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The White Duck

Andrew Lang

A great and powerful King married a lovely Princess. No couple was ever so happy. But before their honeymoon was over they had to part: the King had to lead an army to a far-off country and leave his young wife alone at home. She wept bitterly. He tried to comfort her and gave her careful warnings: never leave the castle, never speak to strangers, beware of bad advisers, and most of all, beware of strange women. The Queen promised faithfully to obey all four.

When he had gone, she shut herself up with her ladies, spinning and weaving and thinking of her husband. She was often sad and lonely. One day, as she sat at the window with tears dropping on her work, an old woman leaning on a crutch, kind and homely-looking, stopped at the window and spoke in flattering tones.

"Why so sad, fair Queen? You shouldn't mope in your rooms all day. Come out into the green garden. Hear the birds singing in the trees, watch the butterflies flit over the flowers and the bees hum, and the sunbeams chasing dewdrops through the rose-leaves and lily-cups. All that brightness will drive your cares away."

For a long time the Queen resisted, remembering her promise. But at last she thought: *What harm could it do to go into the garden for a little while?* She had no idea that the kind old woman was a wicked witch who envied her good fortune and meant to ruin her. So the Queen followed her into the garden and listened to her smooth words.

In the middle of the garden was a pond, clear as crystal. "The day is so warm and the sun so scorching," said the old woman, "and that water looks so cool. Wouldn't you like to bathe, fair Queen?"

"No, I don't think so," said the Queen. But a moment later she regretted it. *Why shouldn't I bathe in that cool water? There's no harm in it.* She slipped off her robes and stepped in. Her feet had barely touched the ripples when she felt a great shove on her shoulders, and the witch had pushed her into the deep water.



"Swim now, White Duck!" cried the witch.

The witch took the Queen's shape, put on her royal robes, and sat among the court ladies to wait for the King. Soon came the sound of horses' hooves and barking dogs. The witch hurried out to meet the royal carriages and threw her arms around the King's neck and kissed him. In his joy, he didn't know that the woman he held was not his wife.

Meanwhile, outside the palace walls, the poor White Duck swam up and down the pond. She laid three eggs, and one morning two fluffy ducklings and an ugly little drake hatched. She raised them, and they paddled after her, caught goldfish, hopped on the bank, waddled and ruffled their feathers and said "quack, quack" on the green banks. She warned them not to wander. "A wicked witch lives in the castle beyond the garden. She ruined me, and she'll try to ruin you."

But the young ones didn't listen. One day they wandered right up to the castle windows. The witch recognised them at once by their smell, and ground her teeth with rage. But she hid her feelings and pretended to be kind. She called them in, joked with them, led them to a beautiful room, gave them food, and showed them a soft cushion to sleep on. Then she went down to the kitchens and told the servants to sharpen the knives, build up a great fire, and hang a large kettle of water over it.

The two little ducklings fell asleep, and the drake lay between them, covered by their wings. But the little drake couldn't sleep. In the dark he heard the witch come to the door. "Little ones, are you asleep?"

The drake answered for the others:

"*We cannot sleep, we wake and weep, Sharp is the knife to take our life; The fire is hot, now boils the pot, And so we wake, and lie and quake.*"

"They aren't asleep yet," the witch muttered. She paced up and down the passage and came back. "Little ones, are you asleep?"

And again the little drake answered for his sisters, with the same rhyme.

"Same answer," the witch muttered. "I'll go in and see." She opened the door

softly, and when she saw the two little ducklings sound asleep, she killed them.

In the morning the White Duck wandered around the pond, distracted, looking for her children. She called and searched, but there was no trace. In her heart she felt that something terrible had happened, and she flew up to the palace. There, on the marble floor of the courtyard, lay her three children, dead and cold. The White Duck threw herself over them, covering their little bodies with her wings, and cried:

"*Quack, quack, my little loves! Quack, quack, my turtle-doves! I brought you up with grief and pain, And now before my eyes you're slain. I gave you always of the best; I kept you warm in my soft nest. I loved and watched you day and night. You were my joy, my one delight.*"

The King heard the White Duck's sad cry and called to the witch. "Wife, what a wonder! Listen to that duck."

"My dear husband, what do you mean? There's nothing wonderful about a duck quacking. Servants! Chase that duck out of the courtyard!" But the servants chased and chased, and couldn't drive her off. She circled around and kept returning to the spot where her children lay, crying:

"*Quack, quack, my little loves! Quack, quack, my turtle-doves! The wicked witch your lives did take, The wicked witch, the cunning snake. First she stole my King away, Then my children did she slay. Changed me from a happy wife To a duck for all my life. Would I were the Queen again; Would that you had never been slain.*"

As the King listened to her words, he began to suspect he'd been deceived. "Catch that duck and bring her here!" But the servants ran back and forth, and the duck always fled past them. So the King himself stepped among them, and the duck fluttered straight into his hands. As he stroked her wings, she turned into a beautiful woman, and he recognised his dear wife. She told him that in her nest in the garden he would find a little bottle with a few drops from the spring of healing. It was brought. The ducklings and the little drake were sprinkled with the water, and from the little bodies three lovely children rose up.

The King and Queen were overjoyed. They all lived happily together in the beautiful palace. As for the wicked witch, the King had her seized, and she came to a bad end.

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