



The White Bride and the Black One

Brothers Grimm

German

Intermediate
9 min read

A woman was going about the unenclosed land with her daughter and her step-daughter cutting fodder, when the Lord came walking towards them in the form of a poor man, and asked, "Which is the way into the village?" "If you want to know," said the mother, "seek it for yourself," and the daughter added, "If you are afraid you will not find it, take a guide with you."

But the step-daughter said, "Poor man, I will take you there, come with me."

Then God was angry with the mother and daughter, and turned his back on them, and wished that they should become as black as night and as ugly as sin. To the poor step-daughter, however, God was gracious, and went with her, and when they were near the village, he said a blessing over her, and spake, "Choose three things for thyself, and I will grant them to thee."

Then said the maiden, "I should like to be as beautiful and fair as the sun," and instantly she was white and fair as day.

"Then I should like to have a purse of money which would never grow empty."

That the Lord gave her also, but he said, "Do not forget what is best of all." Said she, "For my third wish, I desire, after my death, to inhabit the eternal kingdom of Heaven."

That also was granted unto her, and then the Lord left her. When the step-mother came home with her daughter, and they saw that they were both as black as coal and ugly, but that the step-daughter was white and beautiful, wickedness increased still more in their hearts, and they thought of nothing else but how they could do her an injury. The step-daughter, however, had a brother called Reginer, whom she loved much, and she told him all that had happened.

Once on a time Reginer said to her, "Dear sister, I will take thy likeness, that I may continually see thee before mine eyes, for my love for thee is so great that I should like always to look at thee." Then she answered, "But, I pray thee, let no one see the picture." So he painted his sister and hung up the picture in his room; he, however, dwelt in the King's palace, for he was his coachman. Every day he went and stood before the picture, and thanked God for the happiness of having such a dear sister. Now it happened that the King whom he served, had just lost his wife, who had been so beautiful that no one could be found to compare with her, and on this account the King was in deep grief.

The attendants about the court, however, remarked that the coachman stood daily before this beautiful picture, and they were jealous of him, so they informed the King. Then the latter ordered the picture to be brought to him, and when he saw that it was like his lost wife in every respect, except that it was still more beautiful, he fell mortally in love with it. He caused the coachman to be brought before him, and asked whom that portrait represented? The coachman said it was his sister, so the King resolved to take no one but her as his wife, and gave him a carriage and horses and splendid garments of cloth of gold, and sent him forth to fetch his chosen bride.

When Reginer came on this errand, his sister was glad, but the black maiden was jealous of her good fortune, and grew angry above all measure, and said to her mother, "Of what use are all your arts to us now when you cannot procure such a piece of luck for me?" "Be quiet," said the old woman, "I will soon divert it to you"—and by her arts of witchcraft, she so troubled the eyes of the coachman that he was half-blind, and she stopped the ears of the white maiden so that she was half-deaf. Then they got into the carriage, first the bride in her noble royal apparel, then the step-mother with her daughter, and Reginer sat on the box to drive. When they had been on the way for some time the coachman cried,

"Cover thee well, my sister dear,
That the rain may not wet thee,
That the wind may not load thee with dust,
That thou may'st be fair and beautiful
When thou appearest before the King."

The bride asked, "What is my dear brother saying?" "Ah," said the old woman, "he says that you ought to take off your golden dress and give it to your sister." Then she took it off, and put it on the black maiden, who gave her in exchange for it a shabby grey gown. They drove onwards, and a short time afterwards, the brother again cried,

"Cover thee well, my sister dear,
That the rain may not wet thee,
That the wind may not load thee with dust,
That thou may'st be fair and beautiful
When thou appearest before the King."

The bride asked, "What is my dear brother saying?" "Ah," said the old woman, "he says that you ought to take off your golden hood and give it to your sister." So she took off the hood and put it on her sister, and sat with her own head uncovered. And they drove on farther.

After a while, the brother once more cried,

"Cover thee well, my sister dear,
That the rain may not wet thee,

That the wind may not load thee with dust,
That thou may'st be fair and beautiful
When thou appearest before the King."

The bride asked, "What is my dear brother saying?"

"Ah," said the old woman, "he says you must look out of the carriage."

They were, however, just on a bridge, which crossed deep water. When the bride stood up and leant forward out of the carriage, they both pushed her out, and she fell into the middle of the water. At the same moment that she sank, a snow-white duck arose out of the mirror-smooth water, and swam down the river. The brother had observed nothing of it, and drove the carriage on until they reached the court. Then he took the black maiden to the King as his sister, and thought she really was so, because his eyes were dim, and he saw the golden garments glittering. When the King saw the boundless ugliness of his intended bride, he was very angry, and ordered the coachman to be thrown into a pit which was full of adders and nests of snakes.

The old witch, however, knew so well how to flatter the King and deceive his eyes by her arts, that he kept her and her daughter until she appeared quite endurable to him, and he really married her. One evening when the black bride was sitting on the King's knee, a white duck came swimming up the gutter to the kitchen, and said to the kitchen-boy, "Boy, light a fire, that I may warm my feathers."

The kitchen-boy did it, and lighted a fire on the hearth. Then came the duck and sat down by it, and shook herself and smoothed her feathers to rights with her bill. While she was thus sitting and enjoying herself, she asked, "What is my brother Reginer doing?" The scullery-boy replied, "He is imprisoned in the pit with adders and with snakes." Then she asked, "What is the black witch doing in the house?" The boy answered, "She is loved by the King and happy."

"May God have mercy on him," said the duck, and swam forth by the sink.

The next night she came again and put the same questions, and the third night also. Then the kitchen-boy could bear it no longer, and went to the King and discovered all to him. The King, however, wanted to see it for himself, and next evening went thither, and when the duck thrust her head in through the sink, he took his sword and cut through her neck, and suddenly she changed into a most beautiful maiden, exactly like the picture, which her brother had made of her.

The King was full of joy, and as she stood there quite wet, he caused splendid apparel to be brought and had her clothed in it. Then she told how she had been betrayed by cunning and falsehood, and at last thrown down into the water, and her first request was that her brother should be brought forth from the pit of snakes, and when the King had fulfilled this request, he went into the chamber where the old witch was, and asked, What does she deserve who does this and that? and related what had happened. Then was she so blinded that she was aware of nothing and said, "She deserves to be stripped naked, and put into a barrel with nails, and that a horse should be harnessed to the barrel, and the horse sent all over the world."

All of which was done to her, and to her black daughter. But the King married the white and beautiful bride, and rewarded her faithful brother, and made him a rich and distinguished man.

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