



Prince Spin Head and Miss Snow White

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Dutch

*Intermediate
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Long, long ago, before the Romans came into the land and when the fairies ruled in the forest, there was a maiden who lived under an oak tree. When she was a baby they called her Bundlekin. She had four brothers, who loved their younger sister very dearly and did everything they could to make her happy. Her fat father was a famous hunter. When he roamed the woods, no bear, wolf, aurochs, roebuck, deer, or big animal of any kind, could escape from his arrows, his spear, or his pit-trap. He taught his sons to be skilful in the chase, but also to be kind to the dumb creatures when captured. Especially when the mother beast was killed, the boys were always told to care for the cubs, whelps and kittens. As for the smaller animals, foxes, hares, weasels, rabbits and ermine, these were so numerous, that the father left the business of hunting them to the lads, who had great sport.

The house under the oak tree was always well provided with meat and furs. The four brothers brought the little animals, which they took in the woods, to make presents to their sister. So there was always a plenty of pets, bear and wolf cubs, wildcats' kittens and baby aurochs for the girl to play with. Every day, while the animals were so young as to be fed on milk, she enjoyed frolicking with the four-footed babies. When they grew bigger, she romped and sported with them, as if she and they were equal members of the same family. The older brother watched carefully, so that the little brutes, as they increased in size, should not bite or claw his sister,

for he knew the fierce nature that was in wild creatures. Yet the maiden had wonderful power over these beasts of the forest, whether little or big. She was not very much afraid of them and often made them run, by looking at them hard in the eye.

While the girl made a pet of the animals, her parents made a pet of her. The mother prepared the skins of the wolves and bears, until these were very soft, keeping the fur on, to make rugs for the floor, and winter coats for her children. The hides of the aurochs sufficed for rougher use, but from what had once been the clothes of the fawn, the weasel, the rabbit, and the ermine, garments were made that were smooth enough to suit a baby's tender flesh. The forest folk wrapped their infants in swaddling hands made of these dressed pelts. After feeding the darling, a mother hung her baby up, warmly covered, to a tree branch. The cradle, which was a furry bag, was made of the same material and swung in the wind.

Bundlekin usually fell asleep right after she had had her breakfast. When she woke up crowing, the squirrels were playing all around her. She even learned to watch the spiders, spinning their houses of silk, without being afraid. When Bundlekin grew up, she always called this curious creature, that could make silk, Spin Head. She jokingly called it her lover, in remembrance of baby days.

It was funny to see how deft the mother was with her needles, fashioned from bone, and her rough thread, which was made of the intestines of the deer. From her own childhood in the woods, Bundlekin's mother had been used to this kind of dressmaking. Now, when her daughter had grown, from babyhood and through her teens, to be a lovely maiden, fair of face and strong of limb, her sweet, unselfish parent was equal to new tasks. To the soft leather coats, made from the skins of fawns, martens, and weasels, she added trimmings of snow white ermine. Caps and mittens, cloaks for the body, and coverings for the feet, were fashioned to fit neatly. Fringes, here and there, were put on them, until her girl looked like a king's daughter. In summer, the skins of birds and their feathers clothed her lightly, and with many and rich colors, while the forest flowers decked her hair.

In winter, in her white forest robes, the maiden, except for her rosy face and sparkling eyes, seemed as if she might have been born of the snow, or was a daughter of the northern ice god at Ulrum. And because she was so lovely, her parents changed her baby name and called her Dri'-fa, which means Snow White.

Yet, though no other girl in Gelderland equalled, and none, not even the princesses, excelled Snow White in beauty of face, form, or raiment, the maiden was not happy, even though many lovers came to her and offered

to marry her. Some, as proof of their skill as hunters, brought the finest furs the forest furnished. Others showed their strength or fleetness of foot. Some bargained with the kabouters, or fairies of the mines, to bring them shining ore or precious gems which they offered to Snow White. Others, again, went afar to get strange wonders, amber and ambergris, from the seashores of the far north to please her. One fine fellow, who had been in the south and was proud of his travels, told her of what he had seen in the great cities, and offered her a necklace of pearls.

But all was in vain. Every lover went away sorrowful, for Snow White wearied of them and sent each one home, disappointed.

Last of all, among the lovers came a strange looking one, named Spin Head, resembling a spider, promising a secret worth more than furs, gold, gems, or necklace; but the mother, seeing the ugly creature, drove it off with hard words.

So the months and years passed, until her father feared he would not live to see his daughter a wife.

But one day, when all in the household were absent, the leaves of the oak tree rustled loudly. There was no wind, and Snow White, surprised, strained her ears to find out what this might mean. Soon she could make out these words:

“When the spider, that you called Spin Head, comes to make love to you, listen to him. He is the wisest being in all the forest. He knows the future. He will tell you a secret. I shall pass away, but what he teaches you shall live.”

Then the leaves of the oak ceased to rustle and all was quiet and still again.

While wondering what this message might mean, down came the real spider she had named Spin Head. He lowered himself from a tree branch, high above on a silken thread. The creature sat down on the log beside the maiden; but she was not in the least startled and did not scream nor run away. Indeed, she spoke to the spider as an old friend:

“Well, playmate of my babyhood, what have you to tell me?”

“I came to offer you my love. You need not marry me yet, but if you will let me spin a web in your room, I shall live there, and, by and by, reward you. Let me be in your sight always, and you will not be sorry for it.”

The maiden had no sooner agreed than a terrible tempest uprooted the oak and levelled the trees of the forest. In a moment more, a new and very beautiful house rose up out of the ground. It was as noble to look at as a palace. Near by was a garden, and one day when she walked in it, out of it sprang a blue flower, almost under her feet.

“Choose the best room for your own self,” said Spin Head, “and then show me my corner. After a hundred days, if you treat me kindly, I shall reveal the secret of that blue flower.”

Dri’-fa, the maiden, chose the sunniest room, and gave Spin Head the best corner, near the window and close to the ceiling. At once he began to weave a shining web for his own house. She wondered at such fine work, which no human weaver could excel, and why she was not able to spin silk out of her head, nor even with her fingers, like her strange lover. But the oak had promised that Spin Head would reveal a secret, and she was curious to know what it was. Like all girls, she was in a hurry to have the secret. To ease her impatience, Dri’-fa looked on, while Spin Head was thus busy at making his dwelling place, with shining threads which he spun out, never ceasing. She was so intent upon watching him that night came down before she noticed that her room was not furnished. There was not even a bed to sleep on.

Spin Head looked at her closely and then spoke with a deep voice, like a man’s:

“Ah, I know, you want a bed, and pretty things for your room.”

In another moment, soft furs lined the floor, and soon all that Dri’-fa had possessed in the forest for comfort she had now, and more. Lost in wonder as she was, in a few minutes she was fast asleep.

She dreamed she wore a dress of some strange, new, white fabric, such as her people had never seen before. Instead of being close in texture, like the skin of an animal, it was as open work, full of thousands of little holes, yet strongly held together. It was light and gauzy, like a silvery spider’s web on the summer grass before sunrise, when pearly with dewdrops.

The hundred days were passing swiftly by, and Spin Head and Snow White had become fast friends. Each lived in a different world—a world within a world. She was waiting for the secret he would tell her. She bravely

resolved not to be impatient, but let Spin Head speak first.

One day, when autumn had come and she was lonely, she sauntered out into the garden. The chill winds were blowing and the leaves falling, till they covered the ground like a yellow carpet. One fell into her hand, as if it bore words of friendly greeting. Yet, though she waited, not one of the millions of them brought a message to her! Never a word had she ever heard from her parents and brothers! The blue flower had long ago fallen away and there was nothing in its place but a hard, rough, black stalk. Then she said to herself:

“Is there anything in this ugly stick? How will Spin Head reveal his secret?” Never had she been so cast down.

Again the tempest howled. All the winds of heaven seemed to have broken loose. Many a sturdy oak lay prostrate. The leaves darkened the air, so that Snow White could see nothing. Then there was a great calm. The maid cleared her sight, and lo! there, beside her, stood a youth, more beautiful than any of her brothers, or her lovers, or any man she had ever seen. He was dressed in fine white clothing, excelling in its texture any skin of fawn, or animal of the forest. Instead of being leather, however soft, it seemed woven of a multitude of threads. In his hand he held the black stalk of what had been the blue flower.

“I am Spin Head,” he said. “The hundred days are over. The spell is broken and my deliverance from enchantment has come. I bring to you, as my gift, this ugly stalk, on which the blue flower bloomed.”

Between surprise at the change of Spin Head from a spider to a handsome youth, and disappointment at such a present offered her, Snow White was dumb. She could hardly draw her breath. Was that all?

“Break it open,” said Spin Head.

Splitting the stalk from end to end, the maiden was surprised to find inside many long silky fibres, almost as fine as the strands in a spider’s web. She pulled them out and her eyes danced with joy.

“Plant the seed and let the blue flowers blossom by the million,” said the youth. “Then gather the stalks and, from the fibres, weave them together and make this. The black rod is a sceptre of wealth.”

Then, separating the delicate strands one by one, Spin Head wove them together. The result was a rich robe, of a snow white fabric, never seen in the forest. It was linen.

Snow White clapped her hands with joy.

“Tis for your wedding dress, if you will marry me,” said Spin Head.

Snow White’s cheeks blushed red, but she looked at him and her eyes said “yes.”

“Wait,” said Spin Head. “I’ll make you a bridal veil.”

Once more his fingers wrought wonders. He produced yards of a gauzy, open work stuff. He made it float in the air first. Then he threw it over her head. It trailed down her back and covered her rosy face. It was lace.

Happily married, they left the forest and travelled into the land where the blue flax flowers made a new sky on the earth. Soon on the map men read the names of cities unknown before. At a time when Europe had no such masses of happy people, joyous in their toil, Courtrai, Tournay, Ypres, Ghent, and Bruges told what the blue flower of the flax had done for the country. More than gold, gems, or the wealth of forest or mine, was the gift of Spin Head to Snow White, for the making of Belgic Land.

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