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THE GRIMM READER

The Classic Tales of the Brothers Grimm



Translated and edited by Maria Tatar

Introduction by A. S. Byatt



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THE TWELVE BROTHERS

Once upon a time a king and a queen lived peacefully with their twelve children, who were all boys. One day the king said to his wife: "If the thirteenth child you are about to bear turns out to be a girl, then the twelve boys will have to be put to death, so that her wealth can be great and so that she alone inherits the kingdom." Twelve coffins were prepared and filled with wood shavings, with a little pillow for each boy to rest his head. The king put them all into a locked room and gave the key to the queen. He told her not to tell anyone about it.



The mother of the boys was filled with sorrow, and she grieved all day long. Finally, the youngest son, who was always around her and to whom she had given the name Benjamin (after the Bible) asked her: "Mother dear, why are you so sad?"

"Dearest child," she replied, "I'm not allowed to tell you."

The boy was so persistent that she finally went to the room unlocked the door, and showed him the twelve coffins with wood shavings in them. Then she said: "My dearest Benjamin, your father had these coffins made for you and for your eleven brothers. If the child I bear is a girl, you are all going to be killed and buried in these coffins."

She wept with each word she spoke, but her son comforted her and said: "Don't cry, Mother dear. We can take care of ourselves. We'll run away."

She replied: "Take your eleven brothers out into the woods. One of you can climb to the very top of the tallest tree in the woods. Keep an eye out there from the castle tower. If I give birth to a baby boy I'll raise a white flag and you can come right back home again. If I give birth to a baby girl, I'll raise a red flag and then you must flee as fast as your legs can carry you. May the good Lord protect you. I'll get up every night and pray that you will have a fire to warm you in the winter and that you won't suffer from the heat in the summer."

She gave the sons her blessing, and they went out into the woods. They took turns keeping watch from the top of the tallest oak tree they could find and kept an eye out for the signal from the tower. When eleven days had gone by and it was Benjamin's turn, he saw that a flag had been raised. It was not a white flag but a flag red as blood, proclaiming that they were to die. When the brothers got the news, they grew angry and said: "Are we going to die just because of a girl! Let's take an oath to avenge ourselves. If we run into a girl, her red blood will flow."

Then they went deeper into the forest, right to its very heart where it was darkest, and there they found an enchanted hut that was completely empty. They said: "Let's live here. Benjamin, you are the youngest and weakest. You can stay home and keep house while we

go out and look for food." They went into the woods and shot rabbits, deer, birds, and doves, whatever was good to eat. Then they brought the food back home for Benjamin, who had to prepare it in an appetizing way for them. They lived together in the little house for a stretch of ten years, and time was never heavy on their hands.

The little girl to whom the queen gave birth grew up to become a child who was kind of heart and fair of face. She had a golden star on her forehead. Once, on a big washing day, she discovered twelve shirts and asked her mother: "These shirts are far too small for Father. Whose are they?"

The queen replied with a heavy heart: "They belong to your twelve brothers."

The girl said: "I've never heard anything about those brothers. Where are they?"

The queen replied: "God knows where they are. They are wandering about somewhere in the world." She took the girl by the hand and unlocked the room so that she could show her the twelve coffins with the wood shavings and pillows. "These coffins," she said, "were made for your brothers. But they managed to escape before you were born," and then she told her everything that had happened. The girl said to her: "Dearest Mother, don't cry. I'm going to go find my brothers."

She took the twelve shirts and headed straight for the forest, walking all day long until she reached the enchanted house at night. She walked right in and saw a young boy who asked her: "Where are you from and where are you going?" He was filled with wonder by her great beauty, by her majestic clothing, and by the star on her forehead.

The girl replied: "I'm a princess, and I'm searching for my twelve brothers. I'm willing to go as far as the sky is blue to find them."

She showed him the twelve shirts that belonged to them. Benjamin realized that it was his sister and said: "I'm Benjamin, your young-

est brother." She began weeping for joy, and Benjamin did the same. They felt so much love for each other that they couldn't stop kissing and hugging.

"Dear sister," he said, "there's still a problem. We vowed some time ago that we would kill any girl who crossed our threshold, because it was a girl that forced us to leave our home."

"I would gladly give my life if I could save my twelve brothers," she said.

"No, no," he said, "you shall not die. Get down under this tub until our eleven brothers return. I'll manage to win them over."

And so she hid as he told her. When night fell, the brothers returned from hunting, and their dinner was on the table. While they were eating, they asked: "Any news?" Benjamin responded by asking: "Haven't you heard?"

"No, we haven't," they replied.

He continued: "You've been out in the woods, and I've stayed here at home, but I know more than you do."

"Well, tell us, tell us everything," they cried out.

He replied: "All right, as long as you promise not to kill the first girl who crosses our threshold."

"Yes, we promise," they shouted. "We will spare her life. Just tell us what's going on!"

"Our sister is here," and he lifted the tub, and out came the princess in her royal garments with the golden star on her forehead. She was unimaginably beautiful, delicate, and gracious. The boys were overjoyed, and they threw their arms around her, kissed her, and felt a deep love for her.

The princess stayed at home with Benjamin and helped him around the house. The eleven boys went into the woods, caught game, deer, birds, and doves, so that they would have enough to eat, and Benjamin and his sister made sure that everything was cooked in a tasty way.

The princess gathered firewood, found herbs to cook the vegetables with, and stirred the pots on the fire so that there was always food on the table when the brothers returned home. She kept everything in the house in good order and made the beds up with clean, white linens. The brothers were completely content, and they lived together in perfect harmony.

One day Benjamin and his sister had prepared a fine meal, and everyone was sitting at the table, eating, drinking, and overjoyed to be together. Now there was a little garden near the enchanted house, and in it were twelve lilies which are commonly known as "students." The princess wanted to do something nice for her brothers, and she picked the twelve flowers, hoping to give one to each of her brothers during dinner. But just as she was picking the flowers, the twelve brothers turned into twelve ravens and flew up over the trees, and the house vanished. The poor girl was left all alone in the wilderness. As she turned around, she caught sight of an old woman next to her who said: "Dear child, what have you done? Why didn't you leave those twelve white flowers alone? They were your brothers, and now they've been turned into ravens forever."

The girl wept and said: "Isn't there any way to disenchant them?"

"Yes," the old woman said. "There is one way to save them, but it's so hard that you can't possibly hope to free them that way. You would not be able to say a word for seven years, and you wouldn't be able to smile at all. If you speak just one word, or if only a single hour is missing in the seven years, then everything will be in vain—in fact one word would kill your brothers."

The girl vowed to herself: "I know that I will be able to free my brothers," and she went and found a hollow tree, seated herself in it, and began spinning. She neither spoke nor smiled.

One day a king was hunting in the forest, and the big greyhound that he had taken with him ran over to the tree in which the girl

was sitting and started jumping up, yelping and barking. The noise brought the king over, and he set eyes on the beautiful princess with the golden star on her forehead. He was so enchanted with her beauty that he called up to her to ask if she would be his wife. She did not say a word, but she did nod her head. He then went up the tree himself, climbed down with her, got on his horse with her, and rode home. The marriage of the two was celebrated with great joy and splendor. But the wife still did not say a word, nor did she laugh.

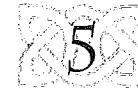
The king and queen had been living happily for several years when the mother of the king, who was an evil woman, began to slander the young queen. She said to the king: "The girl you brought back home is nothing but a common little beggar. Who knows what kinds of godless tricks she plays in secret. Even if she's mute and can't speak, she ought to be able to laugh. A person who can't laugh must have a bad conscience."

At first the king refused to believe her, but the old woman kept at him for so long and accused the queen of so many evil things that finally he was persuaded that she was evil. He had his wife sentenced to death.

In the courtyard a huge fire was lit, and the queen was going to be burned at the stake. The king was at his window and watched with tears in his eyes, for he still loved her. Just after she had been bound to the stake and at the moment when flames began to lick at her clothes with their red tongues, the seven years came to an end. Suddenly there was a whirring sound in the air and twelve ravens came flying through the air and swooped down. When they touched the ground, they turned into her twelve brothers, whom she had disenchanted. They stomped on the fire, put out the flames, and released their sister. They all hugged and kissed. Now that she could finally open her mouth and speak, she told the king why she had taken a vow to remain silent and never to laugh. The king was

overjoyed when he discovered that she was innocent, and the two lived together in harmony until their deaths.

The wicked mother-in-law was brought before a judge and put into a barrel filled with boiling oil and poisonous snakes, and she died a painful death.



LITTLE BROTHER AND LITTLE SISTER

Little Brother took Little Sister by the hand and said: "Since the day that our mother died, we haven't had a moment of peace. Our stepmother beats us every day, and when we try to talk to her, she just gives us a swift kick and drives us off. All we get to eat are crusts of hard bread. Even the dog under the table is better off than we are. At least he gets an occasional tidbit. Our mother would be turning over in her grave if she knew what was happening. It's time for us to leave home and seek our fortune out in the world."



The two walked all day long across meadows and fields and over rocks. When it began to rain, Little Sister said: "God is weeping right along with our hearts!" When night fell, they reached the edge of a forest, and they were so worn down by their hunger, their misery, and

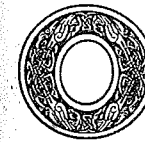
the table where the shoemaker usually put the cut leather, and then they hid in order to see how the little men would react. At midnight they scampered in and were about to start their work when they discovered the cute little articles of clothing in place of the cut-out leather. At first they were puzzled, but then they seemed elated. They slipped quickly into their beautiful clothes, smoothed them down, and sang a little song:

"Don't we look just trim and spruce?
Here's to pleasure! We're footloose!"

They skipped, danced, and jumped over the chairs and benches. And finally they danced out the door and were never seen again. The shoemaker continued to prosper for the remainder of his life, and he succeeded whenever he tried his hand at anything.



THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM



nce upon a time there lived a miller who had a beautiful daughter. He wanted to be sure that she was provided for and that she married well once she was grown up. He thought: "When the right kind of man comes along and asks for her hand, I shall give her to him."

Before long a suitor turned up who seemed to be rich, and since the miller could find nothing wrong with him, he promised him his daughter. But the girl didn't care for him in the way that a girl should



care for her betrothed, and she did not trust him at all. Whenever she set eyes on him or when her thoughts turned to him, she was filled with dread.

One day he said to her: "You're engaged to me, and yet you've never once visited me."

The girl replied: "I don't even know where you live."

The bridegroom told her: "My house lies deep in the forest."

The girl made all kinds of excuses and claimed that she would not be able to find the way there. But the bridegroom said: "Next Sunday you have to come over to my place. I've already invited the guests, and I'll strew ashes on the path so that you can find your way through the woods."

When Sunday arrived and the girl was supposed to leave, she became dreadfully frightened, without knowing exactly why, and she filled both her pockets with peas and lentils to mark the way. She entered the woods, where she found the trail of ashes, and she followed it carefully, but every step of the way she threw some peas on the ground, first to the right, then to left. She walked almost all day long until she got to the middle of the forest, where it was really gloomy. There she saw a house standing all by itself, and she didn't like the look of it because it seemed dark and spooky. She walked in. It was deadly silent. There was not a soul in sight. Suddenly, a voice cried out:

"Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride,
In a house of murderers you've arrived."

The girl looked up and realized that the voice was coming from a birdcage hanging on the wall. Once again, she heard:

"Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride,
In a house of murderers you've arrived."

The beautiful girl walked all around the house, going from one room to the next, but it was completely empty. No one was there. Finally, she went down to the cellar, where she found a woman, as old as the hills, her head bobbing up and down.

"Can you tell me if my betrothed lives here?" the girl asked.

"Oh, you poor child!" said the old woman. "How did you get here? This is a den of murderers. You think you're a bride about to be married, but the only wedding you'll celebrate is a wedding with death. Look over here! I had to heat up this big pot of water for them. When you get into their hands, they'll show no mercy and will chop you into pieces, cook you, and eat you, for they're cannibals. You're lost unless I take pity on you and try to save you."

The old woman hid her behind a big barrel, where no one could see her. "Be still as a mouse," she said. "Don't you dare move, or that'll be the end of you. At night, when the robbers are asleep, we'll escape. I've been waiting a long time for this moment."

No sooner had she spoken those words than the wicked crew returned home, dragging another girl behind them. The men were drunk, and they felt no pity when they heard her screams and sobs. They forced her to drink some wine, three glasses full, one white, one red, one yellow, and before long her heart burst in two. The robbers tore off her fine clothes, put her on the table, chopped her beautiful body into pieces, and sprinkled them with salt.

The poor girl was trembling with fear in her hiding place behind the barrel, for she now understood what the robbers had in store for her. One of them caught sight of a golden ring on the little finger of the murdered girl, and when he couldn't pull it off right away, he took an ax and chopped the finger off. The finger went flying through the air up over the barrel and landed right in the girl's lap. The robber took a candle and wanted to search for it, but he couldn't find it. One of the other robbers asked: "Have you looked over there behind that big barrel?" Just then the old woman called out: "Come and eat! You can search again tomorrow. That finger isn't going to run away."

"The old woman's right," the robbers said, and they stopped searching and sat down to eat. The old woman put a few drops of a sleeping

potion into their wine. Before long, they had retired to the cellar and were snoring away in their sleep.

When the bride heard the snoring noises, she came out from behind the barrel and crawled over the sleeping bodies arranged on the ground in rows. She was terrified that she might wake one of them up, but God guided her footsteps. The old woman went up the stairs with her, opened the door, and they ran as fast as they could from the den of murderers. The wind had scattered the ashes, but the peas and lentils had sprouted and showed the way in the moonlight. The two walked all night long. In the morning they reached the mill, and the girl told her father about everything that had happened.

When the day of the wedding celebration arrived, the groom appeared, as did all the friends and relatives invited by the miller. At dinner, every one there was asked to tell a story. The bride sat quietly and didn't utter a word. Finally the bridegroom said to his bride: "Don't you have anything to say, my love? You have to tell us something."

"Very well," she replied. "I will tell you about a dream I had. I was walking alone through the woods and came across a house. No one was living there, but on the wall there was a cage, and in it was a bird that sang:

'Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride,
In a house of murderers you've arrived.'

Then it repeated those words. My dear, I must have been dreaming all this. I walked from one room to the next, and each one was completely empty. Everything was so spooky. Finally I went down to the cellar, and there I saw a woman as old as the hills, her head bobbing up and down. I asked her: 'Does my betrothed live here?' She replied: 'Oh, you poor child, you've stumbled into a den of murderers. Your

betrothed lives here, but he is planning to chop you up and kill you, and then he'll cook you and eat you up.' My dear, I must have been dreaming all this. The old woman hid me behind a big barrel, and no sooner was I out of sight than the robbers returned home, dragging a maiden behind them. They gave her three kinds of wine to drink, white, red, and yellow, and her heart burst in two. My dear, I must have been dreaming all this. Then they tore off her fine clothes, chopped her beautiful body into pieces, and sprinkled them with salt. My dear, I must have been dreaming all this. One of the robbers caught sight of a gold ring on her finger and since it was hard to pull off, he took an ax and chopped it off. The finger flew through the air up behind the big barrel and landed in my lap. And here is the finger with the ring still on it."

With these words, she pulled it out and showed it to everyone there.

The robber turned white as a ghost while she was telling the story. He jumped up and tried to escape, but the guests seized him and turned him over to the law. He and his band were executed for their dreadful deeds.





BRIAR ROSE

Long, long ago there lived a king and a queen. Day after day they said to each other: "Oh, if only we could have a child!" But nothing ever happened. One day, while the queen was bathing, a frog crawled out of the water, crept ashore, and said to her: "Your wish shall be fulfilled. Before a year goes by, you will give birth to a daughter."

The frog's prediction came true, and the queen gave birth to a girl who was so beautiful that the king was beside himself with joy and arranged a great feast. He invited relatives, friends, and acquaintances,



and he also sent for the Wise Women of the kingdom, for he wanted to be sure that they would be kindly disposed toward his child. There were thirteen Wise Women in all, but since the king had only twelve golden plates for them to dine on, one of the women had to stay home.

The feast was celebrated with great splendor, and when it drew to a close, the Wise Women bestowed their magic gifts on the girl. One conferred virtue on her, a second gave her beauty, a third wealth, and on it went until the girl had everything in the world you could ever want. Just as the eleventh woman was presenting her gift, the thirteenth in the group appeared out of nowhere. She had not been invited, and now she wanted her revenge. Without so much as a greeting or even a glance at anyone there, she cried out in a loud voice: "When the daughter of the king turns fifteen, she will prick her finger on a spindle and fall down dead." And without another word, she turned her back on those assembled and left the hall.

Everyone was horrified, but just in the nick of time the twelfth of the Wise Women stepped forward. She had not yet made her wish. Although she could not lift the evil spell, she could temper it, and so she said: "The princess will not die, but she will fall into a deep sleep that will last for a hundred years." The king, who was intent on preventing any harm from coming to his child, sent out an order that every spindle in the entire kingdom was to be burned to ashes.

As for the girl, all the wishes made by the Wise Women came true, for she was so beautiful, kind, charming, and sensible that everyone who set eyes on her could not help but love her. On the very day that the princess turned fifteen, the king and the queen happened to be away from home, and the girl was left all alone. She wandered around in the castle, poking her head into one room after another, and eventually she came to the foot of an old tower. After climbing up a narrow, winding staircase in the tower, she ended up in front of a little door with a rusty old key in its lock. As she turned the key, the door burst open to reveal a tiny little room, in which an old woman was sitting with her spindle, busily spinning flax.

"Good afternoon, Granny," said the princess. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm spinning flax," the old woman replied, and she nodded to the girl.

"What is that thing bobbing about so oddly?" asked the girl, and she put her hand on the spindle, for she too wanted to spin. The magic spell began to take effect at once, for she had pricked her finger on the spindle.

The instant she felt the prick on her finger, she slumped down on the bed that was in the room, and a deep sleep came over her. The sleep spread through the entire castle. The king and the queen, who had just returned home and were entering the hall, fell asleep, and their attendants along with them. The horses fell asleep in the stables, the dogs in the courtyard, the doves on the roof, the flies on the walls, and yes indeed, even the fire flickering in the hearth died down and fell asleep, and the roast stopped sizzling, and the cook, who was about to pull the hair of the kitchen boy because he had done something stupid, let go and fell asleep. The wind also died down so that not a leaf was stirring on the trees outside the castle.

Soon a hedge of briars began to grow all around the castle. Every year it grew higher until one day it surrounded the entire place. It had grown so thick that you could not even see the banner on the turret of the castle. Throughout the land, stories circulated about the beautiful Briar Rose, for that was the name given to the slumbering princess. From time to time a prince would try to force his way through the hedge to get to the castle. But no one ever succeeded, because the briars clasped each other as if they were holding hands, and the young men who tried got caught in them and couldn't pry themselves loose. They died an agonizing death.

After many, many years had passed, another prince appeared in the land. He heard an old man talking about a briar hedge that was said to conceal a castle, where a wondrously beautiful princess named Briar Rose had been sleeping for a hundred years, and with her the king, the

queen, and the entire court. The old man had learned from his grandfather that many other princes had tried to make their way through the briar hedge, but they had gotten caught on the briars and perished in horrible ways. The young man said: "I am not afraid. I am going to find that castle so that I can see the beautiful Briar Rose." The kind old man did his best to discourage the prince, but he refused to listen.

It so happened that the term of one hundred years had just ended, and the day on which Briar Rose was to awaken had arrived. When the prince approached the briar hedge, he found nothing but big, beautiful flowers. They opened to make a path for him and to let him pass unharmed; then they closed behind him to form a hedge.

In the courtyard the horses and the spotted hounds were lying in the same place fast asleep, and the doves were roosting with their little heads tucked under their wings. The prince made his way into the castle and saw how the flies were fast asleep on the walls. The cook was still in the kitchen, with his hand up in the air as if he were about to grab the kitchen boy, and the maid was still sitting at a table with a black hen that she was about to pluck.

The prince walked along a little farther, over to the great hall, where he saw the entire court fast asleep, with the king and the queen sleeping right next to their thrones. He continued on his way, and everything was so quiet that he could hear his own breath. Finally he got to the tower, and he opened up the door to the little room in which Briar Rose was sleeping. There she lay, so beautiful that he could not take his eyes off her, and he bent down to kiss her.

No sooner had the prince touched Briar Rose's lips than she woke up, opened her eyes, and smiled sweetly at him. They went down the stairs together. The king, the queen, and the entire court had awoken, and they were all staring at each other in amazement. The horses in the courtyard stood up and shook themselves. The hounds jumped to their feet and wagged their tails. The doves pulled their heads out

from under their wings, looked around, and flew off into the fields. The flies began crawling on the walls. The fire in the kitchen flickered, flared up, and began cooking the food again. The roast started to sizzle. The cook slapped the boy so hard that he let out a screech. The maid finished plucking the hen.

The wedding of Briar Rose and the prince was celebrated in great splendor, and the two lived out their days in happiness.



SNOW WHITE

Once upon a time in the middle of winter, when snowflakes the size of feathers were falling from the sky, a queen was sitting and sewing by a window with an ebony frame. While she was sewing, she looked out at the snow and pricked her finger with a needle. Three drops of blood fell onto the snow. The red looked so beautiful against the white snow that she thought: "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame." Not long after that, she gave



birth to a little girl who was white as snow, red as blood, and black as ebony, and she was called Snow White. The queen died shortly after the child was born.

A year later, her husband, the king, married another woman. She was a beautiful lady, but proud and domineering, and she could not