



Karolina Světlá: The Forest Maiden [Lesní panna]

Read by Lily Ann Chu Fencik

The fairytale *Lesní panna - The Forest Maiden* is one of Karolina Světlá's most famous works taking place in the area around Ještěd Mountain. Karla, the village magistrate's daughter, sits under an ancient linden tree, telling stories to a young count from Prague. They soon fall in love, however, one of the stories she tells him foreshadows how their own relationship will end. It's the story of the Forest Maiden:

One day, my great-grandfather went to gather kindling in the Ještěd wood. The day was scorching hot, and so he decided to lie awhile in the shade to revive himself. But it was so comfortable there on the soft moss that he unintentionally slept. [...]

All of a sudden a glade opened up before him and from the underbush a maiden flew out like a shot, wrapped completely in a golden cape. But it wasn't a cape, it was her long, fair hair, which sparkled like pure gold.

She flew, flew, flew and great-grandpa heard her running out of breath, he saw how her legs were buckling under her from fatigue and how the tears were falling down her face from fear; she suddenly caught sight of a stump, she gave a cry and grabbed hold of it with all her might. And it was high time, too, for there upon her fell a pack of monstrous black dogs with fiery muzzles and blazing eyes, circling her like an evil wind, the screaming was terrible. But the dogs could not catch sight of her, because the forest maiden rested on a stump upon which three crosses had been made by my great grandfather who had felled the tree.

"You've saved my life," the forest maiden told my great-grandpa, when the dogs and the storm moved past, "without you I would have been torn to shreds in the chase. Ask whatever you'd like of me and I will grant your every wish."

"I wish that you would become my wife," answered my great-grandpa, without thinking, for no girl had ever appeared so beautiful to him as the maiden with the long golden hair. [...]

"I will grant what you wish," she said sadly, "but think it over well before you take me to be your wife; I am not as mortal women are, and it could easily happen that you may come to detest me. If ever once you reproach me about where I came from, then in that moment I must leave you, and all that you consider most valuable I will take with me, that is the law between us." [...]

One day he returned home from a journey. It was on the day of Midsummer's Eve and the wheat on the hills was in lovely full bloom. When he was almost to the village, all the neighbors poured out to welcome him.

"You have a lively housewife," they shouted, laughing, "we had barely sown the seed when she had started to stack the rye. The more we tried to stop her, the more she strove to harvest it, hastening us to bring the grain into the shed. You've arrived just at harvest time!"

Great-grandpa did not know whether it was the truth they told him or some kind of joke, but as he neared the farm, he saw from a great distance his bare fields and there on



the threshold before his house stood his wife, who handed him a son, born while he was away.

And in his heart suddenly there was not a drop left of his love for her.

“Get out of my sight, you accursed wood nymph!” he yelled at her, in place of a greeting.

The forest maid suddenly came to a halt, and went pale, and paler still, her figure becoming thinner and thinner still, until she, and the child, vanished into the haze.

That night a terrible hailstorm fell, flattening everything in sight, until not even a single stalk was left standing in the fields. The people wept and wailed in a terrible din; they knew not how they were going to survive the winter.

However, when great-grandpa opened his barn to look on the green wheat heaped there by order of his wife, he stood stupefied. The wheat had ripened like gold and when he began to thresh it, it gave forth a hundredfold more than any other, and he could share it with the entire village.

Thus for the first time all realized how much the forest maiden had meant well by them and they wept for her bitterly. My great-grandfather mourned her most of all, but unfortunately in vain, for the forest maid never returned. Because she lived in Světlá, she watches over our mountain and not once since that time have the fields been flattened. And in the place where the child vanished, this linden tree grew under which we now sit.

Translated by Matthew Sweney

Můj Ještěd. Ještědské obrázky Karoliny Světlé. [My Ještěd. The Ještěd Pictures by Karolina Světlá.] Melantrich, Praha 1951. S. 12-17. Edited text.