



The White Feather

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Animals

This is a story that unlike most fairy tales is not widely known, nor told by storytellers around the globe or even written down in a book. Until now, it has been a family story which has been handed down simply from mother to daughter or even grandmother to daughter like a precious jewel. Because not so long ago, some generations back, our great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was best friends with the heroine of this tale. While she and her dear friend are separated by us with a wide, vast ocean and many decades, they are still with us in our hearts, especially at this special time as we share their adventure with you for the very first time.

Emelia was a humble, quiet and shy girl in the village, living with her family and working in a bakery in the town square. While her parents preferred her to walk straight to town, she liked to take a longer path so she could see the ocean and to feel the cool breeze and hear the waves. It was fortunate the Emelia was light and quick on her feet, as her parents never knew that she disobeyed this one single rule. For otherwise she was a good and sweet girl.

On an April morning, she left a bit late and was walking quickly while enjoying the salty breeze. It was then when she spotted the most beautiful creature at the water's edge — a swan! It had a wooden ring around its neck and was tied to the docks with what appeared to be a delicate golden chain that sparkled in the early sunlight.

The swan looked at her and Emelia felt her feet stop, right in their tracks. It was so lovely, that it just about took her breath away for a moment.

“I-I’m sorry, I can’t be late!” Emelia said. For which she felt silly, as she knew the bird could not understand her. The soft spring breeze blew and a beautiful white feather came to the ground right in front of her feet. A swan feather. Emelia picked it up and could feel tingles on her neck. She put it in her satchel.

She hastened her pace and walked to the village. Even from more than a hundred feet away she could smell the delicious scents of baking bread, sweet cakes and cookies tempting people to linger in the square.

“Were you daydreaming again?” Daisy asked.

“I saw a swan,” Emelia put on an apron and helped put the cakes up to display. Daisy had been her best friend since they were tiny tots, she would certainly understand.

“You’re so late because of a bird?” Daisy shook her head and giggled.

Daisy’s father gave them a stern look. “Stop this nonsense. Customers are coming in the door.”

Emelia nodded and tucked the white feather into her apron pocket. It was soft and silky to the touch.

The day flew by and soon Emelia swept the floor and Daisy tidied up.

“Well now, tell me more about the bird,” Daisy said.

“Shh!” Emelia replied. She pointed to the kitchen and kept sweeping quickly.

“Dad’s home having supper. He was up before the sun baking bread,” Daisy replied.

Emelia exhaled a sigh of relief. “I’ve never seen a swan that beautiful before. But I do think it was hungry,” Emelia said.

“Are you sure?” Daisy asked.

“Someone has it trapped at the dock,” Emelia said.

“Well, we baked lemon cookies today. Bring a few for your new friend,” Daisy said.

Emelia took 1 pence out of her pocket. “Here, for the cookies.”

Daisy gave her a sack with cookies and Emelia was soon on her way.

She got to the spot by the water’s edge, but there was no swan. Emelia felt a deep pang of disappointment. The sun was getting ready to set and she watched it for a moment sink lower in the sky and the clouds change colors. Her tummy rumbled and she realized that she had the lemon cookies with her. Emelia’s mouth watered and she raised one to her lips...

Suddenly she saw a flash glide across the water. It was her swan! Emelia felt happy instantly.

“Hello lovely bird. I brought you something to eat,” Emelia said. She held out a cookie.

The swan reached for it, but jolted back, as the chain at the dock was too short.

Emelia looked in the swan’s eyes. They were only a few feet apart. She took off her shoes, put down her satchel and stepped into the water until she was standing next to the swan in knee deep water. The water was cold, she shivered just a little. She could feel the ocean waves gently lap at her legs.

The swan up close was even more beautiful. Emelia fed the bird cookies and watched it eat. For a moment she forgot to shiver and the cold water. She was amazed at how gently the bird took the cookies from her hand, as her mother had always cautioned her that a swan’s bite was quite sharp. But here she felt absolutely no fear.

Emelia looked a bit closer at the ring and chain around its neck. It was quite old wood like the finest mahogany, hand painted with intricate patterns, and the chain looked very expensive, almost as if it was pure gold, she held it in her fingers. It was much heavier than a slim line of gold, as if it was made of rock. Nothing like she’d ever seen before.

“E-excuse me! What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Emelia turned towards the voice at the docks. She could see an old man, wearing a fisherman's cap and a long, dark coat.

"This bird is hungry and chained up. Just feeding it," Emelia explained.

"Well, that's my bird and you're bothering it. So leave it alone!" the old man sputtered. "I'm not going to tell you twice!" He waved his gnarled, knotted wooden cane at her.

The swan started to swim obediently towards the old man's voice. Emelia walked out of the water. Again she felt this deep sadness, as the two parted.

She apologized to the old man, who ignored her and walked back into the little house on the dock. Emelia stepped into her shoes and went home.

Emelia awoke the next morning and could see the sunlight dance through the swan feather she'd put on her windowsill. It almost seemed to sparkle.

If she hurried, she'd have longer to see the bird. She flew out of the house, barely speaking a few words to her parents. Her feet made fast time along the cobblestones and thick grass.

Even from a distance she could see it. Emelia moved faster. The swan glided through the water, like a skater on ice so graceful. She was captivated.

Emelia reached the water's edge.

"Hungry?" Emelia whispered. This time she felt a bit braver, and walked out onto the dock, to easily reach the bird. She held out the cookie between her fingers.

The swan glided and then stopped right in front of her. It tilted its head slightly and pulled the cookie out of her hand! Emelia was simply amazed.

It nibbled the cookie and stayed there.

“C-can I pat you?” she asked. The swan stayed put so she brushed the top of its head. Its feathers were just as soft and silky as the one she’d gotten yesterday, blowing in the breeze. Emelia fed it another cookie.

Her heart was beating fast and she kept looking about. What if the old man came back? What would he say? He seemed so angry that Emelia had paid attention to his pet. Yet he didn’t appear to be caring much for it at all. Each time Emelia had seen the swan, it was very hungry and she actually thought it was a bit lonely.

“I-I’m sorry, I’ve got to go,” Emelia whispered.

The swan’s head dipped down a little. Was it Emelia’s imagination, or did the swan actually look disappointed?

“Don’t worry. I’ll come see you as soon as I can,” she whispered and fed it another cookie.

She left the dock and walked up the hill towards the village. A cold breeze blew that chilled her to the bone. Emelia turned her head to look back, and the old man was walking the dock. She breathed a sigh of relief, she’d been there just in time.

“Well, you’re on time today,” Daisy smiled.

“I-I left early,” Emelia admitted. She put her apron on. There was baking to do today.

“See anything interesting on the way?” Daisy giggled.

“The bird’s eaten all of the cookies, yesterday and today. I patted its head.”

“Well, Em it sounds like you’re going to wind up with quite a pet!” Daisy’s Dad said.

“I-I paid for the cookies,” Emelia stammered. She knew she was blushing.

“I’m not going to fuss if you too feed leftover cookies to a hungry bird,” Daisy’s Dad said. He handed her back the 1 pence coin. “You should keep your money, bring it home to your family.”

Emelia thanked him softly and smiled. She put it in her pocket.

“Daisy, make sure she gets whatever’s extra to feed to that new pet of hers,” Daisy’s Dad said with a laugh.

Emelia walked home. The sun was setting behind her. When she reached the Oceanside, Emelia could see the swan swimming in the cove.

“Look!” Emelia said. “I brought you a cookie!” She held out a lemon cookie between her fingers.

The swan started to swim towards her. It seemed to be coming towards her quickly. Emelia was relieved, because it was as if the swan somehow understood they should not be seen by the man at the docks.

But suddenly, the swan stopped swimming. It came to a complete halt.

“Hurry!” Emelia cried.

The swan stayed put.

Emelia looked closer. It was struggling. The swan was stuck!

Emelia dropped the cookie and entered the water. She didn’t want the swan to remain trapped or drown.

Emelia was in waist high water by the time she reached it.

She put her hands into the water. Thick, long seaweed all around. The swan’s webbed feet must be trapped in it.

“You again! Just what do you think you’re doing?”

Emelia turned her head. It was the old man.

“Your pet is stuck. I’m helping to save it,” she replied. Emelia tried to pull the seaweed away from the swan but there was too much of it.

“Just leave it be. That’s not your worry!” the old man replied.

“Well, someone has to. You don’t seem to care at all!” Emelia said.

“Listen here. You don’t want to disobey me,” the old man.

“But I want to save the swan more!” Emelia.

She pulled with all of her might, lifting it out of the water. The swan ten times heavier than the bags of flour at the bakery.

The old man was pacing along the docks, waving his gnarled cane and shouting at her.

Emelia lifted hard and whoosh! The swan became loose. She heard a crack and saw the wooden ring go flying through the air. She smiled, now not only was the swan free from the seaweed but also no longer trapped as this miserable old man’s pet.

The swan splashed into the water and did not rise for a moment. Emelia watched as the water bubbled. Then a man with black hair and dark green eyes rose from the seafoam.

“How I hoped you’d come back. You saved me,” he said.

Emelia was speechless for a moment. “W-who are you?”

“I am Edward, Prince of the north. That old man is a wizard who cursed me when I refused to marry the princess from a distant land. He’s kept me trapped as a swan,” Edward explained. “Only true love could break this spell.”

Emelia gave the Prince her cloak for modesty and she found help in the village so word could be sent to the King and Queen that their son did not vanish in the mountains as was once thought.

Prince Edward married Emelia on a summer day in June. A few gossips in royal court questioned not only where he had been, but how he had found a girl from a small village, one that does not possess any sort of royal pedigree. Yet they are quickly silenced by the King and Queen who simply say that Prince Edward met Emelia near the ocean one day and it was love at first sight. So who are they to object? It truly was, wasn’t it?

The happy couple were wed the 3rd week of June on the longest day of the year when the sun is in the sky the longest. Daisy, Emelia’s best friend was one of the bridesmaids, along with the Prince’s 2 sisters. In Emelia’s bouquet she tucked the swan feather, wrapped with thick satin ribbons. When she tossed her bouquet, Daisy

caught it. Everyone celebrated until the sun is nearly up for the next day.

One question that is often ask when this story is told is, “What happened to the evil magician?” The one who had turned the Prince into a swan? Well, the magician in this royal court turned that not-so-nice magician into a plump grey pigeon and then deposited him at the fountain by the bakery where Emelia and Daisy had worked. The new King Edward and Queen Emelia sometimes feed the magician-turned-pigeon lemon cookies, and he actually seems to enjoy his life.

Each year a mother or grandmother in our family tells this tale to her daughter, as every small kindness matters.

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