

# *The Enchanted Wreath*

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Scandinavian

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*Intermediate*  
*19 min read*

Once upon a time there lived near a forest a man and his wife and two girls; one girl was the daughter of the man, and the other the daughter of his wife; and the man's daughter was good and beautiful, but the woman's daughter was cross and ugly. However, her mother did not know that, but thought her the most bewitching maiden that ever was seen.

One day the man called to his daughter and bade her come with him into the forest to cut wood. They worked hard all day, but in spite of the chopping they were very cold, for it rained heavily, and when they returned home, they were wet through. Then, to his vexation, the man found that he had left his axe behind him, and he knew that if it lay all night in the mud it would become rusty and useless. So he said to his wife:

'I have dropped my axe in the forest, bid your daughter go and fetch it, for mine has worked hard all day and is both wet and weary.'

But the wife answered:

'If your daughter is wet already, it is all the more reason that she should go and get the axe. Besides, she is a great strong girl, and a little rain will not hurt her, while my daughter would be sure to catch a bad cold.'

By long experience the man knew there was no good saying any more, and with a sigh he told the poor girl she must return to the forest for the axe.

The walk took some time, for it was very dark, and her shoes often stuck in the mud, but she was brave as well as beautiful and never thought of turning back merely because the path was both difficult and unpleasant. At last, with her dress torn by brambles that she could not see, and her face scratched by the twigs on the trees, she reached the spot where she and her father had been cutting in the morning, and found the axe in the place he had left it. To her surprise, three little doves were sitting on the handle, all of them looking very sad.

'You poor little things,' said the girl, stroking them. 'Why do you sit there and get wet? Go and fly home to your nest, it will be much warmer than this; but first eat this bread, which I saved from my dinner, and perhaps you will feel happier. It is my father's axe you are sitting on, and I must take it back as fast as I can, or I shall get a terrible scolding from my stepmother.' She then crumbled the bread on the ground, and was pleased to see the doves flutter quite cheerfully towards it.

'Good-bye,' she said, picking up the axe, and went her way homewards.

By the time they had finished all the crumbs the doves felt much better, and were able to fly back to their nest in the top of a tree.

'That is a good girl,' said one; 'I really was too weak to stretch out a wing before she came. I should like to do something to show how grateful I am.'

'Well, let us give her a wreath of flowers that will never fade as long as she wears it,' cried another.

'And let the tiniest singing birds in the world sit amongst the flowers,' rejoined the third.

'Yes, that will do beautifully,' said the first. And when the girl stepped into her cottage a wreath of rosebuds was on her head, and a crowd of little birds were singing unseen.

The father, who was sitting by the fire, thought that, in spite of her muddy clothes, he had never seen his daughter looking so lovely; but the stepmother and the other girl grew wild with envy.

‘How absurd to walk about on such a pouring night, dressed up like that,’ she remarked crossly, and roughly pulled off the wreath as she spoke, to place it on her own daughter. As she did so the roses became withered and brown, and the birds flew out of the window.

‘See what a trumpery thing it is!’ cried the stepmother; ‘and now take your supper and go to bed, for it is near upon midnight.’

But though she pretended to despise the wreath, she longed none the less for her daughter to have one like it.

Now it happened that the next evening the father, who had been alone in the forest, came back a second time without his axe. The stepmother’s heart was glad when she saw this, and she said quite mildly:

‘Why, you have forgotten your axe again, you careless man! But now your daughter shall stay at home, and mine shall go and bring it back’; and throwing a cloak over the girl’s shoulders, she bade her hasten to the forest.

With a very ill grace the damsel set forth, grumbling to herself as she went; for though she wished for the wreath, she did not at all want the trouble of getting it.

By the time she reached the spot where her stepfather had been cutting the wood the girl was in a very bad temper indeed, and when she caught sight of the axe, there were the three little doves, with drooping heads and soiled, bedraggled feathers, sitting on the handle.

‘You dirty creatures,’ cried she, ‘get away at once, or I will throw stones at you! And the doves spread their wings in a fright and flew up to the very top of a tree, their bodies shaking with anger.

‘What shall we do to revenge ourselves on her?’ asked the smallest of the doves, ‘we were never treated like that before.’

‘Never,’ said the biggest dove. ‘We must find some way of paying her back in her own coin!’

‘I know,’ answered the middle dove; ‘she shall never be able to say anything but “dirty creatures” to the end of her life.’

'Oh, how clever of you! That will do beautifully,' exclaimed the other two. And they flapped their wings and clucked so loud with delight, and made such a noise, that they woke up all the birds in the trees close by.

'What in the world is the matter?' asked the birds sleepily.

'That is our secret,' said the doves.

Meanwhile the girl had reached home crosser than ever; but as soon as her mother heard her lift the latch of the door she ran out to hear her adventures. 'Well, did you get the wreath?' cried she.

'Dirty creatures!' answered her daughter.

'Don't speak to me like that! What do you mean?' asked the mother again.

'Dirty creatures!' repeated the daughter, and nothing else could she say.

Then the woman saw that something evil had befallen her, and turned in her rage to her stepdaughter.

'You are at the bottom of this, I know,' she cried; and as the father was out of the way she took a stick and beat the girl till she screamed with pain and went to bed sobbing.

If the poor girl's life had been miserable before, it was ten times worse now, for the moment her father's back was turned the others teased and tormented her from morning till night; and their fury was increased by the sight of her wreath, which the doves had placed again on her head.

Things went on like this for some weeks, when, one day, as the king's son was riding through the forest, he heard some strange birds singing more sweetly than birds had ever sung before. He tied his horse to a tree, and followed where the sound led him, and, to his surprise, he saw before him a beautiful girl chopping wood, with a wreath of pink rose-buds, out of which the singing came. Standing in the shelter of a tree, he watched her a long while, and then, hat in hand, he went up and spoke to her.

'Fair maiden, who are you, and who gave you that wreath of singing roses?' asked he, for the birds were so tiny that till you looked closely you never saw them.

'I live in a hut on the edge of the forest,' she answered, blushing, for she had never spoken to a prince before.

'As to the wreath, I know not how it came there, unless it may be the gift of some doves whom I fed when they were starving! The prince was delighted with this answer, which showed the goodness of the girl's heart, and besides he had fallen in love with her beauty, and would not be content till she promised to return with him to the palace, and become his bride. The old king was naturally disappointed at his son's choice of a wife, as he wished him to marry a neighbouring princess; but as from his birth the prince had always done exactly as he like, nothing was said and a splendid wedding feast was got ready.

The day after her marriage the bride sent a messenger, bearing handsome presents to her father, and telling him of the good fortune which had befallen her. As may be imagined, the stepmother and her daughter were so filled with envy that they grew quite ill, and had to take to their beds, and nobody would have been sorry if they had never got up again; but that did not happen. At length, however, they began to feel better, for the mother invented a plan by which she could be revenged on the girl who had never done her any harm.

Her plan was this. In the town where she had lived before she was married there was an old witch, who had more skill in magic than any other witch she knew. To this witch she would go and beg her to make her a mask with the face of her stepdaughter, and when she had the mask the rest would be easy. She told her daughter what she meant to do, and although the daughter could only say 'dirty creatures,' in answer, she nodded and smiled and looked well pleased.

Everything fell out exactly as the woman had hoped. By the aid of her magic mirror the witch beheld the new princess walking in her gardens in a dress of green silk, and in a few minutes had produced a mask so like her, that very few people could have told the difference. However, she counselled the woman that when her daughter first wore it— for that, of course, was what she intended her to do—she had better pretend that she had a toothache, and cover her head with a lace veil. The woman thanked her and paid her well, and returned to her hut, carrying the mask under her cloak.

In a few days she heard that a great hunt was planned, and the prince would leave the palace very early in the morning, so that his wife would be alone all day. This was a chance not to be missed, and taking her daughter with her she went up to the palace, where she had never been before. The princess was too happy in her new home to remember all that she had suffered in the old one, and she welcomed them both gladly, and gave them quantities of beautiful things to take back with them. At last she took them down to the shore to see a pleasure

boat which her husband had had made for her; and here, the woman seizing her opportunity, stole softly behind the girl and pushed her off the rock on which she was standing, into the deep water, where she instantly sank to the bottom. Then she fastened the mask on her daughter, flung over her shoulders a velvet cloak, which the princess had let fall, and finally arranged a lace veil over her head.

‘Rest your cheek on your hand, as if you were in pain, when the prince returns,’ said the mother; ‘and be careful not to speak, whatever you do. I will go back to the witch and see if she cannot take off the spell laid on you by those horrible birds. Ah! why did I not think of it before!’

No sooner had the prince entered the palace than he hastened to the princess’s apartments, where he found her lying on the sofa apparently in great pain.

‘My dearest wife, what is the matter with you?’ he cried, kneeling down beside her, and trying to take her hand; but she snatched it away, and pointing to her cheek murmured something he could not catch.

‘What is it? tell me! Is the pain bad? When did it begin? Shall I send for your ladies to bath the place?’ asked the prince, pouring out these and a dozen other questions, to which the girl only shook her head.

‘But I can’t leave you like this,’ he continued, starting up, ‘I must summon all the court physicians to apply soothing balsams to the sore place! And as he spoke he sprang to his feet to go in search of them. This so frightened the pretended wife, who knew that if the physicians once came near her the trick would at once be discovered, that she forgot her mother’s counsel not to speak, and forgot even the spell that had been laid upon her, and catching hold of the prince’s tunic, she cried in tones of entreaty: ‘Dirty creatures!’

The young man stopped, not able to believe his ears, but supposed that pain had made the princess cross, as it sometimes does. However, he guessed somehow that she wisied to be left alone, so he only said:

‘Well, I dare say a little sleep will do you good, if you can manage to get it, and that you will wake up better tomorrow.’

Now, that night happened to be very hot and airless, and the prince, after vainly trying to rest, at length got up and went to the window. Suddenly he beheld in the moonlight a form with a wreath of roses on her head rise out of the sea below him and step on to the sands, holding out her arms as she did so towards the palace.

'That maiden is strangely like my wife,' thought he; 'I must see her closer! And he hastened down to the water. But when he got there, the princess, for she indeed it was, had disappeared completely, and he began to wonder if his eyes had deceived him.

The next morning he went to the false bride's room, but her ladies told him she would neither speak nor get up, though she ate everything they set before her. The prince was sorely perplexed as to what could be the matter with her, for naturally he could not guess that she was expecting her mother to return every moment, and to remove the spell the doves had laid upon her, and meanwhile was afraid to speak lest she should betray herself. At length he made up his mind to summon all the court physicians; he did not tell her what he was going to do, lest it should make her worse, but he went himself and begged the four learned leeches attached to the king's person to follow him to the princess's apartments. Unfortunately, as they entered, the princess was so enraged at the sight of them that she forgot all about the doves, and shrieked out: 'Dirty creatures! dirty creatures!' which so offended the physicians that they left the room at once, and nothing that the prince could say would prevail on them to remain. He then tried to persuade his wife to send them a message that she was sorry for her rudeness, but not a word would she say.

Late that evening, when he had performed all the tiresome duties which fall to the lot of every prince, the young man was leaning out of his window, refreshing himself with the cool breezes that blew off the sea. His thoughts went back to the scene of the morning, and he wondered if, after all, he had not made a great mistake in marrying a low-born wife, however beautiful she might be. How could he have imagined that the quiet, gentle girl who had been so charming a companion to him during the first days of their marriage, could have become in a day the rude, sulky woman, who could not control her temper even to benefit herself. One thing was clear, if she did not change her conduct very shortly he would have to send her away from court.

He was thinking these thoughts, when his eyes fell on the sea beneath him, and there, as before, was the figure that so closely resembled his wife, standing with her feet in the water, holding out her arms to him.

'Wait for me! Wait for me! Wait for me!' he cried; not even knowing he was speaking. But when he reached the shore there was nothing to be seen but the shadows cast by the moonlight.

A state ceremonial in a city some distance off caused the prince to ride away at daybreak, and he left without seeing his wife again.

'Perhaps she may have come to her senses by to-morrow,' said he to himself; 'and, anyhow, if I am going to send her back to her father, it might be better if we did not meet in the meantime! Then he put the matter from his mind, and kept his thoughts on the duty that lay before him.

It was nearly midnight before he returned to the palace, but, instead of entering, he went down to the shore and hid behind a rock. He had scarcely done so when the girl came out of the sea, and stretched out her arms towards his window. In an instant the prince had seized her hand, and though she made a frightened struggle to reach the water—for she in her turn had had a spell laid upon her—he held her fast.

'You are my own wife, and I shall never let you go,' he said. But the words were hardly out of his mouth when he found that it was a hare that he was holding by the paw. Then the hare changed into a fish, and the fish into a bird, and the bird into a slimy wriggling snake. This time the prince's hand nearly opened of itself, but with a strong effort he kept his fingers shut, and drawing his sword cut off its head, when the spell was broken, and the girl stood before him as he had seen her first, the wreath upon her head and the birds singing for joy.

The very next morning the stepmother arrived at the palace with an ointment that the old witch had given her to place upon her daughter's tongue, which would break the dove's spell, if the rightful bride had really been drowned in the sea; if not, then it would be useless. The mother assured her that she had seen her stepdaughter sink, and that there was no fear that she would ever come up again; but, to make all quite safe, the old woman might bewitch the girl; and so she did. After that the wicked stepmother travelled all through the night to get to the palace as soon as possible, and made her way straight into her daughter's room.

'I have got it! I have got it!' she cried triumphantly, and laid the ointment on her daughter's tongue.

'Now what do you say?' she asked proudly.

'Dirty creatures! dirty creatures!' answered the daughter; and the mother wrung her hands and wept, as she

knew that all her plans had failed.

At this moment the prince entered with his real wife. 'You both deserved death,' he said, 'and if it were left to me, you should have it. But the princess has begged me to spare your lives, so you will be put into a ship and carried off to a desert island, where you will stay till you die.'

Then the ship was made ready and the wicked woman and her daughter were placed in it, and it sailed away, and no more was heard of them. But the prince and his wife lived together long and happily, and ruled their people well.

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