

The Wild Swans

Hans Christian Andersen

Far, far away where the swallows fly when we have winter, there lived a King who had eleven sons and one daughter, Elisa. The eleven brothers, Princes all, each went to school with a star at his breast and a sword at his side. They wrote with pencils of diamond upon golden slates, and could say their lesson by heart just as easily as they could read it from the book. You could tell at a glance how princely they were. Their sister, Elisa, sat on a little footstool of flawless glass. She had a picture book that had cost half a kingdom. Oh, the children had a very fine time, but it did not last forever.

Their father, who was King over the whole country, married a wicked Queen, who did not treat his poor children at all well. They found that out the very first day. There was feasting throughout the palace, and the children played at entertaining guests. But instead of letting them have all the cakes and baked apples that they used to get, their new step mother gave them only some sand in a teacup, and told them to make believe that it was a special treat.

The following week the Queen sent little Elisa to live in the country with some peasants. And before long she had made the King believe so many falsehoods about the poor Princes that he took no further interest in them.

"Fly out into the world and make your own living," the wicked Queen told them. "Fly away like big birds without a voice."

But she did not harm the Princes as much as she meant to, for they turned into eleven magnificent white swans. With a weird cry, they flew out of the palace window, across the park into the woods.

It was so early in the morning that their sister, Elisa, was still asleep when they flew over the peasant hut where she was staying. They hovered over the roofs, craning and twisting their long necks and flapping their wings, but nobody saw them or heard them. They were forced to fly on, high up near the clouds and far away into the wide world. They came down in a vast, dark forest that stretched down to the shores of the sea.

Poor little Elisa stayed in the peasant hut, and played with a green leaf, for she had no other toy. She made a little hole in the leaf and looked through it at the sun. Through it she seemed to see her brothers' bright eyes, and whenever the warm sunlight touched her cheek it reminded her of all their kisses.

One day passed like all the others. When the wind stirred the hedge roses outside the hut, it whispered to them, could be prettier than you?" But the roses shook their heads and answered, "Elisa!" And on Sunday, when the old woman sat in the doorway reading the psalms, the wind fluttered through the pages and said to the book, "Who could be more saintly than you?" "Elisa," the book testified. What it and the roses said was perfectly true.

Elisa was to go back home when she became fifteen but, as soon as the Queen saw what a beautiful Princess she was, the Queen felt spiteful and full of hatred toward her. She would not have hesitated to turn her into a wild swan, like her brothers, but she did not dare to do it just yet, because the King wanted to see his daughter.

In the early morning, the Queen went to the bathing place, which was made of white marble, furnished with soft cushions and carpeted with the most splendid rugs. She took three toads, kissed them, and said to the first:

"Squat on Elisa's head, when she bathes, so that she will become as torpid as you are." To the second she said, "Squat on her forehead, so that she will become as ugly as you

are, and her father won't recognize her." And to the third, she whispered, "Lie against her heart, so that she will be cursed and tormented by evil desires.

Thereupon the Queen dropped the three toads into the clear water, which at once turned a greenish color. She called Elisa, made her undress, and told her to enter the bath. When Elisa went down into the water, one toad fastened himself to her hair, another to her forehead, and the third against her heart. But she did not seem to be aware of them, and when she stood up three red poppies floated on the water. If the toads had not been poisonous, and had not been kissed by the witch, they would have been turned into red roses. But at least they had been turned into flowers, by the mere touch of her head and heart. She was too innocent and good for witchcraft to have power over her.

When the evil Queen realized this, she rubbed Elisa with walnut stain that turned her dark brown, smeared her beautiful face with a vile ointment, and tousled her lovely hair. No one could have recognized the beautiful Elisa, and when her father saw her he was shocked. He said that this could not be his daughter. No one knew her except the watchdog and the swallows, and they were humble creatures who had nothing to say.

Poor Elisa cried and thought of her eleven brothers, who were all away. Heavy-hearted, she stole away from the palace and wandered all day long over fields and marshes, till she came to the vast forest. She had no idea where to turn. All she felt was her sorrow and her longing to be with her brothers. Like herself, they must have been driven out into the world, and she set her heart upon finding them. She had been in the forest only a little while when night came on, and as she had strayed from any sign of a path she said her prayers and lay down on the soft moss, with her head pillowed against a stump. All was quiet, the air was so mild, and hundreds of fireflies glittered like a green fire in the grass and moss. When she lightly brushed against a single branch, the shining insects showered about her like falling stars.

She dreamed of her brothers all night long. They were children again, playing together, writing with their diamond pencils on their golden slates, and looking at her wonderful picture book that had cost half a kingdom. But they no longer scribbled sums and exercises as they used to do. No, they set down their bold deeds and all that they had seen or heard. Everything in the picture book came alive. The birds sang, and the people strolled out of the book to talk with Elisa and her brothers, but whenever she turned a page they immediately jumped back into place, to keep the pictures in order.

When she awoke, the sun was already high. She could not see it plainly, for the tall trees spread their tangled branches above her, but the rays played above like a shimmering golden gauze. There was a delightful fragrance of green foliage, and the birds came near enough to have perched on her shoulder. She heard the water splashing from many large springs, which all flowed into a pool with the most beautiful sandy bottom. Although it was hemmed in by a wall of thick bushes, there was one place where the deer had made a path wide enough for Elisa to reach the water. The pool was so clear that, if the wind had not stirred the limbs and bushes, she might have supposed they were painted on the bottom of the pool. For each leaf was clearly reflected, whether the sun shone upon it or whether it grew in the shade.

When Elisa saw her own face she was horrified to find it so brown and ugly. But as soon as she wet her slender hand, and rubbed her brow and her eyes, her fair skin showed again. Then she laid aside her clothes and plunged into the fresh water. In all the world there was no King's daughter as lovely as Elisa. When she had dressed herself and plaited her long hair, she went to the sparkling spring and drank from the hollow of her hand. She wandered deeper into the woods without knowing whither she went. She thought of her brothers, and she thought of the good Lord, who she knew would not forsake her. He lets the wild crab apples grow to feed the hungry, and he led her footsteps to a tree with its branches bent down by the weight of their fruit. Here she had her lunch.

After she put props under the heavy limbs, she went on into the depths of the forest. It was so quiet that she heard her own footsteps and every dry leaf that rustled underfoot. Not a bird was in sight, not a ray of the sun could get through the big heavy branches, and the tall trees grew so close together that when she looked straight ahead it seemed as if a solid fence of lofty palings imprisoned her. She had never known such solitude.

The night came on, pitch black. Not one firefly glittered among the leaves as she despondently lay down to sleep. Then it seemed to her that the branches parted overhead and the Lord looked kindly down upon her, and little angels peeped out from above His head and behind Him.

When she awoke the next morning she did not know whether she had dreamed this, or whether it had really happened.

A few steps farther on she met an old woman who had a basket of berries and gave some of them to her. Elisa asked if she had seen eleven Princes riding through the forest.

"No," the old woman said. "But yesterday I saw eleven swans who wore golden crowns. They were swimming in the river not far from here."

She led Elisa a little way to the top of a hill which sloped down to a winding river. The trees on either bank stretched their long leafy branches toward each other, and where the stream was too wide for them to grow across it they had torn their roots from the earth and leaned out over the water until their branches met. Elisa told the old woman good-by, and followed the river down to where it flowed into the great open sea.

Before the young girl lay the whole beautiful sea, but not a sail nor a single boat was in sight. How could she go on? She looked at the countless pebbles on the beach, and saw how round the water had worn them. Glass, iron ore, stones, all that had been washed up, had been shaped by the water that was so much softer than even her tender hand.

"It rolls on tirelessly, and that is the way it makes such hard things smooth," she said. "I shall be just as untiring. Thank you for your lesson, you clear rolling waves. My heart tells me that some day you will carry me to my beloved brothers."

Among the wet seaweed she found eleven white swan feathers, which she collected in a sheaf. There were still drops of water on them, but whether these were spray or tears no one could say. It was very lonely along the shore but she did not mind, for the sea was constantly changing. Indeed it showed more changes in a few hours than an inland lake does in a whole year. When the sky was black with threatening clouds, it was as if the sea seemed to say, 'I can look threatening too.' Then the wind would blow and the waves would raise their white crests. But when the wind died down and the clouds were red, the sea would look like a rose petal.

Sometimes it showed white, and sometimes green, but however calm it might seem there was always a gentle lapping along the shore, where the waters rose and fell like the chest of a child asleep.

Just at sunset, Elisa saw eleven white swans, with golden crowns on their heads, fly toward the shore. As they flew, one behind another, they looked like a white ribbon floating in the air. Elisa climbed up and hid behind a bush on the steep bank. The swans came down near her and flapped their magnificent white wings.

As soon as the sun went down beyond the sea, the swans threw off their feathers and there stood eleven handsome Princes. They were her brothers, and, although they were greatly altered, she knew in her heart that she could not be mistaken. She cried aloud, and rushed into their arms, calling them each by name. The Princes were so happy to see their little sister. And they knew her at once, for all that she had grown tall and lovely. They laughed, and they cried, and they soon realized how cruelly their stepmother had treated them all.

"We brothers," said the eldest, "are forced to fly about disguised as wild swans as long as the sun is in the heavens, but when it goes down we take back our human form. So at sunset we must always look about us for some firm foothold, because if ever we were flying among the clouds at sunset we would be dashed down to the earth.

"We do not live on this coast. Beyond the sea there is another land as fair as this, but it lies far away and we must cross the vast ocean to reach it. Along our course there is not one island where we can pass the night, except one little rock that rises from the middle of the sea. It is barely big enough to hold us, however close together we stand, and if there is a rough sea the waves wash over us. But still we thank God for it.

"In our human forms we rest there during the night, and without it we could never come back to our own dear homeland. It takes two of the longest days of the year for our journey. We are allowed to come back to our native land only once a year, and we do not dare to stay longer than eleven days. As we fly over this forest we can see the palace where our father lives and where we were born. We can see the high tower of the church where our mother lies buried. And here we feel that even the trees and bushes are akin to us. Here the wild horses gallop across the moors as we saw them in our childhood, and the charcoal-burner sings the same old songs to which we used to dance when we were children. This is our homeland. It draws us to it, and here, dear sister, we have found you again. We may stay two days longer, and then we must fly across the sea to a land which is fair enough, but not our own. How shall we take you with us? For we have neither ship nor boat."

"How shall I set you free?" their sister asked, and they talked on for most of the night, sparing only a few hours for sleep.

In the morning Elisa was awakened by the rustling of swans' wings overhead. Her brothers, once more enchanted, wheeled above her in great circles until they were out of sight. One of them, her youngest brother, stayed with her and rested his head on her breast while she stroked his wings. They spent the whole day together, and toward evening the others returned. As soon as the sun went down they resumed their own shape.

"Tomorrow," said one of her brothers, we must fly away, and we dare not return until a whole year has passed. But we cannot leave you like this. Have you courage enough to come with us? My arm is strong enough to carry you through the forest, so surely the wings of us all should be strong enough to bear you across the sea." "Yes, take me with you," said Elisa.

They spent the entire night making a net of pliant willow bark and tough rushes. They made it large and strong. Elisa lay down upon it and, when the sun rose and her brothers again became wild swans, they lifted the net in their bills and flew high up toward the clouds with their beloved sister, who still was fast asleep. As the sun shone straight into her face, one of the swans flew over her head so as to shade her with his wide wings.

They were far from the shore when she awoke. Elisa thought she must still be dreaming, so strange did it seem to be carried through the air, high over the sea. Beside her lay a branch full of beautiful ripe berries, and a bundle of sweet-tasting roots. Her youngest brother had gathered them and put them there for her. She gave him a grateful smile. She knew he must be the one who flew over her head to protect her eyes from the sun.

They were so high that the first ship they sighted looked like a gull floating on the water. A cloud rolled up behind them, as big as a mountain. Upon it Elisa saw gigantic shadows of herself and of the eleven swans. It was the most splendid picture she had ever seen, but as the sun rose higher the clouds grew small, and the shadow picture of their flight disappeared.

All day they flew like arrows whipping through the air, yet, because they had their sister to

carry, they flew more slowly than on their former journeys. Night was drawing near, and a storm was rising. In terror, Elisa watched the sinking sun, for the lonely rock was nowhere in sight. It seemed to her that the swans beat their wings in the air more desperately. Alas it was because of her that they could not fly fast enough. So soon as the sun went down they would turn into men, and all of them would pitch down into the sea and drown. She prayed to God from the depths of her heart, but still no rock could be seen. Black clouds gathered and great gusts told of the storm to come. The threatening clouds came on as one tremendous wave that rolled down toward them like a mass of lead, and flash upon flash of lightning followed them. Then the sun touched the rim of the sea. Elisa's heart beat madly as the swans shot down so fast that she thought they were falling, but they checked their downward swoop. Half of the sun was below the sea when she first saw the little rock below them. It looked no larger than the head of a seal jutting out of the water. The sun sank very fast. Now it was no bigger than a star, but her foot touched solid ground. Then the sun went out like the last spark on a piece of burning paper. She saw her brothers stand about her, arm in arm, and there was only just room enough for all of them. The waves beat upon the rock and washed over them in a shower of spray. The heavens were lit by constant flashes, and bolt upon bolt of thunder crashed. But the sister and brothers clasped each other's hands and sang a psalm, which comforted them and gave them courage.

At dawn the air was clear and still. As soon as the sun came up, the swans flew off with Elisa and they left the rock behind. The waves still tossed, and from the height where they soared it looked as if the white flecks of foam against the dark green waves were millions of white swans swimming upon the waters.

When the sun rose higher, Elisa saw before her a mountainous land, half floating in the air. Its peaks were capped with sparkling ice, and in the middle rose a castle that was a mile long, with one bold colonnade perched upon another. Down below, palm trees swayed and brilliant flowers bloomed as big as mill wheels. She asked if this was the land for which they were bound, but the swans shook their heads. What she saw was the gorgeous and ever changing palace of Fata Morgana. No mortal being could venture to enter it. As Elisa stared at it, before her eyes the mountains, palms, and palace faded away, and in their place rose twenty splendid churches, all alike, with lofty towers and pointed windows. She thought she heard the organ peal, but it was the roll of the ocean she heard. When she came close to the churches they turned into a fleet of ships sailing beneath her, but when she looked down it was only a sea mist drifting over the water.

Scene after scene shifted before her eyes until she saw at last the real country whither they went. Mountains rose before her beautifully blue, wooded with cedars, and studded with cities and palaces. Long before sunset she was sitting on a mountainside, in front of a large cave carpeted over with green creepers so delicate that they looked like embroidery.

"We shall see what you'll dream of here tonight," her youngest brother said, as he showed her where she was to sleep.

"I only wish I could dream how to set you free," she said.

This thought so completely absorbed her, and she prayed so earnestly for the Lord to help her that even in her sleep she kept on praying. It seemed to her that she was flying aloft to the Fata Morgana palace of clouds. The fairy who came out to meet her was fair and shining, yet she closely resembled the old woman who gave her the berries in the forest and told her of the swans who wore golden crowns on their heads.

"Your brothers can be set free," she said, "but have you the courage and tenacity to do it? The sea water that changes the shape of rough stones is indeed softer than your delicate hands, but it cannot feel the pain that your fingers will feel. It has no heart, so it cannot suffer the anguish and heartache that you will have to endure. Do you see this stinging nettle in my hand? Many such nettles grow around the cave where you sleep. Only those

and the ones that grow upon graves in the churchyards may be used - remember that! Those you must gather, although they will burn your hands to blisters. Crush the nettles with your feet and you will have flax, which you must spin and weave into eleven shirts of mail with long sleeves. Once you throw these over the eleven wild swans, the spell over them is broken. But keep this well in mind! From the moment you undertake this task until it is done, even though it lasts for years, you must not speak. The first word you say will strike your brothers' hearts like a deadly knife. Their lives are at the mercy of your tongue. Now, remember what I told you!"

She touched Elisa's hand with nettles that burned like fire and awakened her. It was broad daylight, and close at hand where she had been sleeping grew a nettle like those of which she had dreamed. She thanked God upon her knees, and left the cave to begin her task.

With her soft hands she took hold of the dreadful nettles that seared like fire. Great blisters rose on her hands and arms, but she endured it gladly in the hope that she could free her beloved brothers. She crushed each nettle with her bare feet, and spun the green flax.

When her brothers returned at sunset, it alarmed them that she did not speak. They feared this was some new spell cast by their wicked stepmother, but when they saw her hands they understood that she laboured to save them. The youngest one wept, and wherever his tears touched Elisa she felt no more pain, and the burning blisters healed.

She toiled throughout the night, for she could not rest until she had delivered her beloved brothers from the enchantment. Throughout the next day, while the swans were gone she sat all alone, but never had the time sped so quickly. One shirt was made, and she set to work on the second one.

Then she heard the blast of a hunting horn on the mountainside. It frightened her, for the sound came nearer until she could hear the hounds bark. Terror-stricken, she ran into the cave, bundled together the nettles she had gathered and woven, and sat down on this bundle.

Immediately a big dog came bounding from the thicket, followed by another, and still another, all barking loudly as they ran to and fro. In a very few minutes all the huntsmen stood in front of the cave. The most handsome of these was the King of the land, and he came up to Elisa. Never before had he seen a girl so beautiful. "My lovely child," he said, "how do you come to be here?"

Elisa shook her head, for she did not dare to speak. Her brothers' deliverance and their very lives depended upon it, and she hid her hands under her apron to keep the King from seeing how much she suffered.

"Come with me," he told her. "You cannot stay here. If you are as good as you are fair I shall clothe you in silk and velvet, set a golden crown upon your head, and give you my finest palace to live in." Then he lifted her up on his horse. When she wept and wrung her hands, the King told her, "My only wish is to make you happy. Some day you will thank me for doing this." Off through the mountains he spurred, holding her before him on his horse as his huntsmen galloped behind them.

At sundown, his splendid city with all its towers and domes lay before them. The King led her into his palace, where great fountains played in the high marble halls, and where both walls and ceilings were adorned with paintings. But she took no notice of any of these things. She could only weep and grieve. Indifferently, she let the women dress her in royal garments, weave strings of pearls in her hair, and draw soft gloves over her blistered fingers.

She was so dazzlingly beautiful in all this splendor that the whole court bowed even deeper than before. And the King chose her for his bride, although the archbishop shook

his head and whispered that this lovely maid of the woods must be a witch, who had blinded their eyes and stolen the King's heart.

But the King would not listen to him. He commanded that music be played, the costliest dishes be served, and the prettiest girls dance for her. She was shown through sweet-scented gardens, and into magnificent halls, but nothing could make her lips smile or her eyes sparkle. Sorrow had set its seal upon them. At length the King opened the door to a little chamber adjoining her bedroom. It was covered with splendid green embroideries, and looked just like the cave in which he had found her. On the floor lay the bundle of flax she had spun from the nettles, and from the ceiling hung the shirt she had already finished. One of the huntsmen had brought these with him as curiosities.

"Here you may dream that you are back in your old home," the King told her. Here is the work that you were doing there, and surrounded by all your splendor here it may amuse you to think of those times."

When Elisa saw these things that were so precious to her, a smile trembled on her lips, and the blood rushed back to her cheeks. The hope that she could free her brothers returned to her, and she kissed the King's hand. He pressed her to his heart and commanded that all the church bells peal to announce their wedding. The beautiful mute girl from the forest was to be the country's Queen.

The archbishop whispered evil words in the King's ear, but they did not reach his heart. The wedding was to take place. The archbishop himself had to place the crown on her head. Out of spite, he forced the tight circlet so low on her forehead that it hurt her. But a heavier band encircled her heart, and; the sorrow she felt for her brothers kept her from feeling any hurt of the flesh. Her lips were mute, for one single word would mean death to her brothers, but her eyes shone with love for the kind and handsome King who did his best to please her. Every day she grew fonder and fonder of him in her heart. Oh, if only she could confide in him, and tell him what grieved her. But mute she must remain, and finish her task in silence. So at night she would steal away from his side into her little chamber which resembled the cave, and there she wove one shirt after another, but when she set to work on the seventh there was not enough flax left to finish it.

She knew that the nettles she must use grew in the churchyard, but she had to gather them herself. How could she go there?

"Oh, what is the pain in my fingers compared with the anguish I feel in my heart!" she thought. "I must take the risk, and the good Lord will not desert me."

As terrified as if she were doing some evil thing, she tiptoed down into the moonlit garden, through the long alleys and down the deserted streets to the churchyard. There she saw a group of vampires sitting in a circle on one of the large gravestones. These hideous ghouls took off their ragged clothes as they were about to bathe. With skinny fingers they clawed open the new graves. Greedily they snatched out the bodies and ate the flesh from them. Elisa had to pass close to them, and they fixed their vile eyes upon her, but she said a prayer, picked the stinging nettles, and carried them back to the palace.

Only one man saw her-the archbishop. He was awake while others slept. Now he had proof of what he had suspected. There was something wrong with the Queen. She was a witch, and that was how she had duped the King and all his people.

In the confessional, he told the King what he had seen and what he feared. As the bitter words spewed from his mouth, the images of the saints shook their heads, as much as to say, He lies. Elisa is innocent." The archbishop, however, had a different explanation for this. He said they were testifying against her, and shaking their heads at her wickedness.

Two big tears rolled down the King's cheeks as he went home with suspicion in his heart. That night he pretended to be asleep, but no restful sleep touched his eyes. He watched

Elisa get out of bed. Every night he watched her get up and each time he followed her quietly and saw her disappear into her private little room. Day after day his frown deepened. Elisa saw it, and could not understand why this should be, but it made her anxious and added to the grief her heart already felt for her brothers. Her hot tears fell down upon her queenly robes of purple velvet. There they flashed like diamonds, and all who saw this splendor wished that they were Queen.

Meanwhile she had almost completed her task. Only one shirt was lacking, but again she ran out of flax. Not a single nettle was left. Once more, for the last time, she must go to the churchyard and pluck a few more handfuls. She thought with fear of the lonely walk and the ghastly vampires, but her will was as strong as her faith in God.

She went upon her mission, but the King and his archbishop followed her. They saw her disappear through the iron gates of the churchyard, and when they came in after her they saw vampires sitting on a gravestone, just as Elisa had seen them.

The King turned away, for he thought Elisa was among them -Elisa whose head had rested against his heart that very evening.

"Let the people judge her," he said. And the people did judge her. They condemned her to die by fire.

She was led from her splendid royal halls to a dungeon, dark and damp, where the wind whistled in between the window bars. Instead of silks and velvets they gave her for a pillow the bundle of nettles she had gathered, and for her coverlet the harsh, burning shirts of mail she had woven. But they could have given her nothing that pleased her more.

She set to work again, and prayed. Outside, the boys in the street sang jeering songs about her, and not one soul came to comfort her with a kind word.

But toward evening she heard the rustle of a swan's wings close to her window. It was her youngest brother who had found her at last. She sobbed for joy. Though she knew that this night was all too apt to be her last, the task was almost done and her brothers were near her.

The archbishop came to stay with her during her last hours on earth, for this much he had promised the King. But she shook her head, and by her expression and gestures begged him to leave. This was the last night she had to finish her task, or it would all go for naught-all her pain, and her tears, and her sleepless nights. The archbishop went away, saying cruel things against her. But poor Elisa knew her own innocence, and she kept on with her task.

The little mice ran about the floor, and brought nettles to her feet, trying to help her all they could. And a thrush perched near the bars of her window to sing the whole night through, as merrily as he could, so that she would keep up her courage.

It was still in the early dawn, an hour before sunrise, when the eleven brothers reached the palace gates and demanded to see the King. This, they were told, was impossible. It was still night. The King was asleep and could not be disturbed. They begged and threatened so loudly that the guard turned out, and even the King came running to find what the trouble was. But at that instant the sun rose, and the eleven brothers vanished. Eleven swans were seen flying over the palace.

All the townsmen went flocking out through the town gates, for they wanted to see the witch burned. A decrepit old horse pulled the cart in which Elisa sat. They had dressed her in coarse sackcloth, and all her lovely long hair hung loose around her beautiful head. Her cheeks were deathly pale, and her lips moved in silent prayer as her fingers twisted the green flax. Even on her way to death she did not stop her still un-finished work. Ten shirts lay at her feet and she worked away on the eleventh. "See how the witch mumbles," the

mob scoffed at her. "That's no psalm book in her hands. No, there she sits, nursing her filthy sorcery. Snatch it away from her, and tear it to bits!"

The crowd of people closed in to destroy all her work, but before they could reach her, eleven white swans flew down and made a ring around the cart with their flapping wings. The mob drew back in terror.

"It is a sign from Heaven. She must be innocent," many people whispered. But no one dared say it aloud.

As the executioner seized her arm, she made haste to throw the eleven shirts over the swans, who instantly became eleven handsome Princes. But the youngest brother still had a swan's wing in place of one arm, where a sleeve was missing from his shirt. Elisa had not quite been able to finish it.

"Now," she cried, "I may speak! I am innocent."

All the people who saw what had happened bowed down to her as they would before a saint. But the strain, the anguish, and the suffering had been too much for her to bear, and she fell into her brothers' arms as if all life had gone out of her.

"She is innocent indeed!" said her eldest brother, and he told them all that had happened. And while he spoke, the scent of a million roses filled the air, for every piece of wood that they had piled up to burn her had taken root and grown branches. There stood a great high hedge, covered with red and fragrant roses. At the very top a single pure white flower shone like a star. The King plucked it and put it on Elisa's breast. And she awoke, with peace and happiness in her heart.

All the church bells began to ring of their own accord, and the air was filled with birds. Back to the palace went a bridal procession such as no King had ever enjoyed before.