which she might not speak or laugh; and she had freed her dear brothers from the power of the spell. The six little shirts were finished, except that on the last one a sleeve was wanting. When she came to the place of execution, she laid the shirts on her arm, and when she stood at the stake, and the fire was just going to be lit, she looked round, and

there came six swans flying through the air. Then her heart leaped with joy, for she saw that her deliverance was near.

The swans flew to her, and crouched down, so that she could throw the shirts over them; as soon as the shirts were touched by them, their swan's-skins fell off, and her brothers stood before her. They were all grown up, strong and handsome; only the youngest had no left arm, but instead of it a swan's wing.

They hugged and kissed their sister many times, and then the queen went to the king, and began to speak, and said, "Dearest husband, now I may speak, and declare to you that I am innocent and falsely accused;" and she told him about the deceit of the old mother, who had taken away her three children, and hidden them.

However they were soon fetched safely back, to the great joy of the king; and the wicked mother-in-law was tied to the stake, and burnt to ashes. But the king and queen, with their six brothers, lived many years in peace and happiness.

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