



# *The Wonderful Birch*

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Slavic

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*Intermediate*  
*20 min read*

Once upon a time there were a man and a woman, who had an only daughter. Now it happened that one of their sheep went astray, and they set out to look for it, and searched and searched, each in a different part of the wood. Then the good wife met a witch, who said to her:

‘If you spit, you miserable creature, if you spit into the sheath of my knife, or if you run between my legs, I shall change you into a black sheep.’

The woman neither spat, nor did she run between her legs, but yet the witch changed her into a sheep. Then she made herself look exactly like the woman, and called out to the good man:

‘Ho, old man, halloa! I have found the sheep already!’

The man thought the witch was really his wife, and he did not know that his wife was the sheep; so he went home with her, glad at heart because his sheep was found. When they were safe at home the witch said to the man:

‘Look here, old man, we must really kill that sheep lest it run away to the wood again.’

The man, who was a peaceable quiet sort of fellow, made no objections, but simply said:

`Good, let us do so.'

The daughter, however, had overheard their talk, and she ran to the flock and lamented aloud:

`Oh, dear little mother, they are going to slaughter you!'

`Well, then, if they do slaughter me,' was the black sheep's answer, `eat you neither the meat nor the broth that is made of me, but gather all my bones, and bury them by the edge of the field.'

Shortly after this they took the black sheep from the flock and slaughtered it. The witch made pease-soup of it, and set it before the daughter. But the girl remembered her mother's warning. She did not touch the soup, but she carried the bones to the edge of the field and buried them there; and there sprang up on the spot a birch tree—a very lovely birch tree.

Some time had passed away—who can tell how long they might have been living there?—when the witch, to whom a child had been born in the meantime, began to take an ill-will to the man's daughter, and to torment her in all sorts of ways.

Now it happened that a great festival was to be held at the palace, and the King had commanded that all the people should be invited, and that this proclamation should be made:

`Come, people all! Poor and wretched, one and all! Blind and crippled though ye be, Mount your steeds or come by sea.'

And so they drove into the King's feast all the outcasts, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. In the good man's house, too, preparations were made to go to the palace. The witch said to the man:

`Go you on in front, old man, with our youngest; I will give the elder girl work to keep her from being dull in our absence.'

So the man took the child and set out. But the witch kindled a fire on the hearth, threw a potful of barleycorns among the cinders, and said to the girl:

`If you have not picked the barley out of the ashes, and put it all back in the pot before nightfall, I shall eat you up!'

Then she hastened after the others, and the poor girl stayed at home and wept. She tried to be sure to pick up the grains of barley, but she soon saw how useless her labour was; and so she went in her sore trouble to the birch tree on her mother's grave, and cried and cried, because her mother lay dead beneath the sod and could help her no longer. In the midst of her grief she suddenly heard her mother's voice speak from the grave, and say to her:

`Why do you weep, little daughter?'

`The witch has scattered barleycorns on the hearth, and bid me pick them out of the ashes,' said the girl; `that is why I weep, dear little mother.'

`Do not weep,' said her mother consolingly. `Break off one of my branches, and strike the hearth with it crosswise, and all will be put right.' The girl did so. She struck the hearth with the birchen branch, and lo! the barleycorns flew into the pot, and the hearth was clean. Then she went back to the birch tree and laid the branch upon the grave. Then her mother bade her bathe on one side of the stem, dry herself on another, and dress on the third. When the girl had done all that, she had grown so lovely that no one on earth could rival her. Splendid clothing was given to her, and a horse, with hair partly of gold, partly of silver, and partly of something more precious still. The girl sprang into the saddle, and rode as swift as an arrow to the palace. As she turned into the courtyard of the castle the King's son came out to meet her, tied her steed to a pillar, and led her in. He never left her side as they passed through the castle rooms; and all the people gazed at her, and wondered who the lovely maiden was, and from what castle she came; but no one knew her—no one knew anything about her. At the banquet the Prince invited her to sit next him in the place of honour; but the witch's daughter gnawed the bones under the table. The Prince did not see her, and thinking it was a dog, he gave her such a push with his foot that her arm was broken. Are you not sorry for the witch's daughter? It was not her fault that her mother was a witch.

Towards evening the good man's daughter thought it was time to go home; but as she went, her ring caught on the latch of the door, for the King's son had had it smeared with tar. She did not take time to pull it off, but, hastily unfastening her horse from the pillar, she rode away beyond the castle walls as swift as an arrow. Arrived at home, she took off her clothes by the birch tree, left her horse standing there, and hastened to her place behind the stove. In a short time the man and the woman came home again too, and the witch said to the girl:

'Ah! you poor thing, there you are to be sure! You don't know what fine times we have had at the palace! The King's son carried my daughter about, but the poor thing fell and broke her arm.'

The girl knew well how matters really stood, but she pretended to know nothing about it, and sat dumb behind the stove.

The next day they were invited again to the King's banquet.

'Hey! old man,' said the witch, 'get on your clothes as quick as you can; we are bidden to the feast. Take you the child; I will give the other one work, lest she weary.'

She kindled the fire, threw a potful of hemp seed among the ashes, and said to the girl:

'If you do not get this sorted, and all the seed back into the pot, I shall kill you!'

The girl wept bitterly; then she went to the birch tree, washed herself on one side of it and dried herself on the other; and this time still finer clothes were given to her, and a very beautiful steed. She broke off a branch of the birch tree, struck the hearth with it, so that the seeds flew into the pot, and then hastened to the castle.

Again the King's son came out to meet her, tied her horse to a pillar, and led her into the banqueting hall. At the feast the girl sat next him in the place of honour, as she had done the day before. But the witch's daughter gnawed bones under the table, and the Prince gave her a push by mistake, which broke her leg—he had never noticed her crawling about among the people's feet. She was VERY unlucky!

The good man's daughter hastened home again betimes, but the King's son had smeared the door-posts with tar, and the girl's golden circlet stuck to it. She had not time to look for it, but sprang to the saddle and rode like an arrow to the birch tree. There she left her horse and her fine clothes, and said to her mother:

‘I have lost my circlet at the castle; the door-post was tarred, and it stuck fast.’

‘And even had you lost two of them,’ answered her mother, ‘I would give you finer ones.’

Then the girl hastened home, and when her father came home from the feast with the witch, she was in her usual place behind the stove. Then the witch said to her:

‘You poor thing! what is there to see here compared with what WE have seen at the palace? The King’s son carried my daughter from one room to another; he let her fall, ’tis true, and my child’s foot was broken.’

The man’s daughter held her peace all the time, and busied herself about the hearth.

The night passed, and when the day began to dawn, the witch awakened her husband, crying:

‘Hi! get up, old man! We are bidden to the royal banquet.’

So the old man got up. Then the witch gave him the child, saying:

‘Take you the little one; I will give the other girl work to do, else she will weary at home alone.’

She did as usual. This time it was a dish of milk she poured upon the ashes, saying:

‘If you do not get all the milk into the dish again before I come home, you will suffer for it.’

How frightened the girl was this time! She ran to the birch tree, and by its magic power her task was accomplished; and then she rode away to the palace as before. When she got to the courtyard she found the Prince waiting for her. He led her into the hall, where she was highly honoured; but the witch’s daughter sucked the bones under the table, and crouching at the people’s feet she got an eye knocked out, poor thing! Now no one knew any more than before about the good man’s daughter, no one knew whence she came; but the Prince had had the threshold smeared with tar, and as she fled her gold slippers stuck to it. She reached the birch tree, and laying aside her finery, she said:

‘Alas I dear little mother, I have lost my gold slippers!’

‘Let them be,’ was her mother’s reply; ‘if you need them I shall give you finer ones.’

Scarcely was she in her usual place behind the stove when her father came home with the witch. Immediately

the witch began to mock her, saying:

`Ah! you poor thing, there is nothing for you to see here, and WE—ah: what great things we have seen at the palace! My little girl was carried about again, but had the ill-luck to fall and get her eye knocked out. You stupid thing, you, what do you know about anything?’

`Yes, indeed, what can I know?’ replied the girl; `I had enough to do to get the hearth clean.’

Now the Prince had kept all the things the girl had lost, and he soon set about finding the owner of them. For this purpose a great banquet was given on the fourth day, and all the people were invited to the palace. The witch got ready to go too. She tied a wooden beetle on where her child’s foot should have been, a log of wood instead of an arm, and stuck a bit of dirt in the empty socket for an eye, and took the child with her to the castle. When all the people were gathered together, the King’s son stepped in among the crowd and cried:

`The maiden whose finger this ring slips over, whose head this golden hoop encircles, and whose foot this shoe fits, shall be my bride.’

What a great trying on there was now among them all! The things would fit no one, however.

`The cinder wench is not here,’ said the Prince at last; `go and fetch her, and let her try on the things.’

So the girl was fetched, and the Prince was just going to hand the ornaments to her, when the witch held him back, saying:

`Don’t give them to her; she soils everything with cinders; give them to my daughter rather.’

Well, then the Prince gave the witch's daughter the ring, and the woman filed and pared away at her daughter's finger till the ring fitted. It was the same with the circlet and the shoes of gold. The witch would not allow them to be handed to the cinder wench; she worked at her own daughter's head and feet till she got the things forced on. What was to be done now? The Prince had to take the witch's daughter for his bride whether he would or no; he sneaked away to her father's house with her, however, for he was ashamed to hold the wedding festivities at the palace with so strange a bride. Some days passed, and at last he had to take his bride home to the palace, and he got ready to do so. Just as they were taking leave, the kitchen wench sprang down from her place by the stove, on the pretext of fetching something from the cowhouse, and in going by she whispered in the Prince's ear as he stood in the yard:

`Alas! dear Prince, do not rob me of my silver and my gold.'

Thereupon the King's son recognised the cinder wench; so he took both the girls with him, and set out. After they had gone some little way they came to the bank of a river, and the Prince threw the witch's daughter across to serve as a bridge, and so got over with the cinder wench. There lay the witch's daughter then, like a bridge over the river, and could not stir, though her heart was consumed with grief. No help was near, so she cried at last in her anguish:

`May there grow a golden hemlock out of my body! perhaps my mother will know me by that token.'

Scarcely had she spoken when a golden hemlock sprang up from her, and stood upon the bridge.

Now, as soon as the Prince had got rid of the witch's daughter he greeted the cinder wench as his bride, and they wandered together to the birch tree which grew upon the mother's grave. There they received all sorts of treasures and riches, three sacks full of gold, and as much silver, and a splendid steed, which bore them home to the palace. There they lived a long time together, and the young wife bore a son to the Prince. Immediately word was brought to the witch that her daughter had borne a son—for they all believed the young King's wife to be the witch's daughter.

`So, so,' said the witch to herself; `I had better away with my gift for the infant, then.'

And so saying she set out. Thus it happened that she came to the bank of the river, and there she saw the beautiful golden hemlock growing in the middle of the bridge, and when she began to cut it down to take to her grandchild, she heard a voice moaning:

‘Alas! dear mother, do not cut me so!’

‘Are you here?’ demanded the witch.

‘Indeed I am, dear little mother,’ answered the daughter ‘They threw me across the river to make a bridge of me.’

In a moment the witch had the bridge shivered to atoms, and then she hastened away to the palace. Stepping up to the young Queen’s bed, she began to try her magic arts upon her, saying:

‘Spit, you wretch, on the blade of my knife; bewitch my knife’s blade for me, and I shall change you into a reindeer of the forest.’

‘Are you there again to bring trouble upon me?’ said the young woman.

She neither spat nor did anything else, but still the witch changed her into a reindeer, and smuggled her own daughter into her place as the Prince’s wife. But now the child grew restless and cried, because it missed its mother’s care. They took it to the court, and tried to pacify it in every conceivable way, but its crying never ceased.

‘What makes the child so restless?’ asked the Prince, and he went to a wise widow woman to ask her advice.

‘Ay, ay, your own wife is not at home,’ said the widow woman; ‘she is living like a reindeer in the wood; you have the witch’s daughter for a wife now, and the witch herself for a mother-in-law.’

‘Is there any way of getting my own wife back from the wood again?’ asked the Prince.

‘Give me the child,’ answered the widow woman. ‘I’ll take it with me to-morrow when I go to drive the cows to the wood. I’ll make a rustling among the birch leaves and a trembling among the aspens—perhaps the boy will grow quiet when he hears it.’

‘Yes, take the child away, take it to the wood with you to quiet it,’ said the Prince, and led the widow woman

into the castle.

‘How now? you are going to send the child away to the wood?’ said the witch in a suspicious tone, and tried to interfere.

But the King’s son stood firm by what he had commanded, and said:

‘Carry the child about the wood; perhaps that will pacify it.’

So the widow woman took the child to the wood. She came to the edge of a marsh, and seeing a herd of reindeer there, she began all at once to sing—

‘Little Bright-eyes, little Redskin, Come nurse the child you bore! That bloodthirsty monster, That man-eater grim, Shall nurse him, shall tend him no more. They may threaten and force as they will, He turns from her, shrinks from her still,’

and immediately the reindeer drew near, and nursed and tended the child the whole day long; but at nightfall it had to follow the herd, and said to the widow woman:

‘Bring me the child to-morrow, and again the following day; after that I must wander with the herd far away to other lands.’

The following morning the widow woman went back to the castle to fetch the child. The witch interfered, of course, but the Prince said:

‘Take it, and carry it about in the open air; the boy is quieter at night, to be sure, when he has been in the wood all day.’

So the widow took the child in her arms, and carried it to the marsh in the forest. There she sang as on the preceding day—

‘Little Bright-eyes, little Redskin, Come nurse the child you bore! That bloodthirsty monster, That man-eater grim, Shall nurse him, shall tend him no more. They may threaten and force as they will, He turns from her, shrinks from her still,’

and immediately the reindeer left the herd and came to the child, and tended it as on the day before. And so it was that the child thrived, till not a finer boy was to be seen anywhere. But the King’s son had been pondering

over all these things, and he said to the widow woman:

‘Is there no way of changing the reindeer into a human being again?’

‘I don’t rightly know,’ was her answer. ‘Come to the wood with me, however; when the woman puts off her reindeer skin I shall comb her head for her; whilst I am doing so you must burn the skin.’

Thereupon they both went to the wood with the child; scarcely were they there when the reindeer appeared and nursed the child as before. Then the widow woman said to the reindeer:

‘Since you are going far away to-morrow, and I shall not see you again, let me comb your head for the last time, as a remembrance of you.’

Good; the young woman stript off the reindeer skin, and let the widow woman do as she wished. In the meantime the King’s son threw the reindeer skin into the fire unobserved.

‘What smells of singeing here?’ asked the young woman, and looking round she saw her own husband. ‘Woe is me! you have burnt my skin. Why did you do that?’

‘To give you back your human form again.’

‘Alack-a-day! I have nothing to cover me now, poor creature that I am!’ cried the young woman, and transformed herself first into a distaff, then into a wooden beetle, then into a spindle, and into all imaginable shapes. But all these shapes the King’s son went on destroying till she stood before him in human form again.

‘Alas! wherefore take me home with you again,’ cried the young woman, ‘since the witch is sure to eat me up?’

‘She will not eat you up,’ answered her husband; and they started for home with the child.

But when the witch wife saw them she ran away with her daughter, and if she has not stopped she is running still, though at a great age. And the Prince, and his wife, and the baby lived happy ever afterwards.

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