

"The Young Woman at the Pond"

A Fairy Tale collected by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm
in the early 1800s in Germany.

As related by Eric Miller.
Starting at the beginning of the story.

Once upon a time, there was a king and queen who had three daughters, the youngest of whom was so beautiful that the whole world looked on her as a wonder. She was healthy, radiant, kind, gentle, and wise. When she cried, tears did not fall from her eyes, but only pearls.

When she was fifteen years old, the king summoned all three sisters to come before his throne. You should have seen how all the people gazed when the youngest entered, it was as if the sun were rising! Then the king said, "My daughters, I do not know when my last day may arrive. Today I will decide what each of you shall receive at my death. You all love me, but the one of you who loves me best, shall fare the best." Each of them said she loved him. 'Please express to me,' said the king, "how much you love me. Then I shall understand what you mean."

The eldest said, "My father, I love you as dearly as the sweetest sugar."

The second said, "I love you as dearly as my prettiest dress."

But the youngest was silent. Her father asked her, "And you, my dear child, how much do you love me?"

"I can't compare my love for you with anything," she replied. But her father insisted that she should name something. So she said at last, "The best food does not please me without salt, therefore I love you like salt."

When the king heard this, he flew into a rage and said, "If you love me like salt, your love shall also be repaid with salt!" Then he divided the kingdom between the two elder sisters, but caused a sack of salt to be bound on the back of the youngest, and had two servants lead her into the wild forest and leave her there.

The queen begged on her youngest daughter's behalf, but the king's anger was not to be appeased.

How the young princess wept when she had to leave her family! The whole road was strewn with the pearls which flowed from her eyes.

The next day, the king repented of his great severity and had the whole forest searched for the poor child, but no one could find her.

The young princess had walked in the forest all night. She walked for many days and nights. When she lay down to sleep, no wild animals disturbed her. Eventually she came to a meadow, high on a mountain range. A clear stream ran through this meadow, and beside the stream there was a small wooden house. The princess shyly walked towards the house, where she met an old woman. This old woman lived in the house, and invited the princess to stay and work for her. The princess agreed. One of her duties was to watch everyday after the flock of geese that lived beside the house.

Soon after the princess moved in with the old woman, a rough grey layer of skin developed on the princess' face. The old woman instructed the princess to every evening go to a nearby pond where the princess could remove the rough grey layer of skin as if it were a mask, wash her own face, wash the rough grey skin in the pond, and lay this skin on the grass to dry in the moonlight.

In this way, three years passed.

Every morning the old woman walked into the forest. There she cut tall grass for her geese, picked all the wild fruit she could reach, and carried everything home -- the grass tied up and placed on her back, and the fruits in two baskets.

One morning, a handsome young man was walking through the forest. The sun shone bright, the birds sang, a cool breeze crept through the leaves, and he was full of joy and gladness. Suddenly he perceived the old woman kneeling on the ground, cutting grass with a sickle. She already had a pile of cut grass ready to be tied up, and near it stood the two baskets, which were filled with wild apples and pears.

"Good day," he said. "Please excuse me for asking, but how can you carry all this?"

"I must carry it, dear sir," she answered. "Rich folk's children have no need to do such things, but with the peasant folk the saying goes, 'Don't look behind you, you will only see how crooked your back is!'"

He remained standing by her, so she asked him, "Will you help me? You are young -- you still have a straight back and strong legs. It would be a trifle to you. My house is not very far away."

The young man replied, "My father is a duke. However, you should see that not only peasants can carry things -- I will gladly carry your bundle."

"Thank you very much!", the old woman replied. "And please carry the apples and pears as well. My house is not far -- just about an hour's walk."

The young man hesitated when he heard of an hour's walk, but the old woman would not let him off. She packed the bundle on his back, and placed one basket in each of his hands.

"See, it is all very light," she said.

"Actually, it is not very light," replied the duke's son. "The bundle weighs as heavily as if it were full of bricks, and the apples and pears are as heavy as lead!"

He had a mind to put everything down, but the old woman said mockingly, "Just look! The young gentleman can not carry what I, an old woman, have so often dragged along. You are ready with fine words, but when it comes time to be earnest, you want to take to your heels. Come, young man! Step lively."

As long as he walked on level ground it was bearable, but when they had to climb, and the stones rolled down under his feet as if they were alive, it was almost beyond his strength. Drops of perspiration formed on his forehead and ran down his back.

"Good mother," he said, "I can go no further. I need to rest a little."

"Not here," replied the old woman. "When we have arrived at our journey's end, you can rest. But now you must go forward. Who knows what good it may do you?"

"Old woman, you are asking too much!", said the duke's son, and he tried to put down the baskets and throw off the bundle. But he laboured in vain: the basket handles stuck to his hands, and the bundle stuck to his back, as if they grew there. He turned and twisted, but he could not get rid of the baskets or the bundle.

The old woman laughed, and hopped about with glee. "Don't get angry, dear sir," she said. "You are growing as red in the face as a turkey-cock! Carry your bundle patiently. I will give you a good present when we get home."

What could he do? He was obliged to submit to his fate and crawl along patiently behind the old woman. As they went along, she seemed to grow more and more nimble, and his burdens seemed to grow even heavier. Suddenly she made a spring, and, jumping up on the bundle on his back, she seated herself on the top of it. And however old and withered she might be, yet she was heavier than the stoutest country lass.

The young man's knees trembled, but when he would not go on, the old woman would hit him about the legs with a switch, and with stinging-nettles. Groaning continually, he climbed the mountain. When he was just about to drop, he finally reached the level ground of the meadow, and they could see the old woman's house. When the geese perceived the old woman, they flapped their wings, stretched out their necks, and ran to meet her, cackling all the while.

Behind the flock walked, stick in hand, the princess. The young man noticed that the skin on her face was scarred and grey -- he was repulsed by the sight.

"Good mother," the princess asked the old woman, "has anything happened to you? You have stayed away so long."

"I am fine, my dear daughter," she answered. "I have met with nothing bad, but, on the contrary, with this kind gentleman, who has carried my burdens for me. Just think, he even took me on his back when I was tired! The way has not seemed long to us. We have been merry, and have been cracking jokes with each other the entire way."

At last the old woman slid down and took the bundle off the young man's back and the baskets from his hands. She looked at him kindly, and said, "Now seat yourself on the bench before the door, and rest. You have fairly earned your wages, and they shall not be wanting."

Then she said to the goose-keeper young woman, "Go into the house, my dear daughter. It is not becoming for you to be alone with a young gentleman. One must not pour oil on fire: he might fall in love with you!"

The duke's son was shocked -- falling in love with this young woman had not even occurred to him!

In the meantime the old woman stroked and fondled her geese as if they were children. Then she went into the house with the young woman. The young man lay down on the bench, under a wild apple-tree. The air was warm and mild. He saw that on all sides stretched a green meadow, which was set with cowslips, wild thyme, and a thousand other flowers. Through the meadow rippled a clear stream, on which the sun sparkled. The white geese walked along the side of the stream; some sipped the water.

"It is delightful here," he thought. "I am so tired, I cannot keep my eyes open. I will sleep a little. I just hope a gust of wind does not come and blow my legs off my body, for they feel like rotten wood."

When he had slept a little while, the old woman came and shook him awake. "Sit up," she said. "You can not stay here. I have treated you roughly, but it has not cost you your life. Of money and land you have no need. Here is something else for you." Thereupon she thrust a little box into his hand. The top and bottom had been cut out of a single emerald. "Take great care of this," she said. "It will bring you good fortune."

The young man sprang up. He felt fresh, and had recovered his vigour. He thanked the old woman for her present, and set off without even once looking back at the goose-keeper young woman. Even when he was some way off, he still heard in the distance the noisy cry of the geese.

For days the young man wandered in the wilderness. Then finally he found his way out. He reached a large town, and as no one knew him, he was led into the royal palace, where the king and queen were sitting on their thrones. The young man fell on one knee, drew the emerald box out of his pocket, and laid it at the queen's feet. She bade him rise and hand her the little box. She took it in her hands, opened it, and looked inside -- upon which she fell as if dead to the ground!

The duke's son was seized by the royal servants, and was being led to prison, when the queen opened her eyes and was helped to her feet. She ordered the servants to release the young man. She requested every one except the king, her husband, to leave the room, as she wished to speak with the young man in private.

When the queen and king were alone with the young man, the queen began to weep bitterly. "Of what use to me are the splendours and honours with which I am surrounded?", she asked the young man. "Every morning I awake in pain and sorrow. When I think that the wild beasts might have devoured my youngest daughter, I can't contain my sorrow. Many times I console myself with the hope that she is still alive, and may have hidden herself in a cave, or may have found shelter with compassionate people. So imagine how I felt when I opened your little emerald box and saw the pearl laying inside. It is exactly the same kind as those which used to fall from my daughter's eyes. You can imagine how the sight of this pearl stirred my heart. You must tell me how you came by this pearl!"

The duke's son told her that he had received it from the old woman in the forest. But he had neither seen nor heard anything of the young princess, he said. The queen and king thought that where the pearl had been, they might obtain news of their daughter. They resolved to set out to visit the old woman that very evening.

At that moment, the old woman was sitting in her small house in the forest. She was sitting at her spinning-wheel, spinning. It was already dusk, and a log which was burning on the hearth gave a soft light. All at once there was a noise outside: the geese were coming home from the pasture, uttering their hoarse cries. Soon afterwards, the goose-keeper young woman entered. But the old woman scarcely welcomed her, and only shook her head a little. The young woman sat down beside her, took her spinning-wheel also, and twisted the threads nimbly.

Thus they both sat for two hours, and exchanged never a word. At last something rustled at the window, and two fiery eyes peered in. It was a night-owl, which cried, "Uhu!", three times. The old woman looked up, and said, "My daughter, it is time for you to go to the pond." The young woman rose and went out.

Where did she go? Through the meadow, onward into the valley. At last she came to the pond, with three old oak-trees standing beside it. The moon had risen large and round over the mountain: it was so light that one could have found a needle.

The young woman removed the skin which covered her face, then bent down to the edge of the pond, and began to wash her face. When she had finished, she dipped the skin in the water, and washed it also, and laid it on the grass so that it could dry in the moonlight.

How the maiden was changed! Such a change was never seen before! When the rough grey mask fell off her face, what remained was her own beautiful, healthy, glowing skin. Her eyes shone as brightly as the stars in the sky.

But the young woman was sad. She was feeling lonely. She sat down and wept bitterly. One tear after another came out of her eyes, and rolled down her face, onto the ground. There she sat, and would have remained sitting a long time, if there had not been a rustling and cracking in the boughs of the neighbouring tree. She sprang up like a doe which has heard the shot of the hunter. Just then the moon was obscured by a dark cloud. In an instant, the young woman slipped the rough grey skin back over her face and dashed away.

She ran back home, trembling like a leaf. The old woman was standing in the doorway, and the young woman was about to relate what had befallen her, but the old woman laughed kindly, and said, "I already know all." She led the young woman into the house's main room and lit a new log. She did not, however, sit down to her spinning again, but fetched a broom and began to sweep. "All must be clean and sweet," she said to the young woman.

"But, mother," asked the maiden, "why do you begin work at so late an hour? What do you expect?"

"Do you know what time it is?", asked the old woman.

"Not yet midnight," answered the maiden, "but already past eleven o'clock."

"It is three years today," said the old woman, "since you came to me. The time is up. We can no longer remain together."

The young woman was terrified. She said, "Alas! Dear mother, will you cast me off? Where shall I go? I have no friends, and no home to which I can go. I have always done as you bade me, and you have always been satisfied with me. Please do not send me away!"

The old woman would not tell the maiden what lay before her. "My stay here is over," the old woman said. "But when I depart, the house must be clean. Therefore do not hinder me in my work. Have no care for yourself. You shall find a roof to shelter you, and the wages which I will give you shall content you."

"But please tell me what is about to happen," the young woman pleaded.

"I ask you again, do not hinder me in my work. Do not say a word more. Go to your room, take that rough skin off your face, and put on the silken gown which you had on when you came to me. Then wait in your room until I call you."

Did I mention that the king and queen had set out to find the source of the pearl in the emerald box? The duke's son had led them, but in the forest he had strayed away from them, and he had to walk onwards alone. Darkness came on. He came to a clearing, and beside a pond he climbed a tree, intending to pass the night up in the tree branches, for he feared wild animals.

When the moon illumined the surrounding countryside, he perceived a figure walking through the meadow. As she came near, he could see that it was the goose-keeper young woman, whom he had seen at the house of the old woman.

How astonished he was when she went to the pond, took the rough grey skin off her face, and washed her face. She was more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen! He hardly dared to breathe, but stretched his head as far forward as he could through the leaves, and stared at her. Perhaps he bent over too far, but whatever the cause might have been, the bough suddenly cracked. Hearing this, the maiden slipped the rough skin back onto her face, and sprang away like a doe. The moon was suddenly covered by a dark cloud, and she disappeared from his eyes.

The young man climbed down from the tree, and ran after her. He had not gone far when he saw, in the twilight, two figures coming across the meadow. It was the king and queen -- they had perceived from a distance the light shining in the old woman's little house in the meadow, and they were walking towards it.

The young man told them the wonderful thing he had seen by the pond, and they immediately guessed that it had been their lost daughter. They walked onwards full of joy, and soon came to the little house.

The geese were sitting all round the house, and had thrust their heads under their wings and were sleeping. Not one of them moved. The king and queen looked in at the window. The old woman was sitting there, quietly spinning. The room was perfectly clean, as if the little mist-men, who carry no dust on their feet, lived there. Their daughter, however, they did not see. They gazed through the window for a long time. At last they took heart, and knocked softly at the door.

The old woman rose, came to the door, opened it, and kindly called out, "Please come in! I know who you are." When they had entered the room, the old woman said to the king, "You might have spared yourself the long walk if you had not three years ago unjustly driven away your child, who is so good and kind. No harm has come to her. For three years she has had to tend the geese. But she has learned no evil, and her heart is as good as it always was. As for you, you have been sufficiently punished by the misery in which you have lived."

Then she went to the room door and called, "Come out, my daughter." Thereupon the door opened, and the young princess stepped into the room, wearing her silken garments, her skin healthy and glowing, her long hair flowing, and her eyes shining. It was as if an angel from heaven had entered the room.

The young princess approached her father and mother, and fell on their necks and kissed them. There was no help for it, they all had to weep for joy. The duke's son stood near them, and when the young princess perceived him, she became as red in the face as a rose -- she herself did not know why.

The king said, "My dear child, I have given away my kingdom. What shall I give to you?"

"She needs nothing," said the old woman. "She has the tears that she has wept on your account. They are precious pearls, finer than those that are found in the sea, and worth more than your whole kingdom. And I give her my little house as payment for her services."

When the old woman had said that, she smiled at the young woman, and then simply disappeared. The walls rattled, and when the king and queen looked around, the little house had changed into a splendid palace. A royal table was spread with the most delicious food, and servants were running hither and thither.

The story goes still further, but my grandmother, who related it to me, had partly lost her memory, and had forgotten the rest. I shall always believe that the beautiful princess married the duke's son, and that they remained together in the palace, living happily there for many years. Whether the geese were in fact young maidens whom the old woman had taken under her protection, and whether they now received their human form again, and stayed as handmaids to the princess, I do not exactly know, but I suspect it. This much is certain: the old woman was no wicked witch, as some people thought, but a wise woman, who meant and did well. Very likely it was she who, at the princess' birth, gave her the gift of weeping pearls instead of tears. That does not happen much now-a-days, or else the poor would soon become rich.