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The Dead Wife

Andrew Lang

A man and his wife lived in the forest, far from the rest of their people. They often spent the day hunting together, but as time went on the wife found she had so much to do at home that she had to stay behind, and he went out alone. He found that without her he never had any luck. One day while he was away hunting, she fell ill, and within a few days she was dead.

He grieved bitterly and buried her in the house where she had spent her life. As time passed he felt so lonely that he carved a wooden doll about her height and size, dressed it in her clothes, and sat it in front of the fire for company. He tried to believe his wife had come back. The next day, when he came home from hunting, the first thing he did was to brush the ashes from the fire off the doll's face. But he was busy now, with the cooking and mending as well as the hunting, for there was no one to help him, and a whole year went by.



At the end of that year he came home one night to find wood by the door and a fire burning inside. The next night there was not only wood and fire but meat in the kettle, nearly ready to eat. He searched all around but found no one. The next time, he went hunting but stayed close, and came home early. While he was still a long way off, he saw a woman carrying wood into the house. He hurried and flung open the door, and instead of the wooden doll, his wife was sitting in front of the fire.

She spoke to him. "The Great Spirit felt sorry for you because you wouldn't be comforted, and he let me come back to you. But you must not reach out and touch me until we have seen the rest of our people. If you do, I will die."

The man listened, and the woman stayed with him, bringing wood and lighting the fire. After a while he said, "It has been two years since you died. Let us go back to our people. Then you will be well, and I'll be able to touch you."

They packed food for the journey, a string of dried deer meat for each of them to carry, and set out. It was six days' journey to the camp. When they were one day away, snow began to fall, and they grew tired and wanted rest. They made a

fire, cooked a meal, and spread out their skins to sleep.

The man's heart was stirred, and he reached out his arms to his wife. She waved her hands. "We haven't seen anyone yet. It's too soon."

But he wouldn't listen. He pulled her to him, and behold! he was holding the wooden doll. He pushed it away in anguish and rushed to the camp and told them his story. Some doubted him, and they went back with him to the place where he and his wife had stopped to sleep. The doll lay there, and in the snow they saw the footprints of two people, and one set of footprints was shaped like the doll's.

And the man grieved for the rest of his life.

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