



The Wood-Lady

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Intermediate

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Betty was a little girl; her mother was a widow, and had no more of her property left than a dilapidated cottage and two she-goats; but Betty was, nevertheless, always cheerful. From spring to autumn she pastured the goats in the birch-wood. Whenever she went from home, her mother always gave her in a basket a slice of bread and a spindle, with the injunction, 'Let it be full.' As she had no distaff, she used to twine the flax round her head. Betty took the basket, and skipped off singing merrily after the goats to the birch-wood. When she got there, the goats went after pasture, and Betty sat under a tree, drew the fibres from her head with her left hand, and let down the spindle with her right so that it just hummed over the ground, and therewith she sang till the wood echoed; the goats meanwhile pastured. When the sun indicated mid-day, she put aside her spindle, called the goats, and after giving them each a morsel of bread that they mightn't stray from her, bounded into the wood for a few strawberries or any other woodland fruit that might happen to be just then in season, that she might have dessert to her bread. When she had finished her meal, she sprang up, folded her hands, danced and sang. The sun smiled on her through the green foliage, and the goats, enjoying themselves among the grass, thought: 'What a merry shepherdess we have! After her dance, she spun again industriously, and at even, when she drove the goats home, her mother never scolded her for bringing back her spindle empty.'

Once, when according to custom, exactly at mid-day, after her scanty dinner, she was getting ready for a dance, all of a sudden—where she came, there she came—a very beautiful maiden stood before her. She had on a white dress as fine as gossamer, golden-coloured hair flowed from her head to her waist, and on her head she wore a garland of woodland flowers

. Betty was struck dumb with astonishment. The maiden smiled at her, and said in an attractive voice, 'Betty, are you fond of dancing?' When the maiden spoke so prettily to her, Betty's terror quitted her, and she answered, 'Oh, I should like to dance all day long!' 'Come, then, let's dance together. I'll teach you!' So spoke the maiden, tucked her dress up on one side, took Betty by the waist, and began to dance with her. As they circled, such delightful music sounded over their heads, that Betty's heart skipped within her. The musicians sat on the branches of the birches in black, ash-coloured, brown, and variegated coats. It was a company of choice musicians that had come together at the beck of the beautiful maiden—nightingales, larks, linnets, goldfinches, greenfinches, thrushes, blackbirds, and a very skilful mocking-bird. Betty's cheek flamed, her eyes glittered, she forgot her task and her goats, and only gazed at her partner, who twirled before and round her with the most charming movements, and so lightly that the grass didn't even bend beneath her delicate foot. They danced from noon till eve, and Betty's feet were neither wearied nor painful. Then the beautiful maiden stopped, the music ceased, and as she came so she disappeared. Betty looked about her; the sun was setting behind the wood. She clapped her hands on the top of her head, and, feeling the unspun flax, remembered that her spindle, which was lying on the grass, was by no means full. She took the flax down from her head, and put it with the spindle into her basket, called the goats, and drove them home.

She did not sing on the way, but bitterly reproached herself for letting the beautiful maiden delude her, and determined that if the maiden should come to her again, she would never listen to her any more. The goats, hearing no merry song behind them, looked round to see whether their own shepherdess was really following them. Her mother, too, wondered, and asked her daughter whether she was ill, as she didn't sing. 'No, mother dear, I'm not ill; but my throat is dry from very singing, and therefore I don't sing,' said Betty in excuse, and went to put away the spindle and the unspun flax. Knowing that her mother was not in the habit of reeling up the yarn at once, she intended to make up the next day what she had neglected to do the first day, and therefore did not say a word to her mother about the beautiful maiden.

The next day Betty again drove the goats as usual to the birch-wood, and sang to herself again merrily. On arriving at the birch-wood the goats began to pasture, and she sat under the tree and began to spin industriously, singing to herself all the time, for work comes better from the hand while one sings. The sun indicated mid-day. Betty gave each of the goats a morsel of bread, went off for strawberries, and after returning began to eat her dinner and chatter with the goats. 'Ah, my little goats, I mustn't dance to-day,' sighed she, when after dinner she collected the crumbs from her lap in her hand and placed them on a stone that the birds might take them away.

'And why mustn't you?' spoke a pleasing voice, and the beautiful maiden stood beside her, as if she had dropped from the clouds. Betty was still more frightened than the first time, and closed her eyes that she might not even see the maiden; but when the maiden repeated the question, she answered modestly: 'Excuse me, beautiful lady, I can't dance with you, because I should again fail to perform my task of spinning, and my mother would scold me. To-day, before the sun sets, I must make up what I left undone yesterday.' 'Only come and dance; before the sun sets help will be found for you,' said the maiden, tucked up her dress, took Betty round the waist, the musicians sitting on the birch branches struck up, and the two dancers began to whirl. The beautiful maiden danced still more enchantingly. Betty couldn't take her eyes off her, and forgot the goats and her task. At last the dancer stopped, the music ceased, the sun was on the verge of setting. Betty clapped her hand on the top of her head, where the unspun flax was twined, and began to cry. The beautiful maiden put her hand on her head, took off the flax, twined it round the stem of a slender birch, seized the spindle, and began to spin.

The spindle just swung over the surface of the ground, grew fuller before her eyes, and before the sun set behind the wood all the yarn was spun, as well as that which Betty had not finished the day 'before. While giving the full spool into the girl's hand the beautiful maiden said: 'Reel, and grumble not—remember my words, "Reel, and grumble not!"' After these words she vanished, as if the ground had sunk in beneath her. Betty was content, and thought on her way, 'If she is so good and kind, I will dance with her again if she comes again.' She sang again that the goats might step on merrily. But her mother gave her no cheerful welcome. Wishing in the course of the day to reel the yarn, she saw that the spindle was not full, and was therefore out of humour. 'What were you doing yesterday that you didn't finish your task?' asked her mother reprovingly. 'Pardon, mother; I danced a little too long,' said Betty humbly, and, showing her mother the spindle, added: 'To-day it is more than full to make up for it.' Her mother said no more, but went to milk the goats, and Betty put the spindle away. She wished to tell her mother of her adventure, but bethought herself again, 'No, not unless she comes again, and then I will ask her what kind of person she is, and will tell my mother.' So she made up her mind and held her tongue.

The third morning, as usual, she drove the goats to the birch-wood. The goats began to pasture; Betty sat under the tree, and began to sing and spin. The sun indicated mid-day. Betty laid her spindle on the grass, gave each of the goats a morsel of bread, collected strawberries, ate her dinner, and while giving the crumbs to the birds, said: 'My little goats, I will dance to you to-day!' She jumped up, folded her hands, and was just going to try whether she could manage to dance as prettily as the beautiful maiden, when all at once she herself stood before her. 'Let's go together, together!' said she to Betty, seized her round the waist, and at the same moment the music struck up over their heads, and the maidens circled round with flying step.

Betty forgot her spindle and her goats, saw nothing but the beautiful maiden, whose body bent in every direction like a willow-wand, and thought of nothing but the delightful music, in tune with which her feet bounded of their own accord. They danced from mid-day till even. Then the maiden stopped, and the music ceased. Betty looked round; the sun was behind the wood. With tears she clasped her hands on the top of her head, and turning in search of the half-empty spindle, lamented about what her mother would say to her. 'Give me your basket,' said the beautiful maiden. 'I will make up to you for what you have left undone to-day.' Betty handed her the basket, and the maiden disappeared for a moment, and afterwards handed Betty the basket again, saying, 'Not now; look at it at home,' and was gone, as if the wind had blown her away.

Betty was afraid to peep into the basket immediately, but half-way home she couldn't restrain herself. The basket was as light as if there was just nothing in it. She couldn't help looking to see whether the maiden hadn't tricked her. And how frightened she was when she saw that the basket was full—of birch leaves! Then, and not

till then, did she begin to weep and lament that she had been so credulous. In anger she threw out two handfuls of leaves, and was going to shake the basket out; but then she bethought herself, 'I will use them as litter for the goats,' and left some leaves in the basket.

She was almost afraid to go home. The goats again could hardly recognise their shepherdess. Her mother was waiting for her on the threshold, full of anxiety. 'For Heaven's sake, girl! what sort of spool did you bring me home yesterday?' were her first words. 'Why?' asked Betty anxiously. 'When you went out in the morning, I went to reel; I reeled and reeled, and the spool still remained full. One skein, two, three skeins; the spool still full. "What evil spirit has spun it?" said I in a temper; and that instant the yarn vanished from the spindle, as if it were spirited away. Tell me what the meaning of this is!'

Then Betty confessed, and began to tell about the beautiful maiden. 'That was a wood-lady!' cried her mother in astonishment; 'about mid-day and midnight the wood-ladies hold their dances. Lucky that you are not a boy, or you wouldn't have come out of her arms alive. She would have danced with you as long as there was breath in your body, or have tickled you to death. But they have compassion on girls, and often give them rich presents. It's a pity that you didn't tell me; if I hadn't spoken in a temper, I might have had a room full of yarn.' Then Betty bethought herself of the basket, and it occurred to her that perhaps, after all, there might have been something under those leaves. She took out the spindle and unspun flax from the top, and looked once more, and, 'See, mother!' she cried out. Her mother looked and clapped her hands. The birch-leaves were turned into gold! 'She ordered me: "Don't look now, but at home!" but I did not obey.' 'Lucky that you didn't empty out the whole basket,' thought her mother.

The next morning she went herself to look at the place where Betty had thrown out the two handfuls of leaves, but on the road there lay nothing but fresh birch-leaves. But the riches that Betty had brought home were large enough.

Her mother bought a small estate; they had many cattle. Betty had handsome clothes, and was not obliged to pasture goats; but whatever she had, however cheerful and happy she was, nothing ever gave her so great delight as the dance with the wood-lady. She often went to the birch-wood; she was attracted there. She hoped for the good fortune of seeing the beautiful maiden; but she never set eyes on her more.

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