



The Wicked Sisters and the Good One: A Fairy Tale

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CAROLINE STAHL

The Wicked Sisters and the Good One: A Fairy Tale

Translator's Introduction

When we began working on The Queen's Mirror: Fairy Tales by German Women Writers 1780–1900,¹ Jeannine Blackwell and I hoped to include every flavor of soup and nut of German women's fairy-tale production in that time period. One author we clearly wanted to include was Caroline Stahl, because of the regard in which she was held by the Brothers Grimm,² her importance as a mediator of French fairy tales for German readers, and her anticipation of the fairy-tale genre as didactic literature for children before the Grimms' collection became the standard. The Grimms deemed Stahl's 1818 collection Fabeln, Märchen und Erzählungen für Kinder (from which the following translation comes) as "[g]roßentheils echte, aus mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelte Märchen, die eben darum, wenn sie auch oft nicht sehr vollständig sind, Werth behalten. Die Erzählung ist gerade nicht ausgezeichnet, aber doch einfach und ohne Überladung" ("a collection of mostly genuine, orally transmitted märchen, that for that very reason, even if not always very complete, are important. The narration is not exactly exceptional, but yet simple and not excessively florid"). They considered the tale translated here, "Die bösen Schwestern und die Gute," "an imperfect transmission" ("nach unvollkommener Überlieferung") of "Frau Holle."³

Born Caroline Dumpf on 4 November 1776 in Tartu, Livonia (now Estonia),⁴ Stahl eventually moved to Germany in 1808 and resided in Weimar, Nuremberg, and for a short while, Vienna. In 1820 she moved back to her native country, where she worked for several years as a governess in Tartu, then in White Russia, and finally in Pskov, before returning to Germany for a four-year period from 1828–32. Besides

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her publications for children, she also published in various literary newspapers of her day, including the *Abendzeitung*, the *Gesellschafter* and the *Morgenblatt*.⁵

Like so many other collections from this time period, Stahl's works have all but disappeared from libraries and can be found today only in private or uncatalogued collections. After searching for several years, I finally received a complete xerox copy of *Fabeln, Märchen und Erzählungen für Kinder* from Dr. Erich Strobach, shortly before his death in 1990. I would like to express my gratitude to his heirs for his kind and gracious support of my research.

A woman lived with her three daughters in a large forest cut off from civilization. The two eldest daughters were very wicked and when they were grown up and their mother had grown old and weak, they were often harsh and mean to her. The youngest daughter, Rose, also had a hard time with them and had to put up with their bad moods and nastiness.

One day a woman came to them and said there was a huge cave in the middle of the forest that was filled to overflowing with gold and precious things. When the woman had left, the girls decided right away that they should visit this cave to see these glorious things with their own eyes and to bring a few things back. Their mother warned them and said that the old woman had looked like a trickster who wanted to lure them into the woods, who knew with what intentions? But the two, Bettie and Nettie, didn't pay her any heed and set out to find the cave with its treasures.

They wandered around for a long time until they came to a clearing completely enclosed by boulders. They could see the entrance to the cave, but above it hung a slab of stone with a chiseled inscription that proclaimed whoever dared to enter this cave could take as many hidden treasures as he wished, but would live only three days after departing the cave and could enjoy his ill-gotten gains only for that long. The sisters' greed spurred them to the most despicable thoughts of sending Rose down and having her haul out as much as possible. Then, since she would die shortly thereafter, they could keep everything for themselves.

They returned home and recounted such wonderful things about the cave that even Rose wanted to see it and the next day they set out with her. When they arrived they didn't let her read the inscription, but instead forced her to climb into the cave, since they were both quite a bit bigger and stockier. Rose was forced to obey and, quaking with fear, she stepped onto the small path that dropped off into the depths. For quite some time she stumbled around in the dark, but then she saw a bright light and she entered a lovely garden

illuminated by lanterns. The trees hung heavy with lovely fruits fashioned of the purest gold to look real. A lovely house stood in the middle of the garden and she braved entering. What a multitude of silk things—ceiling-high piles of dresses, scarves, and the like, in all sorts of colors and fashions! There were also heaps of the most radiant jewels, so many that the dazzled girl hardly knew where to look first. Finally she followed the command of her imperious sisters, who had threatened to scratch and beat her if she returned empty-handed. She took a scarf and then, gaining confidence, one thing after another. Then she picked several golden fruits in the garden and, quite heavily laden, started on the arduous path back.

In the meantime her two sisters had waited in vain for her return and, since night had fallen, they started to fear that something had happened to her—that she might have died in the cave. Filled with fear, they headed home and after much stumbling around in the dark, arrived there at daybreak. Their mother, worried sick about them, hadn't slept a wink, and was sitting on the doorstep anxiously awaiting their arrival. They told her Rose had climbed down into the cave out of curiosity and against their will, but hadn't reappeared. The poor woman shed the bitterest of tears for her best child; she was fairly certain, though, that Rose hadn't gone into the cave on her own accord, but rather at her sisters' insistence. And so as the two took to bed to catch up on their lost night's sleep, she set out for the dreaded cave.

Weeping, she walked to where she thought it had to be and, to her great delight, found Rose safe and sound, asleep under a tree. Next to her lay a little goat, and not far away a pile of the most beautiful things and golden fruits. The good woman, who had brought along a bottle of milk (she herself did not know why), now sat down quietly next to the sleeping girl so as not to wake her, while she gave the little goat some milk out of the cup of her hand. The goat showed its appreciation for this act of kindness by licking her hand. Eventually Rose awakened and after she had refreshed herself with the remaining milk, she recounted how her sisters had forced her to climb down into the cave and what she had seen there and how on the way back she had found this little goat who was so exhausted it could scarcely crawl and so she had taken it along. That, of course, had made the way back slow and tedious, so that in the meantime night had fallen and she hadn't been able to find her sisters. Now they returned home with all the things Rose had brought.

The sisters couldn't believe their eyes when their missing sister reappeared so heavily laden. And they would gladly have grabbed everything right off, if they hadn't felt some trepidation. They decided they would just wait for Rose's certain and impending demise to inherit her things, and they repeatedly scolded her for having burdened herself down with the silly goat instead of taking more pretty things. But, to their great surprise, Rose remained hale and alive, even

though she let herself be talked into taking one of the plainest pieces to make herself a dress. They now regretted not having taken everything away from her and decided to visit the cave themselves with her and to take away as much as the three of them could carry, even though Rose wasn't to get any of it. No sooner said than done; their mother could object all she wanted, but they insisted that Rose absolutely had to come along and climb down first.

They all arrived in the cave safe and sound and after examining and admiring the garden and house, still as resplendent as before, they began picking and packing and Rose was loaded up with so much that she could barely drag herself and the things away. At the end of the garden, where the narrow path led up out of the cave, there was again a little goat who looked at them imploringly, but Nettie and Bettie just kicked it away and swept indifferently past. Rose, although so loaded down that she could barely move and trailing far behind the others, still couldn't bear to leave the helpless little creature lying there and so she took it along.

The two older sisters had already been home for quite awhile when she finally arrived, exhausted to the bone. They were too occupied with their new treasures to notice the small creature Rose had brought along, or they would have made a fuss. The next morning they ran into town with their pretty things and their youngest sister had to carry practically everything alone. They immediately summoned several tailors and milliners to dress and adorn them like aristocratic ladies, and since there was to be a huge ball in a few days, they stayed in town to attend it. While her sisters were out—they never tired of flitting around town—Rose secretly made herself a gown out of a piece of silk her sisters had cast off because it seemed too plain for them. And when both of them went to the ball splendidly attired, she also put on her finery and followed them unnoticed.

Everyone admired their magnificent gowns and the jewels draped about them, and thought they must be countesses, perhaps even princesses. Their haughtiness and arrogance were boundless, and since they paid no attention to the other women, they didn't notice Rose either. She ran out before they left the ball, changed her clothes quickly, and made them tea, as they had told her to do. The next day and the following one they danced again, because there was one ball and festivity after another and they always had new finery. Rose begged them to let her go to their mother for fear that something might have happened to the poor old woman while she was alone, but they forbade her to go because she had to attend them, and they said: "My! Wouldn't it be an awful shame if the old lady died!" Rose burst into tears, for she loved her mother dearly; for that those two wicked dragons beat her mercilessly!

They attended another large and exquisite ball, and Rose also wanted to dance. She hadn't dared venture out again after her first outing and had only

the single pretty dress from the preceding ball. She dressed quickly and, to look a bit different, she adorned herself with real roses. She had seen the arrogance and vanity of her sisters and secretly felt ashamed for them.

An elderly woman appeared at the ball, dressed so shabbily that some of the guests stared in amazement that she had dared to show herself, while others ridiculed her. But the two arrogant sisters ridiculed her openly and belittled her. For a while the old woman said nothing, but suddenly she stood up and tapped the two with a little wand she was holding in her hand. Their beautiful trappings turned into dirty rags and their diamonds into ordinary pebbles, but Rose's dress remained unchanged. Loud, resounding laughter rang out from every corner and just as they had ridiculed others before, they were now maligned in like measure. "I am the owner of the cave and I would have granted you the items you took from me, if you were good-natured creatures. To test your hearts, I begged you for help in the guise of a helpless little goat, but you just kicked me away without the least compassion. I wanted to observe you once more, in the hopes that my shabby attire would bring out your sympathy. But you ridiculed me and you've left your mother helpless at home. Now go! I will watch you carefully in the future and if you don't better yourselves, I'll punish you even more harshly."

Mortified and humiliated, the two slunk away to their lodgings where all their beautiful things had also been transformed like their dresses and they set off for home empty-handed. Rose carried her own little bundle and when she got home, she discovered that everything she had taken out of the cave and belonged to her was still as beautiful. She was overjoyed to find her mother worried, but well. And since she knew the value of the gold and jewels, she went straight away the next day into town and sold them and gave her mother the money she'd received. Now her mother could buy a large plot of land and live a better life and Rose took care of her like a good child should. Somehow the little goats had disappeared. The wicked sisters were afraid to mistreat Rose or be unkind to their mother, for fear of the powerful fairy, even though they were tempted. But they couldn't put the ridicule at the ball and the loss of such riches behind them and were full of anger and resentment at Rose's good fortune. Both got gall stones and died a year later. But Rose lived on blissfully happy in caring for her mother into her old age.

Translated by Shawn C. Jarvis

Translator's Notes

1. To appear in University of Nebraska Press, 2000. The collection presents fairy tales from thirty female authors, beginning with Catherine the Great and ending with Ricarda Huch.
2. They altered her story "Der undankbare Zwerg" ("The Ungrateful Dwarf") as

- “Schneeweißchen und Rosenrot” (“Snow White and Rose Red”; KHM 161) and included it in their third edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1837).
3. The remarks are from the Grimms’ 1856 volume of commentary (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, ed. Heinz Rölleke [Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982] 3: 332 [344], 334 [346]).
 4. At Stahl’s time, Tartu (German *Dorpat*) was in Livonia, a country divided along linguistic borders after World War I into Estonia and Latvia.
 5. I would like to thank Doris Freer for additional information on Stahl.

Works by Caroline Stahl

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Kleine Romane. 2 vols. Leipzig: Reclam, 1819.
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Romantische Dichtungen. Nuremberg: Campe, 1819.
Rosalinde, oder die Wege des Schicksals, den Töchtern gebildeter Stände gewidmet. Nuremberg: Campe, 1833.
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