

A NON-STANDARD FAIRY TALE

Once upon a time, in those prehistoric days before even I was born, let alone you, there was a small peasant family with only two children, both boys. Thomas Malthus would have been pleased with the parents' refusal to populate the world beyond the replacement level, but their decision owed nothing to Malthusianism and everything to the mother's frail health.

Jack, the elder son, grew up to be big and strong; so he helped his father in the field. Ned, the younger, grew up - insofar as he grew up at all - to be small and weak (brothers with such contrasting physical characteristics are quite common in fairy tales because in those prehistoric days the laws of heredity had not yet been passed); so he helped his mother around the house, and from his mother's untimely death until his brother's wedding he did all the housework himself and became quite expert at it. Wherever he went he would sing, accompanying himself on his lute whenever his hands were free. A talented musician, he also composed songs: love ballads in which he imagined himself a conquering hero, winning the hearts of beautiful maidens, whose appearance he described in loving detail.

Jack was so resentful of his brother's inability to help him in the field that he ridiculed him mercilessly, harping constantly on the stark contrast between the contents of Ned's songs and the reality of his life, and only fear of parental retribution prevented Jack from adding injury to insult. The day after they buried their father, Jack turned to his brother and sneered, "All right, runt, your Daddy's no longer around to stick up for you; so get off my farm! You're more trouble than you're worth to me. You're no help to me in the field, and I already have someone to do the housework. You eat up valuable food, you take up space that should go to my kids, and your singing drives me up a wall!"

"I find his songs charming, and I can certainly use some help around the house," interjected Jack's wife.

"You have no say in this matter, woman!" thundered Jack. "It's my farm, I'm the one who brings in the money, and should I choose to beat you, neither you nor Ned nor even both of you together could do a damned thing about it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir," sighed his wife, for these were the days before equal rights and battered women's shelters.

And so, at the age of eighteen years and three months, Ned went to the nearest town to seek his fortune. His fortune consisted of the money dropped by passers-by into his lute case as he played and sang in the streets. It was enough to buy him marginally adequate food, clothing and shelter, but little else, and certainly not the attention of any of the maidens he met. In the hope of securing more remunerative employment he offered his services as a music teacher to whoever stopped to listen to him, but their answers were depressingly similar: "Why should I pay to learn a trade that will enable me to beg in the streets like you?" A legitimate question in lean, mean times!

One day, however, his luck took a decided turn for the better: the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen agreed to engage him as a music teacher. He accompanied her to her house, where he gave her a one-hour lute lesson, ending it by singing one of his love songs to her.

"Well, how much do I owe you?" she asked him.

"From so fair a maiden as you, one kiss would be sufficient compensation," he answered gallantly, for money, after all, was not his primary objective.

"Very well," she said coyly, "you may kiss my hand."

Ned was disappointed. "I was hoping to be permitted at least to peck you on the cheek," he grumbled.

The maiden laughed haughtily and said, "Come again and give me another lesson at the same time next week, and then you may have that reward. Now take the reward I offered you today and do it quickly, before I change my mind, and be off with you!" Ned did, and then returned to the street in eager anticipation of their next meeting.

Ned began the next lesson by asking Belinda - for that was the maiden's name - to play for him the things he had taught her. "You haven't been practising your lesson!" he scolded her.

"Surely you aren't coming here solely for the pleasure of hearing me play well!" she said with a laugh. She did have a point there, he thought. He taught her what she was willing to learn, sang her another love song, collected his peck on the cheek and left with the promise of better things to come.

As the days went by, Belinda made painfully slow progress on the lute, and Ned made equally slow progress with Belinda. But given enough time, drops of water can carve out a canyon, glaciers can cover a continent, and ardent suitors can reach their objective. Ned's objective was not to take Belinda to bed with him; it was to marry her. He was afraid to pop the question too soon lest he frighten her away altogether, but he counted on her very coyness to give him the necessary opportunity: sooner or later she would have to tell him that she was saving herself for her husband, at which point he would gallantly say that this was the very thing he most wanted to become.

Events followed the very script he had imagined until the moment when he finally got to recite the line he had been rehearsing for months: "Will you marry me?"

But Belinda had added an unexpected twist to his script: "First you must prove yourself worthy of me. In the forest a few miles north of the town there lives a wicked witch who plays the nastiest tricks on me! Why, once, for instance, she made all my clothes disappear in the middle of a crowded square! After that the townspeople drove her away, but she'll be back! She's so insanely envious of my beauty that she'll never leave me alone as long as she lives. How I wish I were rid of her! None of my other suitors is clever enough to be able to take on such a formidable opponent. I had just about given up hope when I heard about a marvellous musician who had recently arrived in town, and when I went to hear you I became certain that a man who could write such wonderful music and play it so well must surely be extremely clever. You must surely have read about the story-teller who slew the hundred-eyed dragon after first putting it to sleep with his stories. And you must surely have already thought of putting this witch to sleep with your songs, knocking her out with your lute and then strangling her. Do this for me, and I will gladly marry you."

Now Ned had never thought of himself as being particularly clever. He had never read that story - in fact, he had never learned to read - and he would never have thought of inflicting such a terrible punishment for the sort of prank Belinda had recounted. But he was most anxious to impress her with his cleverness; so he said, "Yes, yes, of course, you took the words right out of my mouth. I'll get to it right away."

On his way out of town he formulated a plan. He would keep searching until he found the witch; then he would charm her with his music and try to persuade her to leave Belinda in peace. If he succeeded, he could pretend to Belinda that he'd done her bidding; if not, he'd have no choice but to try to do it for real.

A little way out of town he came to a stream and decided to put down his lute so that he could use both hands to scoop up drinking water. Since the bank was steep and slippery with mud, he put his lute on level ground a few feet behind him and then drank his fill. Great was his dismay and astonishment when he turned around and discovered that his lute was nowhere to be seen!

"Are you looking for something?" came a female voice behind him. He turned back to the stream and saw nobody. "Are you looking for someone?" came the same voice, again from behind him. He turned again and saw a young girl standing near him. She was not a pretty young girl. In fact, she was a homely young girl. All right, let's call a spade a spade: with her angular shape, long hooked nose and sharp protruding chin she looked downright ugly, very much like a witch! But how could a witch possibly be so young?

"Well, what are you staring at?" said the witch with a cackling laugh. "You were expecting maybe an old lady? This may come as a surprise to you, but witches are not born old. Ugly, yes - by your human standards - but not old. We're born as babies, we grow up, we grow old and we die just like anybody else. We haven't found a magic spell or potion to halt and reverse the aging process yet, but we're working on it!"

Suddenly she stopped laughing and said fiercely, "All right, enough small talk. Let's get down to business. You've been looking for me and now you've found me. Tell me, Ned, were you really intending to kill me?"

In a panic, Ned tried to run, but he was rooted to the spot: his shoes had grown roots which had sunk deep into the ground. "And where do you think you're going?" she asked, putting a long, bony finger on his nose. "You're going nowhere until you answer my question. And you'd better tell me the truth."

Ned's mind, such as it was, raced to try to assess his situation. Somehow this witch had eavesdropped on his conversation with Belinda and knew the mission on which he had been sent. Had she also read his mind and discovered the alternatives he had considered? He decided that his safest option was to assume that she had and to tell the truth. "Not if you promise to play no more nasty tricks on Belinda."

The witch cackled again and said, "So she's got you believing that ridiculous story too, eh? Well, that's hardly surprising - there's no bigger fool than a love-sick fool. The truth is that I was wandering around the town learning as much as I could about the latest progress made by human alchemists in the hope that some of it would be useful to us for mixing magic potions, when for

some reason she started to fill everyone's head with the idea that I was out to harm them. I thought that if I could make her look ridiculous nobody would believe her; so I played an embarrassing trick on her, and that's the only nasty trick I ever..."

"Your trick proved to everyone that they were right to fear you in the first place!" Ned interrupted.

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?" she whined, sounding more like a flustered young girl than an in-control witch. "I tried entertaining them with my magic, I even tried using it to do them favours, but she managed to convince them all that everything I did would some day harm them. They got so scared they started chasing me away with flaming sticks whenever they saw me! Sure, my one nasty trick only made things worse, but it's not as if I were getting anywhere without it. If you're so smart, perhaps you could advise me from your vast experience just what I have to do to get people to accept me!"

Ned's fear of this witch dissolved in a wave of sympathy. She was infinitely more clever and powerful than he was, she had him at her mercy - and here she was confessing to him that she was just as vulnerable as he was and asking his advice! From his own vast experience, he had only one honest piece of advice to give: "Some people just aren't going to accept you no matter what you do. Ignore them and find someone who will."

"Like who, for instance?" she retorted skeptically. "You? Belinda's lover?"

"Well, why not?" he answered enthusiastically. "That way we all come out winners. She gets reassured that you won't bother her anymore. I get to marry her and to get entertained by your magic tricks, which I think are really neat. And you get to show off your stuff and to listen to some really neat songs I wrote - as soon as you give me my lute back - plus she won't be sending anyone else to do you in. Is it a deal?"

The witch smiled and said with a cackle: "Well, why not? There are a lot of tricks I've been dying to show off, but I can't do them here because they require ingredients I have at home. Hop on my broomstick behind me and hold on tight!"

The ride over the treetops was scary at first, but it was the most thrilling experience of his life - with the possible exception of his most recent visits to Belinda. All too soon it was over: they sank down between the trees, landed at the door of a thatched hut, and entered. It was the dirtiest, most disorganized dwelling he had ever seen: bottles, test-tubes, pieces of parchment and other sundry objects littered every surface but the floor, and this was covered by a foot-thick carpet of dust. The witch introduced herself as Winnie, adding, "Surely you didn't think all witches were called Hazel, did you? That would make witches' conferences extremely confusing!" And then she proceeded to demonstrate her magic, bubbling with delight as she explained which of her tricks she had discovered herself and which she had learned from others. After quite some time she said, "I've got lots more to show you, but that'll do for today. Oh, and here's your lute. Sing me some songs!"

Ned sang her three of his love songs and then, noticing her attention waning with each one, he stopped and asked, "You don't seem to be enjoying my songs! What's wrong with them?"

"Well," she replied slowly, "You sing and play extremely well, and you do write beautiful melodies, but the lyrics ... well, let's just say that the subject matter is not exactly original. Perhaps you could approach it from an alternative viewpoint, or else write songs about other subjects ... you know, for the sake of variety."

If Ned was going to persuade Winnie to continue carrying out her end of the bargain he would need more bargaining power than his songs could give him, given her inexplicable lack of enthusiasm for them. Well, he had learned one thing in his life besides music, and the state of her house left him an ideal opportunity to demonstrate it to her, but he was going to have to be tactful about it. "Uh, Winnie," he began tentatively, "Since you're so good at making things disappear, how about applying your magic to all this dust?"

Winnie laughed. "I can't make things cease to exist - that would violate some laws of physics that you humans may discover in a few hundred years. I just make them invisible to humans. I can teleport them one piece at a time, but to teleport all this dust out the door one speck at a time would take longer than cleaning it up by hand, and I'm a very busy witch. Most witches just do the magic our foremothers have taught us, but a few of us are at the cutting edge of progress, as it were. We discover new spells and potions and demonstrate them to each other at witches' conferences, and then they become part of our folklore."

"Well, I don't claim to be at the cutting edge of anything but a kitchen knife, but I am capable of making dirt disappear," Ned blustered. "Brooms are useful for more than just transportation, you know!"

It took him three days to clean Winnie's house to his satisfaction, during which time she worked on her magic and showed it off whenever she could spare the time. She was delighted with his handiwork. "Do come again - in a week!" she implored. "It should only take you one day to clean up then."

"All right," he replied, "But no tricks on Belinda in the meantime. Is that a promise?"

Winnie nodded, they shook on it, and he made his way through the forest, back into town, and straight to the house of his beloved Belinda. On his way, it occurred to him that if he pretended to have killed the witch it would be difficult explain his weekly trips to her house in the woods. Besides, he wasn't yet sure whether it was Belinda or Winnie who was telling him the truth, and he decided that the best way to find out was to be as truthful with Belinda as he had been with Winnie.

"Well, did you kill her as I asked you to?" were the first words with which Belinda greeted him.

Ned shook his head. "No way I could have pulled it off! She was wise to me, and she captured me before I even knew she was there. She could have killed me, but I managed to talk her into sparing me and leaving you in peace. You're safe from her now, Belinda. That is what you wanted, isn't it? So, now that I've proved myself worthy of you, once more I ask you: will you marry me?"

Belinda's face turned red as she screamed furiously, "I didn't ask you to get her to make nice to me, I asked you to get rid of her! A creature that ugly has no right to exist, let alone be

more powerful than I am! If you ever want to see me again, let alone marry me, you'll bring me her head on a pole!"

"I wouldn't have such a spiteful, deceitful maiden as you for all your beauty!" he shot back impulsively. Belinda gasped, but before she could speak he continued, "but I have something far more important to tell you, and you'd better pay attention. The witch is listening to everything we are saying, and now that she knows you still want her dead even though she agreed to leave you in peace, she'll make more than your clothes disappear, believe me. There's only one way you can save yourself. You're going to go out right now and tell all the townspeople that you lied to them. When she can come into this town and go about her business like everybody else, then you'll be safe, and not until."

Belinda turned white. "I'm sorry, Hazel, or whatever your name is!" she blubbered in a terrified voice. "I'll make it up to you! Please don't kill me!" And then she rushed outside to begin making amends.

Ned returned to his job as street musician, satisfied that he had arranged for justice to be done to Winnie, but resentful of the injustice that had been done to him. The only maiden who had ever shown any interest in him had turned out to be unspeakably cruel and had probably just been using him anyway. How unfair of all these beautiful maidens to pass him up despite his musical talent and his gentle disposition just because he was small and weak and poor! And how foolish of them too: his sister-in-law had married a big, strong, prosperous farmer and was now his cowering slave!

And then, for the first time in his life, a profound thought entered his head: big, strong, wealthy men like Jack looked as beautiful to these maidens as dainty, buxom, smooth-skinned maidens like Belinda had always looked to Ned. Was it any fairer to apply the one standard of beauty to mate-selection than the other? Was it any wiser? Belinda had enslaved him with her calculated coyness as effectively as Jack had enslaved his wife with his brutality. Why, had Belinda not lost her cool, she might well have persuaded him to try to kill Winnie!

To kill Winnie? That gentle creature who bore no ill will towards those who bore none towards her, who was so much fun to be with, who took such delight in entertaining him? How much more appropriate it was for him to have defended her! In his mind's eye he saw her smiling face, and discovered to his surprise that it no longer repelled him. A long nose, a protruding chin - what were these trivia beside those fascinating magical powers which attracted him to her like a magnet?

But what did he have that would attract her in return? His ability to clean house for her? Useful, yes, but not necessarily attractive. His musical talent? Hardly! Why, she didn't even enjoy his songs!

And then a second profound thought joined the first one which had been rattling around all alone in his head. He wouldn't have enjoyed listening to love songs in praise of big, strong men like his brother who held him in contempt; so how could he expect her to enjoy listening to his love songs in praise of maidens who were nothing like her and everything like her arch-enemy? Suddenly he understood what she had meant by her request that he approach the subject of love from an alternative viewpoint: she wanted to hear her own qualities praised in his songs! With

new-found inspiration he composed, revised and rehearsed until the week was up, the long walk through the woods completed, and the thatched hut visible through the trees.

As he knocked on her door, his heart sank under the weight of yet another thought: if he failed to win her heart, it would make any future visits to her a source of pain for him rather than pleasure. She greeted him enthusiastically. "That was a beautiful thing you did for me, Ned! It'll be so nice to be able to go into town again to do my research without disguising myself! I hate pretending to be someone I'm not!" Well, that was a good beginning, he thought, and it made him a little more hopeful, but no less nervous.

The next few hours were sheer torture for Ned. All the time he was tidying up her house, and all the time she was showing off her magic, he kept delaying confessing his growing infatuation with her. But when she asked him, "Have you written any new songs for me?" he could delay it no longer. His heart racing, he sang his latest songs to her, playing uncharacteristically many wrong notes on his lute. When he had finished, she said to him, "That was beautiful, Ned! It's just the alternative viewpoint I had in mind."

Her positive reaction to his songs finally gave him the courage he needed to declare his love for her - for that, he now realized, is what he felt. He took a deep breath, but before he could speak she giggled like any young girl and the words started rushing out of her: "I've felt the same way about you ever since you bluffed Belinda into making amends to me, but I didn't know you felt that way too until I got close enough to ... oops!"

Suddenly she put her hand to her mouth, and her face turned as red as a beet. For a moment she was at a loss for words; then she stammered tentatively, "I was afraid to tell you this, Ned, but I suppose you'll have to know eventually. I'll break it to you gently. Do you remember when I asked you if you had really intended to kill me and you said, 'Not if you promise to play no more nasty tricks on Belinda'? If you had been lying, you could have done me in on any number of occasions. Can you guess why I trusted you?" Ned pondered her question until he remembered having wondered if she could read his mind. Before he could speak, she nodded and said, "Yes I can - from up close. We aren't born with this ability; it's a learned skill, and very few of us have mastered it, but I'm one of them. Try not to let it frighten you, Ned. Think of it as just one of the magical powers that make me so attractive to you!"

"That's just what I was thinking, Winnie," he said, "but of course I didn't need to tell you that!"

Winnie laughed with relief and began stroking his face with her long, bony hands as she continued, "I have a lot more to tell you about witches, Ned. As I told you, we do get born, but you'll never guess how we get conceived. Have you ever heard of a male witch? No, wizards are not male witches, and no, we are not hermaphroditic. When a witch wants to procreate, she disguises herself as a human female who lives up to human standards of beauty, she selects an unattached human male and she casts an aphrodisiac spell on him. Then, to avoid casting suspicion on herself, she puts on another human disguise that is very much out of character for a witch: she acts coy, making him pursue her until she decides it's safe to allow him to catch her. And then she leaves him and raises their daughter by herself. It's not much fun, and it's especially galling to have to disguise ourselves to live up to standards alien to our own. We do it as rarely as possible, and that's why we opt for single motherhood and make love only when we

want to procreate. That's the down side of being a witch; the exciting things we get to do with our lives more than make up for it. But I'm going to have it all because you've learned to love me with no disguises. And from now on I'm going to show you what a witch is capable of when she feels free to be herself!" With that, she began her first such demonstration by kissing him, her face at right angles to his so that neither her nose nor her chin got in the way.

If this were a standard fairy tale, that kiss would have transformed him into a big, strong, handsome prince, and her into a beautiful, dainty, curvaceous princess. It did nothing of the sort, and neither did any of the other 571428 kisses they exchanged in the course of their long, non-standard life together, but the transformation that had already occurred was infinitely more satisfying: they had found all the beauty they needed within themselves.