

THE GIRL WHO HAD NO HANDS

There used to be an inn which was kept by a very beautiful woman, who was very much admired by all the guests. When a stranger came in, he would often say to his friends “The landlady is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I don’t believe that there could be a more beautiful woman in the whole wide world” — until he saw her daughter. Everybody agreed that, although it was nearly impossible, she was even more beautiful than her mother could ever have been.

There was a hardness in the mother’s manner which just wasn’t there in the daughter. The elder woman was very proud of her beauty, and would very much have preferred not to be compared to anyone, let alone her own daughter. With every passing day, the young girl grew more beautiful, and jealousy ate into the mother’s heart until, one day she decided to get rid of the girl. She paid a man to take her daughter into the mountains, away from everybody else, and quietly dispose of her. As proof that she was dead, he should cut out her heart and bring it back to the mother.

On the appointed day, the man led the girl into the mountains, far away from anyone else, where he told her what her mother wanted of him. The girl cried bitterly and, on bended knee, begged him to spare her life. He agreed to do so, on the condition that she went far away, and never returned to be seen by her evil mother. Then he killed one of his dogs, cut out its heart, and returned alone to the inn.

Afterwards, the girl wandered sadly alone through the world, until she came to a city where nobody knew her, or her mother. There she remained, working as a maid, for quite a long time. But, as the days and weeks passed, she thought more often of her home, and her mother. With every passing day, she found it harder to believe that her mother really wished her out of the world. She often told herself “Surely, my mother now regrets what she said to that man, and mourns my passing every night.” Expecting a happy reunion, she decided to make the long journey home.

Her mother was indeed very surprised to see her — and extremely angry. But, at first, her anger was directed towards the man who had cheated her, and who now had to make things right. This time, he again had to take the girl into the mountains, as he had been paid to do, but, as proof of her death he should cut off both her hands and bring them back to her mother.

On the appointed day, he led the girl into the mountains, far away from anyone else, where he told her what her mother wanted of him. The girl cried bitterly and, on bended knee, begged him to spare her life. He wanted to do so, but was afraid to face the fury of the jealous mother. “How can I do that?” he asked the girl, “Your mother has demanded that I bring her your hands as proof that you are dead. And, they look nothing like the paws of a dog.”

“I would rather lose my hands than my life.” answered the girl, raising her eyes to heaven, “Cut them off, and let me live!” Then, she placed both hands on a tree stump, and let the axe fall.

The man helped bind her bleeding wrists tightly, and, before returning to the inn, begged her to go far away, and never, ever return to be seen by her mother. In great pain, she fled deep into the forest and prayed to God that He would keep her safe and heal her wounds. In time, the pain lessened and her wounds did heal. The wild animals, even the wolves, never sought to harm her, and she found plenty of food in the fruits, leaves and roots of the forest plants. For shelter, she first slept in a cave, but then she found a great old willow tree with a hollow trunk. With great effort and patience she made the hole large enough to sleep in. There, she was not only sheltered from the heat and the cold, but also well protected from animals roaming in the night. When her wounds particularly pained her, or when she feared what would become of her, her only comfort was her tears and her prayers. In answer to her prayers, a quiet voice inside her said “God is with you, and will protect you and keep you safe”. She listened, and for a while, she was safe.

But then, a party of hunters came into the forest, and with them a young prince who had become separated from his companions. Between the trees, some distance off, he saw the beautiful wild girl. At first, he thought that she was some wonderful new animal, and wanting to take it alive, he didn't shoot. Instead he followed at a distance, and watched her vanish into the hollow tree. He cautiously approached, and gently called to her to come out. Slowly she did so.

The prince was astonished to see, standing before him, a beautiful girl, perfectly formed in every way, except that she had no hands. He first asked her “Who are you? Where are you from? Why are you here? And, who cut off your hands?” But she didn't answer him. Instead, she cast down her face and cried. His heart was touched, and so he said to her “There is no need to answer. I can see that you have been badly mistreated by evil people, but if you come with me to the city, I can keep you safe and give you a better life.” Then he blew fiercely into his horn, so loud that it rang clearly through the trees and echoed off the mountains, to call his companions and servants. They soon came, and after preparing a litter to carry the girl, and the prince giving her his own coat, they abandoned the hunt and set off for the palace. There, the prince had apartments prepared just for her, and appointed servants to look after her.

One day, after she had settled into her new life, the prince came to her and asked her to become his wife. Blushing ferociously, she stammered that it was not possible. When he asked why not, she answered “How can a poor girl who has no hands become the wife of a prince? What would your mother say?”

“Don't worry about that,” he answered, “I am my own master, and am free to follow my own heart. And, it is my heart which tells me that it is you who will make me happiest. I will always love you deeply, even if you are unable to return that love.” At these words, her face flushed crimson red and, with a pounding

heart, she sank to her knees, kissed his hands and washed them with her tears. “So you do love me, and you will be my bride before God and all the world!” he cried out joyfully and, raising her up, kissed her. Now he just had to face *his* mother.

The old queen was a proud woman, as proud in her own way as the girl’s mother had been. She had long expected that her son, the prince, would marry one of the most beautiful, richest, and powerful princesses in the world — and not some poor orphan girl who had no hands. “Are you crazy?” she shouted at her son, “Do you want to give me a little beggar girl, as a daughter-in-law, and present to the people, a freak with no hands as queen?” But the prince, held his ground and forced his mother to, at least contain her fury, if she couldn’t tame it, because he did marry the girl who had no hands.

On the other hand, the people not only accepted their new princess, they loved and respected her. Unlike the proud old queen, who had never extended her two hands in charity, the young princess, who had no hands to extend, gave generously and worked for the good of the people. But, the happiness of the young couple didn’t last. Within a few months, the young prince was called to war with his army. Before he left, he gave all his servants instructions to care for his young wife, who was now with child, and to see that nothing untoward befell her.

A few months later, the young princess gave birth to two healthy and strong baby boys. The angry old queen would have immediately taken the children from her, but her son’s faithful servants kept a close watch on both mother and children. Instead, the old queen sent word to her son that his wife had given birth to two monstrous children, who looked like dogs and, because of this, the people were up in arms. When she asked what she should do, she fully expected that he would order that the girl and her children be put to death. But, she was wrong. The prince gave the order that *nobody* was to put a hand on his wife and children before he himself returned. She, in turn, sent the messenger back with the message that it was too late. The people had already risen up, and to prevent a revolution, the girl and her children had been burnt at the stake in the market place. It was not yet true, but it would have been if a faithful servant hadn’t warned the young princess. Taking both her children, she quietly left the palace, and the city, in the middle of the night.

Telling herself “God will not desert me and the little ones” she made her way far from the city, until she came to a valley in a wild forest. There she met two elderly gentlemen, who asked her if the children had been baptised. She told them that they had not yet been, and explained how she had fled the city with them.

One of the gentlemen then said to her “Then, I shall christen them. What names should I give them?”

“Whichever you think suits them best.” answered the young mother.

“Very well” said the old man, “We shall name them after ourselves. One shall be called John, and the other shall be called Joseph.” And so, Saint John followed his calling, and baptised the two young boys in the mountain stream which flowed through the distant valley.

“Now take your children into the valley” said the elder Joseph “where you will find a cottage with all you need. But, from this day on, you should never leave that house, and never open the door to anybody unless they beg by the five wounds of our Lord.”

She thanked the two saints for their kindness and went on her way, following the stream into the valley. There she met a beautiful lady, who kindly told her “My dear girl, you cannot go through life and care for your children without hands. Place your arms into the water and be blessed!” The girl who had no hands did as she was instructed and, when she pulled her arms out of the stream, her own hands had been restored to her wrists. Weeping with joy, she thanked the lady, who was none other than Mary mother of God. Then, Mary said to her “Now go inside your new home, and be careful to follow everything that the two saints have told you. If you do, then everything will be well for you and your children, because you will have always been faithful and have trusted in heaven at the time of your greatest need.”

The young woman and her children lived happily and peacefully alone in the house for six years. Although there was nobody for miles around, and they were never disturbed, they had everything they needed. The two boys grew up strongly, and soon played in the forest, never coming to any harm. Their mother, following the instructions of the two saints, remained in the house where she prayed morning and evening for their continued protection.

By this time, her husband, the prince had returned from the war, had become king, and had banished his mother from the palace and the city. But he was not happy, and often thought of his dead wife and children. One day, with no other distraction, he again led a hunt into the forest. Just as it had happened six years earlier, in another forest, he became separated from his party. As the night fell, a tremendous storm rolled in. He tried to find shelter among the trees, but the heavy rain pelted his face and soaked his clothes. The sound of thunder echoed from the mountains and the sky momentarily lit up as a lightning bolt flashed across it. It was then, that he saw a house through the trees, and he made his way towards it. There was a light inside, but when he knocked on the door, nobody answered. After yet another flash of lightning and the terrible crash of thunder, he cried out “By the five wounds of our Lord, I beg you. Please let me in!”

When the young queen heard these words, she unlocked the door and let him into the house. “Please give me shelter for the night.” begged the stranger “I am totally exhausted and soaked through.” When he saw the woman of the house, he at first thought that it was his dead wife. But that was not possible, his wife was not only long dead, but she had no hands. This lady had two fine, delicate, even beautiful, hands. She had, of course, recognised her husband, but for the

time being said nothing. She led him to the hearth and built up the fire, before bringing him food and drink. Her two sons, not having met anyone besides their mother, were at first shy of the stranger until she called them to her. When he saw them, tears came to his eyes as he thought "If they had lived, my two sons would be about the same age as these two boys." As he sat by the fire, drying his clothes, tiredness overcame the young king and he fell asleep. When she was certain that he was sleeping, their mother told the boys that the stranger was their father, and that they should be friendly to him when he awoke.

As the king was sleeping, it so happened, that his hat slipped of his head and fell to the floor. The mother said to one of her sons "John, pick up your father's hat off the floor, and put it back on his head." The boy quietly picked up the hat, and gently set it on his father's head, a little unsteadily.

But the king was half awake, and had heard what the lady had said. "What was that?" he thought, "let's see if she says it again". So, after a little while, pretending to be asleep, he tilted his head and his hat again slipped and fell to the floor.

"Joseph," said the mother to the second son "pick up your father's hat off the floor, and put it back on his head."

Before he could do so, the king sat up and asked "Why did you call me, a stranger, their father?"

Smiling at him, she replied "Don't you recognise me? Look very carefully."

"Yes," he answered "you look very much like my beloved wife, but it is not possible that you are her. You have two hands, and she had none."

"It is indeed possible, my dearest husband!" she cried out, "God has given me my hands back, and these two fine boys are your sons!" Then she embraced and kissed him, and he thought his heart would break. He took his two sons onto his knee, by the fire and, through both tears and laughter, they all spent the night together talking and listening to each others adventures.

In the morning, the king wanted to take his wife and sons with him to the city, but she explained to him the promise she had made to the two saints. He didn't argue, but kissed his wife and children gently goodbye, telling them "I shall return, very soon."

He returned alone to the city, and to the palace, where he abdicated the crown and passed the government to his most trusted advisers. He then sold off his remaining possessions, and returned to his family in the valley, where they lived long and happily together for many years.