



# *Rapunzel and Alice Gothel*

Catherine Assheton-Stones

Retold Fairy Tales

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I'm Alice Gothel. You will have heard of me even if you don't know my name. But let me tell you, it won't have been the true story. Another version of events has been in circulation many years now.

That little bastard Mr Magpie had it in for me since the day I rescued an injured baby squirrel from him. I can't abide an animal being tortured, you see, and he was about to peck out its eyes. His beak dropped open in surprise as I snatched the squirrel from the ground.

So, since I'd deprived him of lunch, Mr Magpie spread the word far and wide that I'm a wicked witch, and that I did many terrible things, including blinding the Prince. Ironic. He had plenty to embellish the story once Rapunzel arrived. The only bit of the tale that's correct is that, yes, I am a witch. Wicked or not, I'll let you decide.

The first thing you've probably heard is that Rapunzel's father, while she was merely a kicking lump in her mother's tummy, stole some of that very herb from my garden, and in revenge for this I claimed the child, cruelly imprisoning her in my tower, blah blah. How anyone thinks this would work in practice is beyond me. I'd threaten to turn someone into a toad if I didn't get the child? One, that's not my style. And, two, it's not how my magic works.

It is true that Rapunzel's mother had a craving for the herb. That's why Rapunzel's father came knocking at my gate. Such a hesitant knock it was too, a mere tap-tap. Back then I only had the reputation of being a frighteningly good healer, but the unknown itself inspires fear.

The garden must have looked eerie to him in the moonlight, with fronds of fragrant herbs, shimmering pools for the water-plants and a fountain in the centre for those potions that require running water. The nightingale sung from a dark nook. Looming over it all, my turreted tower.

Through the open door I saw him hovering at the gate, half turning away. I left my weaving and went forward to greet him, stepping into the golden pool of lamplight spilling onto the path.

As he came towards me his eyes widened. I wasn't sure if it was admiration or surprise. I was very young to be a healer, you see. Most assume you cannot develop the skill until you're an old crone, but I learnt the art at my mother's knee. With my pale skin and black eyes, I certainly don't look normal, but it's the hair that really gives it away. Straight, black, and falling into curls at the very end. Only women with magic in their blood have such hair.

He was dressed in simple farming attire, sandy hair all tousled and furrows on his brow. A sturdy, handsome fellow, and I had to remind myself that he was here for the sake of his wife. I must leave well alone.

Sometimes I was tempted when visitors like him came to my door – a witch has her needs you know.

But more than that, my mother had gone the day after my twenty first birthday, called to other lands by the mysterious compulsion that witches sometimes feel. She left me safe enough and able to earn a living, but I'd sit and weave at night and look out at the glowing lights of the village below. I'd reflect that there must be other souls alone like me, sitting in their little pools of light, with the black spaces between them, like a constellation of tiny stars in the darkness.

I invited the stranger in, gave him a seat by the fire and pressed a cup of warmed wine into his hands. He stared doubtfully into its depths, perched on the edge of his chair as though about to bolt. I sat back down at my hand loom and told him in my softest voice that I was just finishing the shawl and not to mind if I continued to work. He took a few sips of wine and soon sat up straighter, his heavy eyes became more alert. I

pretended not to watch him, sensing that he'd begin in his own time.

'What it is,' he piped up at last, 'What it is, Mistress, is that my wife is due to have our first baby in a few days' time. She's got a terrible craving for this herb, rapunzel, the traveller man said it was called. I can't find hide nor hair of it anywhere and we heard from Meg who sells the sheep fleeces that you have all manner of unusual plants and herbs and just might be able to oblige.'

I stopped weaving and said of course I could give them as much of the herb as they liked. 'What's your price?' he asked. I could see he was anxious – some healers charged ridiculous prices. When I said just a penny he became more cheerful. He followed me out to the far side of the garden, while I cut the herb, told me all about how his wife was worried the child was also craving the rapunzel as it had been kicking and moving about a lot these last few days.

I didn't think the child could be in want of it, since the only good thing about the herb was that it is rich in vitamins. I didn't tell the father, but I worried that the gypsy who sold them the rapunzel had put a craving curse on it. Such a thing wasn't unknown among travelling salesmen. It meant when they passed the door again they'd have a plentiful demand, but often they blew away with the wind, like my mother, and never passed that way again.

Back in the light inside, I made great show of packaging up the herb in brown paper and string, and while doing so muttered a 'satiating' spell. That should cure both mother and baby of any magically inspired cravings. The stranger was examining my jars and bottles on the shelves as though they were exotic artefacts. I doubted he could read, so he wasn't able to decipher the more prosaic titles such as 'liniment', 'hound tonic' and 'cat de-worming potion'.

He took the parcel and held it to him as though it was such a precious gift, dropping his penny into my hand with so many repeated 'thank you's' that I said if he'd just wait a moment I could give him something else. He sat back down by the fire while I returned to the loom. The shawl I was working on had been for a neighbour's new born, but I could make another one for them.

Soon, it was ready, blue and fluffy, made of softest lamb's wool and blessed with a warming spell, to keep a baby cosy through the winter. But before I handed it over, on an impulse, I went to my mantelpiece and

opened a box which contained a mother of pearl pendant on a silver chain. It was the only piece of jewellery I had.

I folded the shawl and placed the pendant on top and laid them on the lap of the man by the fire. He stroked the blue wool as I explained that the mother of pearl pendant would, if worn through labour, guarantee the safe birth of any child. Tears sprang to his eyes and he said he would return the pendant to me after it had done its good work. He helped me wrap this second parcel in paper, our hands brushing as we worked.

I waved him goodnight at the open door, watching him leave the golden circle of light and go out into the darkness.

You may be wondering, why such an extravagant dwelling for a simple medicine-woman? My father, and his father before and his before that lived in the tower at the end of the valley as watchmen. We guarded the villagers from invaders for generations, until peace crept over the land and we turned our skills to protecting them from dangers closer to home: disease and childbirth.

A few days later I returned from foraging into the woods with my basket full of mushrooms (they can only be picked at night for the particular purposes I needed them) to find another larger basket on my doorstep. Eggs of many different size and hue filled it, duck eggs, hen's eggs, goose eggs and tiny spotted quail's eggs. Tucked between the eggs nestled a flat brown paper envelope. Inside was my pendant and written in large uncertain hand was, 'Dear Mistress, our daughter who we have named Rapunzel was born last night. Babe and mother are well. Please dine with us any day soon so we can thank you'.

Well, I did visit them and saw baby Rapunzel, wrapped in my blanket with her matching cornflower eyes and her gentle coo-ing. Her mother was a silly little thing, simpering and golden of hair that fell in natural ringlets down her back. Such hair usually indicates a vapid brain, and this was no exception.

But, she was sweet enough, and we had a pleasant dinner at their fireside, and after that we'd visit each other at least once every season. I would bring them medicine as needed and they would bring me gifts as they could. So I saw little Rapunzel grow from a tiny babe to a small stagerer, pudgy-handed and inquisitive as my black cat Lucifer. Her hair began as tiny golden wisps and her blue eyes only grew bluer and darker with time.

Rapunzel must have been about twelve when I had the aforementioned altercation with the magpie and

acquired my new squirrel friend and the beginnings of my bad reputation. It was a few years later, when she was blossoming into young womanhood, that I rescued another injured creature.

Out in the forest looking for wild garlic one day, I heard crashing from the undergrowth. Assuming it was some deer or other wild animal that might be injured, I went to investigate. What I found, in a ferny dell, was not a deer, but what I took to be a frightened boy, hunting breeches and white frilled shirt all ripped and stained. When I parted the ferns and saw him I'm not sure which of us was more astounded.

I should mention, my magical blood saves me from many of the usual frailties of mortals. I looked barely a day older than when Rapunzel's father came knocking at my gate. I could have been taken for being in the mid-twenties, though was much older than that even then. On my part, I had not been expecting to run into the Prince and future King on my morning outing.

Kneeling by his side I found his ankle was swollen and bruised. His horse had thrown him and galloped off. Ascertaining the creature's name, I sent it out, whispered on the breeze and only a few minutes later the steed came trotting back along the forest path to us.

'What are you?' the Prince asked, not very gallantly, I thought, though his eyes glowed with wonder. 'A healer,' I replied. 'And I have a way with animals.' That was all he needed to know.

Having led the Prince and his horse back to my tower, I got him by the fire, propped his injured leg up on a stool and gave him a drop of liquor laced with opium to numb the pain. He soon fell asleep and while he slept I mixed a black ointment and covered his ankle with it, muttering certain incantations over his injury. He woke just as I was wiping the black gunge from his skin. His hand closed over my wrist.

'It's true, what I've heard, you are a witch,' he said.

I slipped away from his grasp and turned my back to him to clean the wooden bowl. 'Why do you say that?' 'Because,' he paused, and I heard him push away the stool and stand up, 'My ankle is completely better.' 'I'm a good healer.'

I turned to see him standing there, on two legs. I hadn't realised how tall he was until then. My eyes must have widened at sight of him. He smiled at me: a smile like the sun coming out.

After that he kept dropping by for the oddest things – did I have any essence of violets for his mother, the Queen; could I give him something for the royal cats to stop them killing the royal birds; his father the King had gout, was making everyone miserable, and none of the expensive physicians at the palace could help him.

It wasn't long before the day I turned round from mixing a tonic for him to find him up close behind me, then his arms around me, then his hands over me.

I couldn't deny I'd had a hankering to touch him recently. But I protested.

'You should not, Prince. I am a witch, remember. I am older than you. We could never be any sort of match.'

'I don't care,' he answered and began kissing me. Pretty soon I didn't care either.

By this time Rapunzel had turned sixteen. Whenever I saw her I was amazed at how fast she'd grown, yet I still thought of her as merely a beautiful child.

But, one spring night a cautious rat-tat-tat came at my door. I wondered if it was my Prince, but it wasn't his usual knock. Outside stood Rapunzel, little fair face tear streaked.

'You've got to help me, Aunt Alice!' she said. 'I'm in terrible trouble. I can't hide it anymore.'

In the lamplight the curve of her belly was clear.

'Who was it?' I asked.

'Gareth the stable-hand.'

I didn't think much of her choice of mate. A vicious youth, known for neglecting and beating the horses.

'He said he'd marry me to get me into the hay,' she wept. 'Now he says he won't. I told my parents and they turned me out of doors. Father might have relented, but mother wouldn't. She's always been jealous of me.'

I raised my eyebrows. It seemed there was more to the simpering twit of a mother than at first appeared, and not in a good way.

But, now that I looked at Rapunzel in a new light, she looked very much as her mother had fifteen years before, only more lovely.

'In that case,' I said, slowly, 'You must stay with me. You'll be safe here.'

'Oh Auntie Alice!' she flung herself at me. 'I knew you wouldn't turn me away and abandon me.'

In the coming weeks I found a delight I hadn't expected in having someone to care for. She did take a lot of care too, more than I'd expected, but I blamed her indolence and her liking for being waited on hand and foot on her mother for spoiling her. I knew she had a sweet nature.

Having her there did make things difficult with my Prince. Fortunately, she had requested the room at the very top of the tower, which had the best view. So he would visit after she had retired to rest, and for many months she was unaware of his presence at all. That was how I hoped things would stay. I wanted us to remain a secret from his parents, and anyone knowing of our affair would risk making it public.

By now he'd asked me to marry him. The day he asked, while naked in my bed, I wanted to say yes, but I held back, and asked him to wait for an answer, unsure we could survive the wrath of his parents, and perhaps the whole village.

I had to go hunting and foraging more with Rapunzel to feed. Her appetite seemed insatiable and she'd grow fractious and tearful if there wasn't always something to eat at hand. I remembered her mother's cravings when carrying her and didn't blame her for it.

When I found her eating berries from the blueberry bush outside I had to speak sternly to her and tell her never to eat anything from the garden. It might look like an innocent berry, and as it happened the blueberries were, but it might just as well be poisonous or magically enchanted.

Rapunzel rolled her eyes when she thought I couldn't see, but said, 'Yes, Auntie, I won't, I'm sorry,' docilely enough.

Returning tired from hunting a few days later with a hare slung over my shoulder, I heard a keening sound from inside. I pushed the door open, noticing it was ajar as I did so, to find Rapunzel doubled up in front of the fire, bending over, whimpering, arms wrapped around her middle.

When I pulled her upright I saw black stains on her lips.

'What did you eat?' I cried, grabbing her arms. She started weeping noisily. I shook her and asked her again. 'The red bush in the far corner over the little pond... Berries that looked just like blackberries but they tasted bitter.'

I dropped her arms and my face must have given itself away as she screamed, 'No, don't look like that, don't... don't. What have I done?'

Taking her face between my hands I held her still and saw that her irises had already turned black. Soon the colour would creep across the whites too, then her whole face and she would stop breathing.

I carried her up to her room in my arms. As she lay on the bed, feverish, I said every spell and incantation in my arsenal. There was no point making her a tonic or healing potion: only direct magic could help with such quick poison which was already inside her. She grew easier after a little while and dozed. The blackness was no longer spreading. But half an hour later she sat up and screamed, clutching her stomach.

'Get the pendant,' she said, between convulsions. 'My baby... He's two moons early. He needs the pendant to be safe.'

I ran downstairs and fetched it from its wooden box, slipped it over her neck.

I held her hand as she convulsed with the labour pains. Tears overflowed and I dashed them away before she could see, gritting my teeth. I knew the baby was dead inside her, you see. Telling her and not telling her were both horrible options. At least by not telling her, she could live in ignorance a few moments longer.

When the tiny boy emerged, pale and still, Rapunzel went limp and fell back on the bed. As I cut the cord and washed the tiny body, checking in vain for signs of life one last time, I glanced at her grey face and wondered if I was losing her too.

Rapunzel lived. But the sweet girl she'd been never returned from that confinement. We buried her baby in the garden under a rose bush together.

Gradually, as she recovered, I saw a different side of her. When people came for my medicines if she was in the room she'd mutter, 'Much may that help you...' She'd make remarks about single women with cats while eyeing Lucifer, who'd taken to hissing at her whenever she looked his way.

'There's nothing to keep me here now,' she said on several occasions, 'I may as well go and seek my fortune, make my way in the world,' but she made no move to go.

It was around this time that the Prince called while she was downstairs. I'd told him what had happened to her



and I could see it was in his mind as he went over and kissed her hand. The tenderness on his face disturbed me. Rapunzel on the other hand, eyes wide in surprise at meeting him and realising our relationship, was all smiles and blushes. The two of them cooing at each other made me irritated and I went out into the garden with Lucifer, sitting outside on the bench until eventually the Prince came to find me.

I soon forgot the incident. Not least because shortly after I received a message via a pigeon from an old friend – her sister was seriously ill and could I go and tend to her. ‘Well, good luck to them then...’ Rapunzel muttered as I saddled my horse. I didn’t bid her goodbye.

When I returned, having been away six weeks, I was surprised to find Rapunzel almost back to her former self. Perhaps time to reflect had done her good. She insisted on preparing supper the night of my return and asked all about my travels, listening and glowing like the good friend she’d once been. I went to bed feeling cheered and looking forward to seeing my Prince.

In the event all thoughts of him went from my mind the next day as I was called out to attend an accident where a cart had driven off the road. Having done what I could for the injured driver, I returned, with a heavy tread, looking forward to a cup of mead and supper.

I called out as I entered the tower, expecting to find Rapunzel waiting for me. I found not only Rapunzel but also the Prince, on the window seat, in each other’s arms. They sat bolt upright from their half reclining posture, like naughty children caught with their hands in the cake tin. It occurred to me what a fool I’d been not to foresee this.

An expression of horror came across my former lover’s face. At the time I was puzzled and later I realised it was because, instead of raging or weeping, I smiled. It must have looked pretty frightening, to be fair. The Prince turned, flung open the sash of the window, scrambled on to the window seat and jumped into the flower bed outside. He stumbled and fell forwards into a patch of menthol herb. We heard him cry out and stagger up, fists in his eyes, as he rushed towards the road.

Several birds and people saw him making his way back to the palace with red, raw streaming eyes half open, occasionally falling over things. That’s what gave rise to the rumour that I blinded him.

Rapunzel eyed me. The silence between us deepened. She squared her shoulders. ‘We should have told you

before this. He wanted to. But I wanted to spare your feelings.'

Before either of us knew it I had a bunch of her golden curls in my fist and was hauling her to the door. She wailed like the brat I now knew her to be until I flung her down on the path outside. Then she stopped her cries, and sat on the ground.

'You can't hurt me. I have the Prince's baby in my belly.'

I heard myself howl. In that instant I knew – I wanted what she had, and I could never have it now.

I seized a pair of shears from the garden bench beside me, grabbed her hair again and hacked at it. Great golden hunks fell and scattered from my hands until she looked like a badly shorn sheep, red in the face and sobbing. Once there was only the odd forlorn tuft on her scalp, I dropped the shears. Unseeing, I rushed passed her, through the open gate and took off into my sanctuary, the woods.

Blinded by tears I crashed through the undergrowth, haphazard as a wounded deer.

How could the Prince do this? I loved him, and he said he'd loved me. He'd said he wanted to be with me forever. Even if he found he preferred that little idiot, Rapunzel, he must hate me to humiliate me like that. As for her, she'd been waiting to betray me all along.

I didn't even see the deep ditch until the ground was gone from under my feet and I was falling. All I remember is searing pain – burning stabs all over my face and hands and another stabbing pain in my left ankle, then a bird singing nearby, then nothing.

When I regained consciousness I was aware of a strange sensation of movement: of being carried along. I was lying, as though in someone's arms, but moving far faster than anyone could walk. There was a sort of rolling motion, like being on a boat perhaps. I opened one eye. I could only squint painfully and couldn't open the other one at all.

It was an arm supporting my legs, large and tanned and hairy. Now I understood: it was another arm under my back. I was held against and sturdy man's bare chest.

I whimpered.

‘Hush, lady,’ said a deep voice from just above my head. ‘I won’t harm you. It was lucky I found you. Don’t talk now. Time for that later.’

I looked up and saw that it was a man, or at least, something very like a man. A strong face, black stubble. The crescent pendant hung at his neck, and I understood who he was then. The centaurs call themselves the people of the crescent. They’re secretive, and it was the first time I’d ever seen one in person.

I think I dozed then, which is strange, considering the novelty of my situation, but the galloping motion was soporific.

When his gait changed I woke and looked up through my one good eye to see we’d entered a pale palace in the trees; walls and arches of white elm soaring up to the sky, like nothing I’d seen before. I knew this place had a stronger, older magic than my small powers.

The centaur laid me on a mossy bank. I found myself alone and began to wonder what had happened to me. I examined my hands and saw the skin of my palms deeply gashed and torn. I jumped as I realised the centaur had returned.

‘You fell into a thorn thicket.’ He answered the question I’d thought but not asked.

‘Let me see my face.’

‘That isn’t advisable. If you will lie still, I will tend to you.’

He held a wooden bowl full of shimmering water. How strange to find myself the one needing care, rather than the one caring for another. I lay back down on the moss.

The centaur put his hand in the bowl and then held it above my face so that sparkling drops fell onto my skin and eyes. He muttered words in a language I couldn’t place while the cool drops landed. Then I discovered I could open both eyes: I could see properly again.

‘Please, put your hands in the water,’

He helped me to sit up and I slipped my hands along the wooden bottom of the bowl. There was a tingling, then the cuts were gone and I drew my hands out whole and white from the water.

I rested my eyes on his face. How blue his eyes were. How kind that mouth, not smiling, but not stern once you looked closely. It was a face you could never get tired of looking at, and I could feel the magic of the place we were in seeping into my very bones.

Time moves slowly in the palace in the wood.

I never returned to my tower. Apparently Rapunzel burnt it down the day after I ran away. The news hardly touched me: I feel so far away from my former life here. Lucifer found me in the woods a few days later, picking his way through tree roots with daintily lifted paws and concerned meows. There was nothing else in the tower I cared for as much him.

The townspeople also know where to find me if they need me. The nightingales spread the word. Sometimes I hear news of Rapunzel and the Prince from them. They did marry, and the King then died, so the Prince is in charge, ruling badly and taxing the people too highly. Rapunzel is now Queen, nursing her two young children. She plagues his life out I'm told.

As for my fate? Well, I married my centaur.

He's more magical than I, and we've travelled to many a distant land together. There are excellent benefits to being married to a man who's half-man half-horse, I can tell you.

Why are you smiling? I mean he can carry me on his back when he gallops, so travelling is a joy. I can't imagine what you were thinking.

Anyway, after our adventures, we always return in the end to our elm palace in the woods. I'm expecting our first centaur foal any day now.

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