

The One-Handed Girl

by Andrew Lang
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

An old couple once lived in a hut under a grove of palm trees, and they had one son and one daughter. They were all very happy together for many years, and then the father became very ill, and felt he was going to die. He called his children to the place where he lay on the floor--for no one had any beds in that country--and said to his son, 'I have no herds of cattle to leave you--only the few things there are in the house--for I am a poor man, as you know. But choose: will you have my blessing or my property?'

'Your property, certainly,' answered the son, and his father nodded.

'And you?' asked the old man of the girl, who stood by her brother.

'I will have blessing,' she answered, and her father gave her much blessing.

That night he died, and his wife and son and daughter mourned for him seven days, and gave him a burial according to the custom of his people. But hardly was the time of mourning over, than the mother was attacked by a disease which was common in that country.

'I am going away from you,' she said to her children, in a faint voice; 'but first, my son, choose which you will have: blessing or property.'

'Property, certainly,' answered the son.

'And you, my daughter?'

'I will have blessing,' said the girl; and her mother gave her much blessing, and that night she died.

When the days of mourning were ended, the brother bade his sister put outside the hut all that belonged to his father and his mother. So the girl put them out, and he took them away, save only a small pot and a vessel in which she could clean her corn. But she had no corn to clean.

She sat at home, sad and hungry, when a neighbour knocked at the door.

‘My pot has cracked in the fire, lend me yours to cook my supper in, and I will give you a handful of corn in return.’

And the girl was glad, and that night she was able to have supper herself, and next day another woman borrowed her pot, and then another and another, for never were known so many accidents as befell the village pots at that time. She soon grew quite fat with all the corn she earned with the help of her pot, and then one evening she picked up a pumpkin seed in a corner, and planted it near her well, and it sprang up, and gave her many pumpkins.

At last it happened that a youth from her village passed through the place where the girl’s brother was, and the two met and talked.

‘What news is there of my sister?’ asked the young man, with whom things had gone badly, for he was idle.

‘She is fat and well-liking,’ replied the youth, ‘for the women borrow her mortar to clean their corn, and borrow her pot to cook it in, and for all this they give her more food than she can eat.’ And he went his way.

Now the brother was filled with envy at the words of the man, and he set out at once, and before dawn he had reached the hut, and saw the pot and the mortar were standing outside. He slung them over his shoulders and departed, pleased with his own cleverness; but when his sister awoke and sought for the pot to cook her corn for breakfast, she could find it nowhere. At length she said to herself,

‘Well, some thief must have stolen them while I slept. I will go and see if any of my pumpkins are ripe.’ And indeed they were, and so many that the tree was almost broken by the weight of them. So she ate what she wanted and took the others to the village, and gave them in exchange for corn, and the women said that no pumpkins were as sweet as these, and that she was to bring every day all that she had. In this way she earned more than she needed for herself, and soon was able to get another mortar and cooking pot in exchange for her corn. Then she thought she was quite rich.

Unluckily someone else thought so too, and this was her brother's wife, who had heard all about the pumpkin tree, and sent her slave with a handful of grain to buy her a pumpkin. At first the girl told him that so few were left that she could not spare any; but when she found that he belonged to her brother, she changed her mind, and went out to the tree and gathered the largest and the ripest that was there.

'Take this one,' she said to the slave, 'and carry it back to your mistress, but tell her to keep the corn, as the pumpkin is a gift.'

The brother's wife was overjoyed at the sight of the fruit, and when she tasted it, she declared it was the nicest she had ever eaten. Indeed, all night she thought of nothing else, and early in the morning she called another slave (for she was a rich woman) and bade him go and ask for another pumpkin. But the girl, who had just been out to look at her tree, told him that they were all eaten, so he went back empty-handed to his mistress.

In the evening her husband returned from hunting a long way off, and found his wife in tears.

'What is the matter?' asked he.

'I sent a slave with some grain to your sister to buy some pumpkins, but she would not sell me any, and told me there were none, though I know she lets other people buy them.'

'Well, never mind now--go to sleep,' said he, 'and to-morrow I will go and pull up the pumpkin tree, and that will punish her for treating you so badly.'

So before sunrise he got up and set out for his sister's house, and found her cleaning some corn.

'Why did you refuse to sell my wife a pumpkin yesterday when she wanted one?' he asked.

'The old ones are finished, and the new ones are not yet come,' answered the girl. 'When her slave arrived two days ago, there were only four left; but I gave him one, and would take no corn for it.'

‘I do not believe you; you have sold them all to other people. I shall go and cut down the pumpkin,’ cried her brother in a rage.

‘If you cut down the pumpkin you shall cut off my hand with it,’ exclaimed the girl, running up to her tree and catching hold of it. But her brother followed, and with one blow cut off the pumpkin and her hand too.

Then he went into the house and took away everything he could find, and sold the house to a friend of his who had long wished to have it, and his sister had no home to go to.

Meanwhile she had bathed her arm carefully, and bound on it some healing leaves that grew near by, and wrapped a cloth round the leaves, and went to hide in the forest, that her brother might not find her again.

For seven days she wandered about, eating only the fruit that hung from the trees above her, and every night she climbed up and tucked herself safely among the creepers which bound together the big branches, so that neither lions nor tigers nor panthers might get at her.

When she woke up on the seventh morning she saw from her perch smoke coming up from a little town on the edge of the forest. The sight of the huts made her feel more lonely and helpless than before. She longed desperately for a draught of milk from a gourd, for there were no streams in that part, and she was very thirsty, but how was she to earn anything with only one hand? And at this thought her courage failed, and she began to cry bitterly.

It happened that the king’s son had come out from the town very early to shoot birds, and when the sun grew hot he left tired.

‘I will lie here and rest under this tree,’ he said to his attendants. ‘You can go and shoot instead, and I will just have this slave to stay with me!’ Away they went, and the young man fell asleep, and slept long. Suddenly he was awakened by something wet and salt falling on his face.

‘What is that? Is it raining?’ he said to his slave. ‘Go and look.’

‘No, master, it is not raining,’ answered the slave.

‘Then climb up the tree and see what it is,’ and the slave climbed up, and came back and told his master that a beautiful girl was sitting up there, and that it must have been her tears which had fallen on the face of the king’s son.

‘Why was she crying?’ inquired the prince.

‘I cannot tell--I did not dare to ask her; but perhaps she would tell you.’ And the master, greatly wondering, climbed up the tree.

‘What is the matter with you?’ said he gently, and, as she only sobbed louder, he continued:

‘Are you a woman, or a spirit of the woods?’

‘I am a woman,’ she answered slowly, wiping her eyes with a leaf of the creeper that hung about her.

‘Then why do you cry?’ he persisted.

‘I have many things to cry for,’ she replied, ‘more than you could ever guess.’

‘Come home with me,’ said the prince; ‘it is not very far. Come home to my father and mother. I am a king’s son.’

‘Then why are you here?’ she said, opening her eyes and staring at him.

‘Once every month I and my friends shoot birds in the forest,’ he answered, ‘but I was tired and bade them leave me to rest. And you--what are you doing up in this tree?’

At that she began to cry again, and told the king’s son all that had befallen her since the death of her mother.

‘I cannot come down with you, for I do not like anyone to see me,’ she ended with a sob.

‘Oh! I will manage all that,’ said the king’s son, and swinging himself to a lower branch, he bade his slave go quickly into the town, and

bring back with him four strong men and a curtained litter. When the man was gone, the girl climbed down, and hid herself on the ground in some bushes. Very soon the slave returned with the litter, which was placed on the ground close to the bushes where the girl lay.

‘Now go, all of you, and call my attendants, for I do not wish to say here any longer,’ he said to the men, and as soon as they were out of sight he bade the girl get into the litter, and fasten the curtains tightly. Then he got in on the other side, and waited till his attendants came up.

‘What is the matter, O son of a king?’ asked they, breathless with running.

‘I think I am ill; I am cold,’ he said, and signing to the bearers, he drew the curtains, and was carried through the forest right inside his own house.

‘Tell my father and mother that I have a fever, and want some gruel,’ said he, ‘and bid them send it quickly.’

So the slave hastened to the king’s palace and gave his message, which troubled both the king and the queen greatly. A pot of hot gruel was instantly prepared, and carried over to the sick man, and as soon as the council which was sitting was over, the king and his ministers went to pay him a visit, bearing a message from the queen that she would follow a little later.

Now the prince had pretended to be ill in order to soften his parent’s hearts, and the next day he declared he felt better, and, getting into his litter, was carried to the palace in state, drums being beaten all along the road.

He dismounted at the foot of the steps and walked up, a great parasol being held over his head by a slave. Then he entered the cool, dark room where his father and mother were sitting, and said to them:

‘I saw a girl yesterday in the forest whom I wish to marry, and, unknown to my attendants, I brought her back to my house in a litter. Give me your consent, I beg, for no other woman pleases me as well, even though she has but one hand!’

Of course the king and queen would have preferred a daughter-in-law with two hands, and one who could have brought riches with her, but they could not bear to say 'No' to their son, so they told him it should be as he chose, and that the wedding feast should be prepared immediately.

The girl could scarcely believe her good fortune, and, in gratitude for all the kindness shown her, was so useful and pleasant to her husband's parents that they soon loved her.

By and bye a baby was born to her, and soon after that the prince was sent on a journey by his father to visit some of the distant towns of the kingdom, and to set right things that had gone wrong.

No sooner had he started than the girl's brother, who had wasted all the riches his wife had brought him in recklessness and folly, and was now very poor, chanced to come into the town, and as he passed he heard a man say, 'Do you know that the king's son has married a woman who has lost one of her hands?' On hearing these words the brother stopped and asked, 'Where did he find such a woman?'

'In the forest,' answered the man, and the cruel brother guessed at once it must be his sister.

A great rage took possession of his soul as he thought of the girl whom he had tried to ruin being after all so much better off than himself, and he vowed that he would work her ill. Therefore that very afternoon he made his way to the palace and asked to see the king.

When he was admitted to his presence, he knelt down and touched the ground with his forehead, and the king bade him stand up and tell wherefore he had come.

'By the kindness of your heart have you been deceived, O king,' said he. 'Your son has married a girl who has lost a hand. Do you know why she had lost it? She was a witch, and has wedded three husbands, and each husband she has put to death with her arts. Then the people of the town cut off her hand, and turned her into the forest. And what I say is true, for her town is my town also.'

The king listened, and his face grew dark. Unluckily he had a hasty temper, and did not stop to reason, and, instead of sending to the

town, and discovering people who knew his daughter-in-law and could have told him how hard she had worked and how poor she had been, he believed all the brother's lying words, and made the queen believe them too. Together they took counsel what they should do, and in the end they decided that they also would put her out of the town. But this did not content the brother.

'Kill her,' he said. 'It is no more than she deserves for daring to marry the king's son. Then she can do no more hurt to anyone.'

'We cannot kill her,' answered they; 'if we did, our son would assuredly kill us. Let us do as the others did, and put her out of the town. And with this the envious brother was forced to be content.'

The poor girl loved her husband very much, but just then the baby was more to her than all else in the world, and as long as she had him with her, she did not very much mind anything. So, taking her son on her arm, and hanging a little earthen pot for cooking round her neck, she left her house with its great peacock fans and slaves and seats of ivory, and plunged into the forest.

For a while she walked, not knowing whither she went, then by and bye she grew tired, and sat under a tree to rest and to hush her baby to sleep. Suddenly she raised her eyes, and saw a snake wriggling from under the bushes towards her.

'I am a dead woman,' she said to herself, and stayed quite still, for indeed she was too frightened to move. In another minute the snake had reached her side, and to her surprise he spoke.

'Open your earthen pot, and let me go in. Save me from sun, and I will save you from rain,' and she opened the pot, and when the snake had slipped in, she put on the cover. Soon she beheld another snake coming after the other one, and when it had reached her it stopped and said, 'Did you see a small grey snake pass this way just now?'

'Yes,' she answered, 'it was going very quickly.'

'Ah, I must hurry and catch it up,' replied the second snake, and it hastened on.

When it was out of sight, a voice from the pot said:

‘Uncover me,’ and she lifted the lid, and the little grey snake slid rapidly to the ground.

‘I am safe now,’ he said. ‘But tell me, where are you going?’

‘I cannot tell you, for I do not know,’ she answered. ‘I am just wandering in the wood.’

‘Follow me, and let us go home together,’ said the snake, and the girl followed his through the forest and along the green paths, till they came to a great lake, where they stopped to rest.

‘The sun is hot,’ said the snake, ‘and you have walked far. Take your baby and bathe in that cool place where the boughs of the tree stretch far over the water.’

‘Yes, I will,’ answered she, and they went in. The baby splashed and crowed with delight, and then he gave a spring and fell right in, down, down, down, and his mother could not find him, though she searched all among the reeds.

Full of terror, she made her way back to the bank, and called to the snake, ‘My baby is gone!--he is drowned, and never shall I see him again.’

‘Go in once more,’ said the snake, ‘and feel everywhere, even among the trees that have their roots in the water, lest perhaps he may be held fast there.’

Swiftly she went back and felt everywhere with her whole hand, even putting her fingers into the tiniest crannies, where a crab could hardly have taken shelter.

‘No, he is not here,’ she cried. ‘How am I to live without him?’ But the snake took no notice, and only answered, ‘Put in your other arm too.’

‘What is the use of that?’ she asked, ‘when it has no hand to feel with?’ but all the same she did as she was bid, and in an instant the wounded arm touched something round and soft, lying between two stones in a clump of reeds.

‘My baby, my baby!’ she shouted, and lifted him up, merry and laughing, and not a bit hurt or frightened.

‘Have you found him this time?’ asked the snake.

‘Yes, oh, yes!’ she answered, ‘and, why--why--I have got my hand back again!’ and from sheer joy she burst into tears.

The snake let her weep for a little while, and then he said--

‘Now we will journey on to my family, and we will all repay you for the kindness you showed to me.’

‘You have done more than enough in giving me back my hand,’ replied the girl; but the snake only smiled.

‘Be quick, lest the sun should set,’ he answered, and began to wriggle along so fast that the girl could hardly follow him.

By and by they arrived at the house in a tree where the snake lived, when he was not travelling with his father and mother. And he told them all his adventures, and how he had escaped from his enemy. The father and mother snake could not do enough to show their gratitude. They made their guest lie down on a hammock woven of the strong creepers which hung from bough to bough, till she was quite rested after her wanderings, while they watched the baby and gave him milk to drink from the cocoa-nuts which they persuaded their friends the monkeys to crack for them. They even managed to carry small fruit tied up in their tails for the baby’s mother, who felt at last that she was safe and at peace. Not that she forgot her husband, for she often thought of him and longed to show him her son, and in the night she would sometimes lie awake and wonder where he was.

In this manner many weeks passed by.

And what was the prince doing?

Well, he had fallen very ill when he was on the furthest border of the kingdom, and he was nursed by some kind people who did not know

who he was, so that the king and queen heard nothing about him. When he was better he made his way home again, and into his father's palace, where he found a strange man standing behind the throne with the peacock's feathers. This was his wife's brother, whom the king had taken into high favour, though, of course, the prince was quite ignorant of what had happened.

For a moment the king and queen stared at their son, as if he had been unknown to them; he had grown so thin and weak during his illness that his shoulders were bowed like those of an old man.

'Have you forgotten me so soon?' he asked.

At the sound of his voice they gave a cry and ran towards him, and poured out questions as to what had happened, and why he looked like that. But the prince did not answer any of them.

'How is my wife?' he said. There was a pause.

Then the queen replied:

'She is dead.'

'Dead!' he repeated, stepping a little backwards. 'And my child?'

'He is dead too.'

The young man stood silent. Then he said, 'Show me their graves.'

At these words the king, who had been feeling rather uncomfortable, took heart again, for had he not prepared two beautiful tombs for his son to see, so that he might never, never guess what had been done to his wife? All these months the king and queen had been telling each other how good and merciful they had been not to take her brother's advice and to put her to death. But now, this somehow did not seem so certain.

Then the king led the way to the courtyard just behind the palace, and through the gate into a beautiful garden where stood two splendid tombs in a green space under the trees. The prince advanced alone, and, resting his head against the stone, he burst into tears. His father and mother stood silently behind with a curious pang in their souls

which they did not quite understand. Could it be that they were ashamed of themselves?

But after a while the prince turned round, and walking past them in to the palace he bade the slaves bring him mourning. For seven days no one saw him, but at the end of them he went out hunting, and helped his father rule his people. Only no one dared to speak to him of his wife and son.

At last one morning, after the girl had been lying awake all night thinking of her husband, she said to her friend the snake:

‘You have all shown me much kindness, but now I am well again, and want to go home and hear some news of my husband, and if he still mourns for me!’ Now the heart of the snake was sad at her words, but he only said:

‘Yes, thus it must be; go and bid farewell to my father and mother, but if they offer you a present, see that you take nothing but my father’s ring and my mother’s casket.’

So she went to the parent snakes, who wept bitterly at the thought of losing her, and offered her gold and jewels as much as she could carry in remembrance of them. But the girl shook her head and pushed the shining heap away from her.

‘I shall never forget you, never,’ she said in a broken voice, ‘but the only tokens I will accept from you are that little ring and this old casket.’

The two snakes looked at each other in dismay. The ring and the casket were the only things they did not want her to have. Then after a short pause they spoke.

‘Why do you want the ring and casket so much? Who has told you of them?’

‘Oh, nobody; it is just my fancy,’ answered she. But the old snakes shook their heads and replied:

‘Not so; it is our son who told you, and, as he said, so it must be. If you need food, or clothes, or a house, tell the ring and it will find them

for you. And if you are unhappy or in danger, tell the casket and it will set things right.' Then they both gave her their blessing, and she picked up her baby and went her way.

She walked for a long time, till at length she came near the town where her husband and his father dwelt. Here she stopped under a grove of palm trees, and told the ring that she wanted a house.

'It is ready, mistress,' whispered a queer little voice which made her jump, and, looking behind her, she saw a lovely palace made of the finest woods, and a row of slaves with tall fans bowing before the door. Glad indeed was she to enter, for she was very tired, and, after eating a good supper of fruit and milk which she found in one of the rooms, she flung herself down on a pile of cushions and went to sleep with her baby beside her.

Here she stayed quietly, and every day the baby grew taller and stronger, and very soon he could run about and even talk. Of course the neighbours had a great deal to say about the house which had been built so quickly--so very quickly--on the outskirts of the town, and invented all kinds of stories about the rich lady who lived in it. And by and bye, when the king returned with his son from the wars, some of these tales reached his ears.

'It is really very odd about that house under the palms,' he said to the queen; 'I must find out something of the lady whom no one ever sees. I daresay it is not a lady at all, but a gang of conspirators who want to get possession of my throne. To-morrow I shall take my son and my chief ministers and insist on getting inside.'

Soon after sunrise next day the prince's wife was standing on a little hill behind the house, when she saw a cloud of dust coming through the town. A moment afterwards she heard faintly the roll of the drums that announced the king's presence, and saw a crowd of people approaching the grove of palms. Her heart beat fast. Could her husband be among them? In any case they must not discover her there; so just bidding the ring prepare some food for them, she ran inside, and bound a veil of golden gauze round her head and face. Then, taking the child's hand, she went to the door and waited.

In a few minutes the whole procession came up, and she stepped forward and begged them to come in and rest.

‘Willingly,’ answered the king; ‘go first, and we will follow you.’

They followed her into a long dark room, in which was a table covered with gold cups and baskets filled with dates and cocoa-nuts and all kinds of ripe yellow fruits, and the king and the prince sat upon cushions and were served by slaves, while the ministers, among whom she recognised her own brother, stood behind.

‘Ah, I owe all my misery to him,’ she said to herself. ‘From the first he has hated me,’ but outwardly she showed nothing. And when the king asked her what news there was in the town she only answered:

‘You have ridden far; eat first, and drink, for you must be hungry and thirsty, and then I will tell you my news.’

‘You speak sense,’ answered the king, and silence prevailed for some time longer. Then he said:

‘Now, lady, I have finished, and am refreshed, therefore tell me, I pray you, who you are, and whence you come? But, first, be seated.’

She bowed her head and sat down on a big scarlet cushion, drawing her little boy, who was asleep in a corner, on to her knee, and began to tell the story of her life. As her brother listened, he would fain have left the house and hidden himself in the forest, but it was his duty to wave the fan of peacock’s feathers over the king’s head to keep off the flies, and he knew he would be seized by the royal guards if he tried to desert his post. He must stay where he was, there was no help for it, and luckily for him the king was too much interested in the tale to notice that the fan had ceased moving, and that flies were dancing right on the top of his thick curly hair.

The story went on, but the story-teller never once looked at the prince, even through her veil, though he on his side never moved his eyes from her. When she reached the part where she had sat weeping in the tree, the king’s son could restrain himself no longer.

‘It is my wife,’ he cried, springing to where she sat with the sleeping child in her lap. ‘They have lied to me, and you are not dead after all, nor the boy either! But what has happened? Why did they lie to me?’

and why did you leave my house where you were safe?' And he turned and looked fiercely at his father.

'Let me finish my tale first, and then you will know,' answered she, throwing back her veil, and she told how her brother had come to the palace and accused her of being a witch, and had tried to persuade the king to slay her. 'But he would not do that,' she continued softly, 'and after all, if I had stayed on in your house, I should never have met the snake, nor have got my hand back again. So let us forget all about it, and be happy once more, for see! our son is growing quite a big boy.'

'And what shall be done to your brother?' asked the king, who was glad to think that someone had acted in this matter worse than himself.

'Put him out of the town,' answered she.

From 'Swaheli Tales,' by E. Steere.