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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Six Swans

Once upon a time, there was a king who was hunting in a large forest. The king was so eager in chasing a wild animal that none of his men could follow him. As night fell, he stopped and looked around, only to realize that he was lost. He searched for a path but could not find any. Suddenly, an old woman with a nodding head came toward him. The old woman was a witch.

"My dear lady," he said, "can you show me the way out of the forest?"

"Oh, yes, my lord," she replied, "I certainly can. But I have a condition, and if you do not fulfill it, you will never leave the forest and die of hunger."

"What is the condition?" the king asked.

"I have a daughter," said the old woman, "she is as beautiful as all the people in the world put together. If you want to take her as your bride and make her the queen, I will show you the way out of the forest."

The king agreed due to the difficult situation he was in. The old woman led him into her cottage, where her daughter sat by the fire. She received the king as if



she had been expecting him, and although he saw that she was very beautiful, he did not like her. He could not look at her without feeling an inner shudder.

Nonetheless, he put the girl on his horse and the old woman showed him the way. Soon, he was back in his royal castle, where the wedding was held.

The king had been previously married and his first wife had left him seven children, six boys and a girl, whom he loved most in the world. The king was afraid that the stepmother would not treat them well and might even harm them. So, he took them to a lonely castle in the middle of the forest. They remained hidden there because the way to it was so difficult to find that even the king himself could not have found it if a wise woman had not given him a ball of yarn with miraculous properties. When he threw the ball of yarn on the ground, it unraveled and showed him the way.

He went there as often as he could to see his beloved children. So often that the queen was not happy with his absence. She became curious and wanted to know why he went into the forest alone so often. She bribed his servants with a lot of money, and they showed her the secret and told her about the ball of yarn that could guide her to the children. The queen could not rest after discovering where the king was going. She made a few white silk shirts and sewed a spell in each of them, as she had learned from the witchcraft of her mother.

One day, when the king had gone hunting, she took the shirts and went into the forest. The ball of yarn guided

her. The children, who saw someone in the distance, thought it was their dear father who had come to visit them and jumped up with joy to meet him. Then the evil queen threw each of the shirts at them, and as soon as the shirts touched their bodies, they turned into swans and flew away through the forest. The queen went home very happy because she thought she had gotten rid of her stepchildren. But the girl had not run away with her brothers, and so the queen knew nothing about her. The next day, the king went to his children, but he found no one except his daughter.

"Where are your brothers?" asked the king.

"Ah, dear father," she answered, "they are gone and have left me behind." She then told him how from her window she had seen her brothers fly away as swans through the forest. She showed him the feathers they had dropped on the courtyard and that she had picked up. The king was saddened, he had never imagined that it was the queen who had committed this wicked deed. He was afraid that the girl would also be stolen from him, so he wanted to take her with him. But the girl was afraid of her stepmother and begged the king to let her stay for one more night in the castle in the woods.

Then she said to herself, "I must not stay here any longer, but I must go and find my brothers."

When night fell, she fled and went straight into the woods. She walked that night and the next day until she could no longer go on from exhaustion. Finally, she saw a simple hut, and she went inside and found a room



with six little beds in it. She didn't dare to lie down in them, but she crawled under one of the beds and lay on the hard planks and wished that the night would come quickly. As the sun was almost setting, she heard a rustling sound and saw six swans fly in through the window.

They settled on the ground and blew at each other until they had blown off all their feathers. Then they took off their swan skins as if they were shirts. The girl looked at them and recognized them as her brothers. She was very happy and crawled out from under the bed. The brothers were no less happy when they saw their sister, but their joy did not last long.

"You must not stay here," they said to her. "This is a robbers' camp, and if they were to come looking for you here, they would kill you at once."

"Can't you defend me?" asked the little sister.

"No," they replied, "because we can only lose our swan skins for a short time and take on our human form for fifteen minutes every evening. But then we turn into swans again."

Their sister cried when she heard this and said, "Can nothing be done to set you free?"

"Oh no," they replied, "and besides, the work would be too hard for you. For six years, you would be obliged

never to speak or laugh and in that time, you would have to make six shirts out of aster flowers. You would not be allowed to speak a single word until the work was finished. No, it would all be in vain." And just as the brothers had told her this, the quarter-hour ended, and they turned back into swans and flew out of the window.

But the girl decided to set her brothers free, even if it cost her life. She left the hut and went into the woods, climbed up a tree, and spent the night there. The next morning, she went to work. She gathered asters and began sewing them together. As for speaking, there was no one to speak to, and as for laughing, she had no desire to do so. So she sat and did nothing else but her work.

After she had been working like this for a while, it happened one day that the king of that land went hunting in the woods. A few of his hunters came to the tree in which the girl was sitting. They called out to her and asked, "Who are you?" But she did not answer. "Come down," they cried, "we will not harm you." But she only shook her head.

And when they tormented her even more with questions, she threw her golden necklace to them, hoping they would be satisfied with that. But they did not stop, so she threw her belt to them, and when that was not good enough, her garters. One thing after another, everything she had on and could spare, until she had nothing left but her jacket. But nothing was good enough and the hunters were not deterred. They

climbed the tree, carried the girl away, and brought her to the king.

The king asked, "Who are you? What were you doing in the tree?" But she did not answer. He spoke to her in all the languages he knew, but she remained silent. The girl was very beautiful, and the king was drawn to her. He even felt a great love for her rising in his heart. He threw his cloak around her, put her on his horse in front of him, and took her to his castle. Then he had her put on beautiful clothes, and her beauty shone as bright as the morning, but she would not speak a word. He sat her at his side at the table, and her modesty and friendly demeanor pleased him so much that he said:

"I choose this girl as my wife, and no other girl in the whole world." And after a few days, they were married. But the king had a wicked mother who was dissatisfied with the marriage and spoke ill of the young queen.

"Who knows where that servant girl came from?" she said. "She can't even speak a word! She's not worthy of being a queen!"

After a year had passed, and the queen gave birth to her first child, the old woman took it away and smeared some blood around the queen's mouth while she was sleeping. Then she went to the king and declared that his wife was a cannibal. The king did not want to believe such a thing and ordered that no one should harm her. Meanwhile, the queen quietly continued sewing the shirts and cared for nothing else. The next time a beautiful boy was born, the evil

stepmother used the same trick, but the king did not believe her words, for he said:

"She is too tender and too good to do such a thing, and if she could speak and defend herself, her innocence would be as clear as the dawn."

When the old woman stole a newborn child for the third time and accused the queen, who could say nothing in her defense, the king had no choice but to bring the queen to trial. She was sentenced to suffer. She would be killed by fire.

The day her punishment was to be carried out was the very last of the sixth year of the years in which she had not spoken or laughed, to free her beloved brothers from the evil enchantment. The six shirts were ready, except for one, which still needed its left sleeve to be finished. As she was led to the stake, she carried the six shirts on her arm. As she climbed the stake and the fire was about to be lit, she suddenly gave a loud cry, for six swans flew through the air. She saw that her redemption was near, and her heart beat with joy. The swans came close to her with flapping wings and bent around her, so that she could throw the shirts over them. When that was done, the swan skins fell off of them, and her brothers stood completely safe and sound in their own bodies before her. But one shirt had no left sleeve, and so the youngest brother had a swan wing instead of a left arm. They hugged and kissed each other, and the queen went to the king, who looked on in amazement. She began to speak to him:

"My dearest husband, now I can finally dare to speak and tell you that I am innocent and falsely accused."

She told him about the treachery of the stepmother, who had taken away and hidden the three children. And she was reconciled with the king with great joy. Instead of the queen, the wicked stepmother was now tied to the stake on the pyre and burned to ashes. And the king and queen lived for many years, together with the six brothers, in peace and joy.

