



Maiden Swanwhite and Maiden Foxtail

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Intermediate

14 min read

Author's note: This story comes from Sweden.

There was once upon a time a wicked woman who had a daughter and a step-daughter. The daughter was ugly and of an evil disposition, but the step-daughter was most beautiful and good, and all who knew her wished her well. When the girl's step-mother and step-sister saw this they hated the poor girl.

One day it chanced that she was sent by her step-mother to the well to draw water. When the girl came there she saw a little hand held out of the water, and a voice said—

“Maiden, beautiful and good, give me your golden apple, and in return for it I will thrice wish you well.”

The girl thought that one who spoke so fairly to her would not do her an ill turn, so she put the apple into the little hand. Then she bent down over the spring, and, taking care not to muddy the water, filled her bucket. As she went home the guardian of the well wished that the girl would become thrice as beautiful as she was, that whenever she laughed a gold ring might fall from her mouth, and that red roses might spring up wherever she trod. The same hour all that he wished came to pass. From that day the girl was called the Maiden Swanwhite,

and the fame of her loveliness spread all through the land.

When the wicked step-mother perceived this, she was filled with rage, and she thought how her own daughter might become as beautiful as Swanwhite. With this object she set herself to learn all that had happened, and then she sent her own daughter to fetch water. When the wicked girl had come to the well, she saw a little hand rise up out of the water, and heard a voice which said—

“Maiden, beautiful and good, give me your gold apple and I will thrice wish thee well.”

But the hag’s daughter was both wicked and avaricious, and it was not her way to make presents. She therefore made a dash at the little hand, wished the guardian of the well evil, and said pettishly—

“You need not think you’ll get a gold apple from me.”

Then she filled her bucket, muddying the water, and away she went in a rage. The guardian of the well was enraged, so he wished her three evil wishes, as a punishment for her wickedness. He wished that she should become three times as ugly as she was, that a dead rat should fall from her mouth whenever she laughed, and that the fox-tail grass might spring up in the footsteps wherever she trod. So it was. From that day the wicked girl was called Maiden Foxtail, and very much talk was there among the folk of her strange looks and her ill-nature. The hag could not bear her step-daughter should be more beautiful than her own daughter, and poor Swanwhite had to put up with all the ill-usage and suffering that a step-child can meet with.

Swanwhite had a brother whom she loved very much, and he also loved her with all his heart. He had long ago left home, and he was now the servant of a king, far, far off in a strange land. The other servants of the king bore him no good-will because he was liked by his master, and they wished to ruin him if they could find anything against him.

They watched him closely, and one day, coming to the king, said—

“Lord king, we know well that you do not like evil or vice in your servants. Thence we think it is only right to tell you that the young foreigner, who is in your service, every morning and evening bows the knee to an idol.”

When the king heard that he set it down to envy and ill-will, and did not think there was any truth in it, but the courtiers said that he could easily discover for himself whether what they said was true or not. They led the

king to the young man's rooms, and told him to look through the key-hole. When the king looked in he saw the young man on his knees before a fine picture, and so he could not help believing that what the courtiers had told him was true.

The king was much enraged, and ordered the young man to come before him, when he condemned him to die for his great wickedness.

"My lord king," said he, "do not imagine that I worship any idol. That is my sister's picture, whom I commend to the care of God every morning and evening, asking Him to protect her, for she remains in a wicked step-mother's power."

The king then wished to see the picture, and he never tired of looking on its beauty.

"If it is true," said he, "what you tell me, that that is your sister's picture, she shall be my queen, and you yourself shall go and fetch her; but if you lie, this shall be your punishment,—you shall be cast into the lions' den."

The king then commanded that a ship should be fitted out in grand style, having wine and treasure in it. Then he sent away the young man in great state to fetch his beautiful sister to the court.

The young man sailed away over the ocean, and came at length to his land. Here he delivered his master's message, as became him, and made preparations to return. Then the step-mother and step-sister begged that they might go with him and his sister. The young man had no liking for them, so he said no, and refused their request, but Swanwhite begged for them, and got them what they wanted.

When they had put to sea and were on the wide ocean, a great storm arose so that the sailors expected the vessel and all on her to go to the bottom. The young man was, however, in good spirits, and went up the mast in order to see if he could discover land anywhere. When he had looked out from the mast, he called to Swanwhite, who stood on the deck—

"Dear sister, I see land now."

It was, however, blowing so hard that the maiden could not hear a word. She asked her step-mother if she knew what her brother said.

“Yes,” said the false hag; “he says we shall never come to God’s land unless you throw your gold casket into the sea.”

When Swanwhite heard that, she did what the hag told her, and cast the gold casket into the deep sea.

A while after her brother once more called to his sister, who stood on the deck—

“Swanwhite, go and deck yourself as a bride, for we shall soon be there.”

But the maiden could not hear a word for the raging of the sea. She asked her step-mother if she knew what her brother had said.

“Yes,” said the false hag; “he says we shall never come to God’s land unless you cast yourself into the sea.”

While Swanwhite thought of this, the wicked step-mother sprang to her, and thrust her on a sudden overboard. The young girl was carried away by the blue waves, and came to the mermaid who rules over all those who are drowned in the sea.

When the young man came down the mast, and asked whether his sister was attired, the step-mother told him many falsehoods about Swanwhite having fallen into the sea. When the young man heard this he and all the ship-folk were afraid, for they well knew what punishment awaited them for having so ill looked after the king’s bride. The false hag then thought of another deception. She said they had better dress her own daughter as the bride, and then no one need know that Swanwhite had perished. The young man would not agree to this, but the sailors, being in fear of their lives, made him do as the step-mother had suggested. Maiden Foxtail was dressed out in the finest manner with red rings and a gold girdle, but the young man was ill at ease, and could not forget what had happened to his sister.

In the midst of this the vessel came to shore, where was the king with all his court with much splendour awaiting their arrival. Carpets were spread upon the ground, and the king’s bride left the ship in great state. When the king beheld Maiden Foxtail, and was told that that was his bride, he suspected some cheat, and was

very angry, and he ordered that the young man should be thrown into the lions' den. He would not, however, break his kingly word, so he took the ugly maiden for his wife, and she became queen in the place of her step-sister.

Now Maiden Swanwhite had a little dog of which she was very fond, and she called it Snow-white. Now that its mistress was lost, there was no one who cared for it, so it came into the king's palace and took refuge in the kitchen, where it lay down in front of the fire. When it was night and all had gone to bed, the master-cook saw the kitchen door open of itself and a beautiful little duck, fastened to a chain, came into the kitchen. Wherever the little bird trod the most beautiful roses sprang up. The duck went up to the dog upon the hearth, and said—

“Poor little Snow-white! Once on a time you lay on blue silk cushions. Now you must lie on the grey ashes. Ah! my poor brother, who is in the lions' den! Shame on Maiden Foxtail! she sleeps in my lord's arms.”

“Alas, poor me!” continued the duck, “I shall come here only on two more nights. After that I shall see you no more.”

Then it caressed the little dog, and the dog returned its caresses. After a little while the door opened of itself and the little bird went its way.

The next morning, when it was daylight, the master-cook took the beautiful roses that lay strewn on the floor and with them decorated the dishes for the king's table. The king so much admired the flowers that he ordered the master-cook to be called to him, and asked him where he had found such magnificent roses. The cook told him all that had happened, and what the duck had said to the little dog. When the king heard it he was much perplexed, and he told the cook to let him know as soon as the bird showed itself again.

The next night the little duck again came to the kitchen, and spoke to the dog as before. The cook sent word to the king, and he came just as the bird went out at the door. However he saw the beautiful roses lying all over the kitchen floor, and from them came such a delightful scent that the like had never been known.

The king made up his mind that if the duck came again he would see it, so he lay in wait for it. He waited a long while, when, at midnight, the little bird, as before, came walking up to the dog which lay on the hearth, and said—

“Poor little Snow-white! once on a time you lay on blue silk cushions. Now you must lie on grey ashes. Ah! my poor brother, who is in the lions’ den. Shame on Maiden Foxtail! she sleeps in my lord’s arms.”

Then it went on—

“Alas! poor me! I shall see thee no more.”

Then it caressed the little dog, and the dog returned its caresses. As the bird was about to go away, the king sprang out and caught it by the foot. Then the bird changed its form and became a horrible dragon, but the king held it fast. It changed itself again, and took the forms of snakes, wolves, and other fierce animals, but the king did not lose his hold. Then the mermaid pulled hard at the chain, but the king held so fast that the chain broke in two with a great snap and rattling. That moment there stood there a beautiful maiden much more beautiful than that in the fine picture. She thanked the king for having saved her from the power of the mermaid. The king was very glad, and took the beautiful maiden in his arms, kissed her, and said—

“I will have no one else in the world for my queen, and now I will see that your brother was guiltless.”

Then he sent off at once to the lions’ den to learn if the young man was yet alive. There the young man was safe and sound among the wild beasts, which had done him no injury. Then the king was in a happy mood, and rejoiced that everything had chanced so well. The brother and sister told him all that the step-mother had done.

When it was daylight the king ordered a great feast to be got ready, and asked the foremost people in the country to the palace. As they all sat at table and were very merry, the king told a story of a brother and sister who had been treacherously dealt with by a step-mother, and he related all that had happened from beginning to end. When the tale was ended the king’s folk looked at one another, and all agreed that the conduct of the step-mother in the tale was a piece of unexampled wickedness.

The king turned to his mother-in-law, and said—

“Some one should reward my tale. I should like to know what punishment the taking of such an innocent life deserves.”

The false hag did not know that her own treachery was aimed at, so she said boldly—

“For my part, I certainly think she should be put into boiling lead.”

The king then turned himself to Foxtail, and said—

“I should like to have your opinion; what punishment is merited by one who takes so innocent a life?”

The wicked woman answered at once—

“For my part, I think she deserves to be put into boiling tar.”

Then the king started up from the table in a great rage, and said—

“You have pronounced doom on yourselves. Such punishment shall you suffer!”

He ordered the two women to be taken out to die as they themselves had said, and no one save Swanwhite begged him to have mercy on them.

After that the king was married to the beautiful maiden, and all folk agreed that nowhere could be found a finer queen. The king gave his own sister to the brave young man, and there was great joy in all the king's palace.

There they live prosperous and happy unto this day, for all I know.

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