



# *The Unlucky Shepherdess*

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Animals, Humor, Magic

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It happened once upon a time that a very lazy shepherdess was tending her flock of sheep when she had the unfortunate idea to take a quick nap. Seeing that the day was warm and the sheep grazed contentedly, she dozed off beneath an apple tree with a smile, for no nap is sweeter than one stolen whilst on the watch.

The shepherdess soon entertained the most delightful dreams of dancing at balls and eating fried hams, so that upon waking, she felt very annoyed to be taken away from the lovely little scenes that played about her brain.

“Why must I be a shepherdess!” she pouted, lamenting her sad lot. “It would be much nicer to be a Princess! I daresay I would wear the crown of royalty quite well and people from all over the land would say, ‘Never was there such a fair and just Princess! My how her hair shines like the noonday sun and her eyes sparkle like diamonds on the water!’ I would dine on cherry creams and trifle, chocolate puffs and tarts. Poo, to this stupid tree that only produces boring apples when I should be tasting Turkish Delights and Pear Strudels—as are only proper for a Princess!”

Such were the vain dreams of the Shepherdess, and in her very high estimation of herself, she began to despise her faithful flock. She looked around her at the sheep and found them where they should be, but that did not please her.

“Better if you had all wandered off and been eaten by a wolf while I slept! Then, maybe I could be free of this horrid business and start the work of becoming a Princess!”

The sheep were very much distressed by this statement, for sheep, though simple-minded creatures, are trusting. They know they were not made for pugilism, but for pasturing; and therefore, they need the strong

arm and firm staff of a shepherdess to protect them from the ravenous wolves and wily foxes. A sheep is happy to be a sheep, and so, this is why they were most astonished to hear that their shepherdess did not wish to be a shepherdess!

Not only that, but her proclamation that their death would be better for her was also quite disconcerting. To say the least. The very, very least. They began to baa and babble among themselves. Their noises only fueled her anger, for she thought it grossly unfair that she should have to hear sheep babble all day instead of sweet symphonies and sonnets composed in honor of her beauty.

“Poor, miserable me!” she said, slumping against a rock and weeping bitter tears.

One sheep, a kind of leader among his flock, stepped forward and said to his brethren, “This really won’t do. If our own protector wishes us dead, what sort of protection will she offer when night creeps in and wolves are on the prowl? We are not brave sheep nor are we strong sheep, but I daresay! We are better to go off on our own than to follow our beloved shepherdess any longer.”

And to this they all agreed. So, while the shepherdess continued to moan and weep, they went trotting up the hill to look for a cave. The bells around their necks clanged and rang, making them trot all the faster.

The shepherdess eventually took notice of the fading sound. She jumped to her feet and shouted at them to come back. “No no no no, what are you doing you stupid sheep!?! Come back here, ya hear! Come back I say!”

She made chase with wicked thoughts of beating them with her staff, but she did not catch them. For as was mentioned before, she was a lazy shepherdess. After the slightest exertion, she lost her breath and fell to her knees, exhausted.

“Oh woe is me!” she wailed anew. “What am I to do? I’ll be harshly whipped for losing all the sheep. What made them run off like that? Are there wolves around?” She looked about to see what the danger was and saw none.

“It is better for me to die than to return without any sheep. Never was there a more unfortunate girl than I! Who has ever seen such rebellious sheep!” she raged at the sky.

Just then, a raven flew above her head and cawed at her. “Why are you so miserable, oh most fortunate of all shepherdesses?” he squawked.

“How can you call me fortunate when I have lost all my sheep? Unlucky me!” she cried.

“It would seem that way, but I happen to know there is a wolf skin just over beyond those crags and if you wear it you can play a nice trick on your sheep, which are not far from here just over the hill in a cave,” the blackbird said with a sneaky look in his eye.

“Do you speak the truth vile bird? For if you do, I should be indebted to you. Tell me, how might I repay your good will if I recover my sheep?” she asked.

“No need, no need for that,” said the Blackbird, “but if you find it fair, let me alight on your shoulder and clip a lock of your long golden hair to weave into my nest.”

The shepherdess laughed at the request and thought, “Stupid bird. A lock of my hair is nothing to give in return for an entire flock of sheep and to save myself twenty lashes.”

But she smiled sweetly at him and said aloud, “Of course. Come hither and clip whichever lock you like.” With that, the blackbird grinned broadly, landed on her shoulder and clipped a lock from behind her ear and flew away very quickly with it streaming from his beak, and he looked much pleased with himself.

“Now to find that wolf skin,” the shepherdess thought. She climbed over where the bird had instructed and searching between the craggy rocks and thorny bushes, she soon found the prize she sought.

She pulled the rich silver fur up in front of her and examined the head. “What a beastly thing! Oh, I’ll give those sheep such a fright!” she squealed.

What she did not know was this: the wolf skin was enchanted! Once she put it on, she would not be able to take it off again unless a Prince fell in love with her. As she did not know this, and even if she did she would not have believed it, so wicked were her thoughts at playing a trick on her poor, fearful sheep that she scooped the skin over her body and immediately went on her way in search of the flock. It was not long before she found them cowering in a cave, trying to be very quiet and brave.

She chuckled to herself under the skin, and doing her very best impersonation of a wolf, she crept slowly into the cave, licking her lips and stalking her prey. The poor sheep quivered in fear and bleated helplessly. They lost their courage and all began to run helter-skelter. She leapt and pounced in their midst until she frightened them all out of the cave and down the hill, and back home.

She was feeling very proud and very tickled at hearing their silly, scared bleating. "What a clever disguise! This is easier than shepherding them! They run so fast when they are scared!" she thought to herself.

As it happened, the manager of the farm was just coming out to see to it that all the animals were locked up safe and tight, when he saw a great wolf bounding down the hillside at his sheep, which were all running straight away for their sheep pen. The farmer picked up a large stone and threw it at the wolf. His aim was true.

The shepherdess was knocked in the ribs and fell backward. She scarcely had time to comprehend what happened before she was being pummeled by many rocks all at once, for all the farm hands had come to the aid of the flock. She tried to call out to them to stop, but they did not hear her for they were all yelling and shouting to scare her away, for they truly thought she was a wolf. The shepherdess had no choice but to take to her heels and speed away as fast as she could into the woods.

Once out of harm's way, she decided to rid herself of the wolf skin right away and examine her wounds. Try as she might, she could not peel the skin away from her.

"What is this?" she said in a fright. "Why won't the skin come off? Oh dear me!" She began to weep once more. "Oh, dreadful day! I have been brutally tricked and now I am all alone, cold and beaten in this terrible wood. I will never see my home again. What am I to do?"

As she was saying these things, a caravan happened to be passing by on a road near her, and leading the party was a young Prince on horseback. He heard the weeping in the wood and stopped, curious. He followed the sound and came upon the most stunningly beautiful silver wolf weeping so bitterly that his heart was pierced in his breast.

Indeed, any heart would have been touched at the sad scene in the wood, for though a wolf is an evil creature, to see one in such distress calls upon the deepest goodwill in a human heart, to rise nobly and show kindness to even our most despised enemies.

The Prince called out to the wolf. "Friend, why weepest thou in this lonely wood? Verily, if I can be of any help to you, consider me at your disposal for it is my honor and duty as prince of this land to right those wronged, and ease the suffering of broken hearts."

At these words, the shepherdess turned to the Prince, astonished. She had never seen a Prince before nor heard such lofty speech, and in truth, she did not know how to respond. Seeing the distress and confused look on the wolf's face, the Prince continued, "Please! You have naught to fear unless evil is your game, but if thou art truly in distress, speak now and let fate smile upon you."

Indeed, this Prince was a very generous and kind prince, but he was young and foolish to have left his entire caravan behind, all to befriend a wolf. However, the wolf skin was resplendent and mesmerizing, and on second look, he could see the bloodied belly near the ribs and other cuts along the back and tail marring the beautiful silver fur with sticky, red patches.

"You are hurt, methinks!" cried the Prince. The shepherdess-wolf looked down at herself and nodded her head in agreement. She sniffled a little, and the young Prince's heart broke for her. He jumped from his saddle and walked toward her.

She started and put up her paws, "Please don't hurt me!"

He stopped, surprised and said, "Dear wolf, how sweet is thy tongue! Such a lilting, melodic voice, but forgive me, you are not in need of words but of action for you are well wounded, and I do not come to give thee harm but to carry thee on my horse back to my castle where I shall tend to all your needs and nurse you back to health."

The shepherdess was much pleased at this and stood shakily on her four legs. She decided not to say much more yet, as she did not want to give herself away as a lowly shepherdess and be sent back to the farm she so loathed. The Prince helped her onto his horse, where she sat quite dignified, side saddle. The Prince was in awe of the creature. He sat in front of her and rode back to join his company.

They were all much surprised to see him return with a wild beast, sitting so charmingly on the back of his horse! Before they could speak a word in alarm or protest, the Prince raised his hand and spoke thus, "Fear not, for this wolf is injured and she is in need of our assistance. Far be it from me to deny such a beautiful creature the healing she needs. And in truth, I like this wolf. She speaks with a lovely voice and I hope to hear her sing

once she is well.” His servants and knights were amazed at all he said. They assented to his wishes and they all returned at once to the castle.

The Prince was true to his word and had a handful of maid servants assist the she-wolf in all matters of bathing. They also cleaned and dressed her wounds. The wolf was invited to sup at dinner. She was dressed in fine linens and a string of pearls placed round her neck. It was most unbecoming for a wolf, but there was something tragic and tender in it all and none could speak a word against her, for she continued to sigh so heartily that even the most cold-heart melted in the presence of her grief. The Shepherdess was very careful not to utter a word to the maid servants while she was in their care until she understood the Princes’ plans for her.

At dinner, the Prince eyed her curiously the entire time, while his mother, the Queen tried not to let her mouth fall into too much of a gape, for she was much aghast at the sight of a wolf at her dining table. There was no King, for he had died recently. All were very sad but anticipated the rise of the Prince to take his place.

Once he found a Princess to marry, he would be made King. The Queen was of a mind to make a very advantageous match for him and the kingdom, and had sent many letters to all the lands letting them know her son was seeking a bride. She had invited all of royal and noble birth to a feast at her castle in honor of the beautiful princesses, duchesses and heiresses of great lords, to see if any were worthy to be Queen.

The Prince was looking forward to the grand feast, for he was pleased to become a King and wanted very much to find a lovely wife to marry as soon as possible. This was the matter at hand of which they discussed at the banquet table that evening.

“There will be minstrels of course, and a quartet and the gardens will be in such a bloom by then that if nothing else, we will be illustrious in the eyes of the world for our grand hospitality and ornate accommodations that we will most certainly be the talk of the whole world for the next six months at least.” said the Queen, mostly to herself for no one else was listening.

The prince had his eyes on the she-wolf, and the shepherdess her eyes on her plate, playing shy. She wasn't actually shy, no – she was vain and lazy, and because of this she desperately desired to go to the feast and present herself to the Prince. Though not as a wolf, of course, but as a maiden fair. She would win his hand and live all her days as a Queen, sitting on feather pillows while eating chocolates and ordering maids to braid her hair, paint her toes, and bring her more raspberry cordial.

She was contriving how to do this when the Prince said, “Yes Mother, that all sounds resplendent, and I should like very much that our guest, this...well, what do you call yourself dear she-wolf? Whatever it is, I request that you bless us with your presence at the feast. I am certain all will be in great awe of your striking silver mane and wildly good manners, which are simply unheard of in a monstrous creature like yourself. Please excuse my forwardness, but I have never seen the likes of you in all of God's holy kingdom.”

The shepherdess nodded her head gratefully and played with the pearl strand around her throat. “My name,” she began, “is Mirabella,” she lied, but it was the nicest sounding name she could think of for a would-be Princess.

Her voice was the sound of tinkling bells and a heavenly choir to the Prince; perhaps, it was because one expects gruffness from a wolf, so any bit of tenderness is well received. To be fair, despite all the shepherdess' many faults, she did have a lovely voice, made lovelier when filled with song. As all people know, shepherdesses have refined voices as singing is the one practice they can exert nearly all their energy toward while tending a flock of sheep. So moved was he at the sound of her voice and learning her name that he could do nothing save reach out his hand and tenderly touch her paw.

The Queen was more aghast than ever and dropped her spoon into her pumpkin soup. It made an awful glop and a decided clang, so both the Prince and Mirabella looked over in surprise at this complete lack of etiquette.

“Dear Mother, are you quite alright?” asked the Prince.

“Quite alright? I assure you dear son, I am quite alright. It is you I fear for. Please tell me I have soup in my ears, and I did not just hear you invite this wolf to our banquet with all the most refined and noble men and women of our time? For though I love you dearly, and am so glad you have found a new pet, it would be entirely out of fashion to have a wild animal at a dinner party, and not just any dinner party, but a banquet to find your betrothed! Indeed!” she sputtered.

“Mother! Please....” the Prince began, but the shepherdess cut him off.

“Dearest Queen, your concerns are quite right. It would be most unbecoming for me to attend such a tremendous feast as the one you are planning; however, I am no wild beast but a Princess under a most ghastly enchantment, and that is the reason for all my sighs and tears! This also accounts for the good manners of which you have noticed in myself, for certainly, no ordinary wolf could hold a soup spoon with the ease and grace that I do.”

The Prince and Queen raised their eyebrows and nodded in agreement. “I appear before you completely embarrassed and humbled in such a fur, and can only plead for your kind understanding, that you pass over these hideous paws and beastly countenance, and find in your heart some pity for my sad, sad lot. I do not know how to break the enchantment, and by now my noble parents have most likely died from heartache. Oh, woe is me! But how fortunate to have found such a magnanimous welcome by a Queen as renowned as yourself.”

The Prince and Queen were astonished to hear of the poor Mirabella’s fate. The Queen was won over by the shepherdess’ moving and kind words, and was immediately contrite and apologetic and promised to do anything within her power to help Mirabella break the spell upon her. The Prince too vowed that he would not sleep or eat until she was restored to her proper form, to which Mirabella assured him that though his intentions were noble, fasting from such things which would only weaken him, and thusly unwise should she need him to do battle for her.

The Prince heard her words and thought her astute beyond all women, and maybe, there was a gleam in her blue gray eyes that he found a little seductive. He thanked her for the sage advice, saying he was at her service and hoped to restore her to her kingdom and her maiden form as soon as possible.

The Shepherdess could not believe her good fortune! Once they figured out how to make her a girl again, she

was sure they would not kick a poor orphaned Princess out, and even if she could not be the Princes' wife, she could make a very fine younger sister to him. She chuckled, and the Prince said, "What's that?" To which, she said, it was nothing and asked to be excused.

"Of course of course, you have had a long and arduous day and the comfort of a soft bed will be welcome after your many days out in the wild. But pray, bless us with a song before you go?" pleaded the Prince.

The wolf brushed a paw over her silver locks and glanced around. She noticed a lyre and asked if the Prince could play. He could and so eagerly went to retrieve it. He began a doleful melody which suited her mood, and she began to sing a sweet, mournful song which crept into the hearts of those who heard it like fog on a harbor at night. Soon they were entirely lost in her voice and gave themselves over to the sweet enchantment.

When she finished, the Prince had tears in his eyes. Her words stirred his very soul and he knew he had never heard a finer voice. The knowledge that she was a Princess under that thick coat only helped fuel the passion stirred in his breast for her. For all good Princes' hope for some poor damsel to rescue, for some adventure to present itself that will prove their might, their devotion, their wit. Here before him was, clearly, the loveliest and most needy of all creatures he had ever met. Without his aid she may forever be enchanted.

He determined in his heart to devote his life to her even if they never found the scoundrel who did this. Little did he know that she did it to herself, and that she was entirely undeserving of such a fine Princes' devotion as his, but all that aside, she made him feel important and noble in a way that he had never felt before, and so, before parting for bed, he kissed her paw and knew he was falling in love.

The Shepherdess was treated to all the luxuries customary for a Princess during her stay at the castle. There was a warm bath each day with plenty of plush towels. Her fur was brushed and braided and pinned back with ribbons and bows of finest silk. They had a tailor make custom gowns of rich velvet with fine brocade. She was a sight to behold and it only fueled her vanity.

Her nails were painted, her pillows plumped. She dined on quail with parsnips, roast pig and plum. For dessert, every fruit imaginable was served on a platter for her choosing with rich creams and custards to accompany them, and sweet port wine. They asked her each evening to sing a song, to which she gladly acquiesced, and after each song the Prince lost more of his heart to her, while she fell more and more in love with the fineness afforded royalty.

It came to be the night of the grand banquet to find his bride, and the Prince was at his best. He was immeasurably cheerful and in such fine spirits that the whole castle could feel his joy. The Prince had decided to profess his love to Mirabella in a toast after the first course of the evening. He knew his guests would be shocked, and he would have to apologize for making them travel so far when he had already decided his bride. He would say that he wanted them all there to take part in his engagement party, as that is what it would become once he made his announcement.

Already the news of Mirabella had spread throughout the kingdom, so that those arriving were quite aware that she would make an appearance at the banquet, and all were anxious to see with their own eyes the wolf-princess. The Prince requested that flyers be posted throughout every province, offering a reward to anyone who knew how to break the spell.

Every sleepy village was awake with gossip and curiosity at the news of such a bizarre enchantment, for Princes turning into toads and children into donkeys were commonplace then, and even a spell as rare as a goose laying golden eggs still turned up every couple of years or so, but a Princess turning into a wolf – never!

The great royals and nobles of that day were excited to present their daughters to the good prince in hopes of making a match of marriage, but they were even more excited to see the enchanted wolf, though they would not dare admit it.

The time for feasting was upon them, and all were seated in the grandest of banquet halls in all the latest fashions befitting nobility. Mirabella sat at the right hand of the Prince, bedecked in rubies and pearls, her gown flowing with gold embroidery. She looked divine in the moonlight that poured through the rose window.

All eyes were on her and she loved every minute of the attention. She made a point to bat her eyes and fan herself often. She was so taken with playing her part that she had never noticed the Prince falling in love with her. When he stood and cried, “A toast! A toast!” she looked at him with little understanding of the events which were about to unfold.

While it may be obvious to many, that of course only a Prince in love could break an enchantment of such proportion, it had not occurred to the poor Shepherdess. She was not well acquainted with spells and enchantments, and was really as simple and silly as the sheep she tended.

All eyes were on the Prince as he raised his glass high. “Dear friends, I am humbled at your presence here

tonight and most honored to have round me the finest ladies and gentleman this good earth has birthed. You have traveled long and far, and for that I am deeply moved. You are here to see me choose a bride, and I am so happy to say, that I have found her!”

A cheer went up from the crowd! They all looked round as if to guess first who the lucky woman was. The Queen began to swoon, for she had assumed that she would choose the bride, and she had no idea that her son could be so brash and bold as to choose a bride so soon and without her knowledge and consent.

“I present to you, the light of my life, the crown jewel of the kingdom, the fairest one of all, the lady, Mirabella.” A gasp went out among them all, and indeed, even Mirabella let out an exclamation of surprise and knocked her wine into her potatoes.

“Mirabella, I love you truly. Will you be my wife?” In this moment, his heart beat most true. He was so fully in love that the spell was broken, despite all the falsehoods. All eyes saw the beastly skin fall from the body of the Shepherdess into a heap on the floor. She now sat in peasant clothes, her lowborn dignity and vanity available to be judged by them all.

But, they had witnessed a miracle and so took no notice of her clothes or bare feet at all, and saw only her long golden hair shining in the moonlight, and her sweet, small eyes looking nervously at the Prince.

The Prince stood amazed to see his love in her maiden form and threw his arms round her in delight and kissed her mouth. A cheer went up in the room, for while there were many tears from forgotten brides whose hopes were in this evening, no one could be too sad or ignoble after witnessing the restoration of a princess to her rightful body.

And so it was that the lazy shepherdess became a Princess, and she indulged every whim and fancy she ever imagined. She felt sure that she deserved all this finery and had earned it for her years of hard labor tending sheep. She was not the most just and fair Princess, for to her fairness meant she should have everything she wanted and justice was bossing around her maidservants the way the farmhands had bossed her.

The Prince adored her so that he looked past all her beastly habits, like picking her teeth at the dinner table, and being more interested in food than him, just as he was able to look past the beastly garb she wore when they first met.

But not everyone was so love struck with Mirabella after she became a Princess, least of all her maid servants,

for she made demands of them constantly, and all without a word of thanks. A more ungrateful Princess there never was; but she lived happily all the days of her life at the castle with her Prince, which unfortunately for her, were not long.

Seeing as she was not accustomed to rich foods and constant sweets, her constitution could not keep up with the delicacies and so she grew very fat very quickly, and harbored a chronic case of indigestion.

These things did not slow her greedy hand to her mouth however, for one fated day found her gobbling cherry truffles so quickly that a forgotten pit became lodged in the back of her throat. The poor, lazy shepherdess choked to death in the afternoon sun lying on a damask of paisley flowers and tiny stitched dragonflies.

The good Prince grieved his fair Mirabella, and built a glass case in the lower western corridor to display the wolf skin in her memory to preserve the beautiful time they once shared, when they were both under such strange enchantments.

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