

The Wild Swans

From the book, "Children's Classics in Dramatic Form" by Augusta Stevenson
Suggested by Hans Andersen's The Wild Swans

CHARACTERS:

Eliza
The Goody
The Fairy
The King
His Wicked Uncle
Guardsmen
Servants
Eliza's Brothers (11 of them)
The Executioner
First Citizen
Second Citizen
Third Citizen
Fourth Citizen

SCENE I

TIME: A long time ago

PLACE: On the seashore

(The Goody is seen walking along the shore. Eliza enters from the forest.)

GOODY: Bless me! What is the little girl doing in this lonely place? And alone, too!

ELIZA: I seek my eleven brothers.

GOODY: Ah! Then you must be the Princess Eliza!

ELIZA: *(Sadly.)* Yes, Goody.

GOODY: And the eleven brothers you seek are the eleven little princes!

ELIZA: Yes; do you know them?

GOODY: I saw them in school one day. Each prince wore a golden crown on his head, a star on his breast, and sword by his side.

ELIZA: (*Nodding.*) They studied very hard, just as princes should.

GOODY: They wrote on gold slates with diamond pencils. I myself saw them!

ELIZA: I sat on a little stool of plate-glass. Did you know that?

GOODY: Oh, yes! And I know about your picture-book worth half a kingdom.

ELIZA: We were all so happy then! Our dear mother was alive and sometimes went to school with us. Now all is changed.

GOODY: What has happened?

ELIZA: They have driven us from the palace.

GOODY: (*Indignantly.*) I said so! On the day of that wedding I said so.

ELIZA: Then you know that my father married again?

GOODY: Yes, I know. I wept when I heard our good king had married that wicked queen.

ELIZA: She drove my brothers away, the very day of the wedding feast.

GOODY: And now she has driven you away!

ELIZA: (*Nodding.*) If only I could find my dear brothers!

GOODY: You may hear something about them very soon.

ELIZA: (*Quickly.*) Do you know where they are? Tell me! I pray you tell me!

GOODY: (*Shaking her head mysteriously.*) I cannot say where they are. I only know what they are.

ELIZA: I do not understand—

GOODY: The wicked queen has turned your brothers into wild swans.

ELIZA: Wild swans?

GOODY: (*Nodding.*) I saw them yesterday, at sunrise, flying out over the sea. Each swan wore a gold crown on his head.

ELIZA: The queen could not take their crowns from them!

GOODY: As the swans flew upward, their eleven crowns glittered like eleven suns. My eyes were dazzled. I was obliged to look away. At that moment the swans disappeared.

ELIZA: *(Sadly to herself.)* My poor brothers! I shall never see them again.

GOODY: *(Suddenly.)* Do you see those great blue bluffs to the south?

ELIZA: Yes; the sea is dashing against them.

GOODY: In those bluffs, back from the shore, is a cave. Go at once to that cave and enter.

ELIZA: And what shall I do there, good woman?

GOODY: Perhaps you may learn how to break the spell over your brothers.

ELIZA: *(Surprised.)* How to break the spell?

GOODY: Ask no questions, but go at once to the cave.

ELIZA: *(Going.)* Thank you, good woman. You are very kind to me.

GOODY: Go now, child, and fear nothing.

(Eliza goes; the Goody disappears.)

SCENE II

TIME: A half-hour later

PLACE: The cave

(Eliza is seen at entrance of cave. She stops; is afraid to enter.)

ELIZA: I am afraid to enter! It is so dark—I know not what is within! It may be the den of some wild animal.

(Listening.)

Not a sound do I hear! But wild animals are cunning. They know how to lie as still as death and then to leap quickly.

(Pause.)

Well, be it so. I will enter, for I must save my brothers. *(She enters the cave. Fair is within the cave, but invisible.)*

FAIRY: You have courage, little Eliza.

ELIZA: (*Showing relief.*) Oh! Are you here, good woman?

FAIRY: Behold!

(*The cave is filled with light; a beautiful Fairy is seen.*)

ELIZA: Ah! I thought it was the Goody.

FAIRY: No matter, dear child. I knew you were to come here.

ELIZA: I was afraid to enter.

FAIRY: But you did enter. Your love for your brothers was greater than your fear.

ELIZA: It was that which gave me courage.

FAIRY: It was a test of your courage. And now I can tell you how to break the spell over your brothers.

ELIZA: I will do whatever you say.

FAIRY: You will suffer greatly.

ELIZA: What matter, if I save my brothers!

FAIRY: (*Nodding.*) Then listen. Do you see the stinging nettles which I hold in my hand?

ELIZA: Yes, dear Fairy.

FAIRY: You must gather great quantities of these.

ELIZA: I noticed many of the same sort growing near this cave.

FAIRY: (*Shaking head.*) You must gather only those that grow in graveyards.

ELIZA: It shall be exactly as you say, dear Fairy.

FAIRY: The nettles will make blisters on your hands.

ELIZA: I will not think of myself; I will think only of my brothers.

FAIRY: Break the nettles into pieces with your hands and feet, and they will become flax. From this flax you must spin and weave eleven coats with long sleeves. If these eleven coats can be thrown over the eleven swans, the spell will be broken.

ELIZA: It shall be done.

FAIRY: But remember, that from the moment you begin your task, until it is finished, you must not speak. Even though it should occupy years of your life, you must not speak.

ELIZA: I shall remember.

FAIRY: The first word you utter will pierce through the hearts of your brothers like a dagger. Their lives hang upon your tongue. Go now and begin your task.

ELIZA: *(Going.)* I go, dear Fairy.

FAIRY: Remember all I have told you, dear child. Farewell!

(Eliza goes; the cave becomes dark; the Fairy disappears.)

SCENE III

TIME: Two days later

PLACE: A distant country; the King's palace.

(The Wicked Uncle stands waiting to receive the King. Enter the King with Eliza. She is pale and sad.)

WICKED UNCLE: Welcome, your Majesty! Welcome home from your hunt! But who is this maiden?

KING: I know not, my Uncle.

WICKED UNCLE: What?

KING: My huntsmen found her in a cave in a far-off country.

WICKED UNCLE: In a cave? Alone?

KING: *(Nodding.)* Alone; spinning coats out of flax.

WICKED UNCLE: This is very strange. *(To Eliza.)* Why were you all alone in a cave, and why were you spinning coats?

(Eliza shakes her head.)

KING: She is dumb, Uncle. Not a word has she uttered since we found her.

WICKED UNCLE: Why did you bring her with you?

KING: I will make her my queen.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Angrily.)* Your queen?

KING: See how beautiful she is.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Whispering to King.)* She is a witch!

KING: Nonsense! She is as good as she is beautiful.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Whispering as before.)* She has bewitched your heart!

KING: Nonsense, I say! She did not want to leave the cave. She wept bitterly when I put her on my horse.

(He turns to the servants.) Let the music sound! Prepare the wedding feast!

(He turns to Eliza, who weeps.) Do not weep, my beautiful maid.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Whispering to King.)* She is not beautiful. She has bewitched your eyes.

KING: I will not listen to you! Go, bid them ring the church bells.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Going; speaking aside.)* I must poison his heart against her in some way; else I'll never wear the crown. *(Wicked Uncle goes.)*

KING: *(To Eliza.)* Do not weep. You shall be dressed in silks and velvets and I will place a golden crown upon your head.

(Eliza weeps and wrings her hands.)

KING: Well, then, I know how to make you smile. *(The King opens a door into an inner room. Eliza looks in, smiles, and claps her hands for joy.)*

KING: I thought 't would make you happy! 'T is very like your cave—I had it made so.

(Eliza tries to thank King with her eyes.)

KING: But no more spinning! Your fingers shall be covered with diamonds instead of blisters.

(Eliza sighs very sadly.)

KING: Something troubles you, little queen. If you could only tell me of your grief!

(Eliza shakes her head sadly.)

KING: Well, I can at least save you from a life of labor. You shall be most tenderly cared for.
(Calling.) Ho, there, Guardsmen!

(Enter Guardsmen.)

KING: Guardsmen, behold your queen!

(Guards kneel before Eliza.)

KING: Guardsmen, arise and hear my commands.

(Guards rise.)

KING: Your queen is never to do any of the work about the castle. Do you hear me, Guardsmen?

GUARDSMEN: *(Bowling.)* We hear, O King!

KING: Not even the spinning or weaving. Do you hear me, Guardsmen?

GUARDSMEN: *(Bowling.)* We hear, O King!

KING: Those are my commands. Now attend us to the banquet-hall.
(To Eliza, who is weeping.) Weep no more, little queen. I wish only your happiness. Come, give me your hand. We go now to the wedding feast. *(They go out, the Guards attending.)*

SCENE IV

TIME: Two weeks later; sunrise

PLACE: The open just without the town gate.

(Enter crowds of people from the town gate. Enter the Goody from the forest. Enter the Wicked Uncle from the town gate.)

GOODY: *(To Wicked Uncle.)* Why these crowds so early, sir?

WICKED UNCLE: Do not call me 'sir.'

GOODY: What shall I say, sir?

WICKED UNCLE: Say, "Your Highness.'

GOODY: But you are not the King, sir.

WICKED UNCLE: I'm very near it, old woman.

GOODY: Not so near, sir, as you were, sir. There is the new queen, sir.

WICKED UNCLE: The new queen is about to die.

GOODY: *(Alarmed.)* About to die?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Nodding.)* Aye, because she's a witch. They're bringing her out here now.

GOODY: The King permits it?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Nodding.)* He soon found out the truth about her.

GOODY: And what was that?

WICKED UNCLE: Just what I told him the first time I saw her. "She's a witch," said I, but he would not believe me.

GOODY: What has so changed him?

WICKED UNCLE: 'T was I who saw her slip forth from the castle one midnight. I followed her; straight to the graveyard she went.

GOODY: To the graveyard?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Nodding.)* In she went—I following. I saw her gather the stinging nettles that grow there.

GOODY: But they would blister her hands. Did she not cry out?

WICKED UNCLE: Not a sound did she utter! That would prove her a witch, were there nothing more.

GOODY: Ah, there is something more, then?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Nodding; mysteriously.)* I followed her back to the castle; through the marble halls and up to the little cave room. I saw her break up the nettles. Then I saw her spin and weave this flax into a magic coat.

GOODY: Bless me! A magic coat?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Nodding.)* There were ten of them hanging from the ceiling.

GOODY: Of course you told the King?

WICKED UNCLE: Just as soon as I could waken him, but he would not believe me. He said there was but one coat when they brought her here, and that there could be but one now.

GOODY: She worked at night, then, while the castle slept.

WICKED UNCLE: True queens do not work—nay, can't be made to work. Everyone knows that.

GOODY: But how did the King find out the truth?

WICKED UNCLE: I persuaded him to watch with me the next night. Just at midnight the queen came out. We followed her to the graveyard. "That is enough," said his Majesty, "she is a witch and must die."

(The Citizens rush to the gates.)

CITIZENS: *(Calling.)* See the witch!

GOODY: Is she coming?

WICKED UNCLE: *(Looking.)* Yes, she is just within the gate. She rides in an old cart by an old horse—quite good enough for a witch.

(Enter the King with servants and Guards. Behind them is the cart. In the cart sits Eliza. She is spinning and weaving, never once looking up.)

GOODY: How pale she is! Bless me! She is spinning and weaving.

WICKED UNCLE: It is the eleventh coat and it will be the last.

GOODY: How she hurries to finish it!

(The cart stops.)

KING: *(To Eliza.)* Once again I ask you, are you a witch?

(Eliza shakes her head.)

KING: Then give up the coats. They are of no use to anyone.

(Eliza again shakes her head.)

WICKED UNCLE: That proves her a witch! Else, she would give up the coats.

KING: *(To Eliza.)* Once more—will you not give them up?

(Eliza shakes her head. The King turns away. He is very sad; his eyes are filled with tears.)

FIRSTS CITIZEN: *(Calling.)* See the witch!

SECOND CITIZEN: *(Calling.)* See her magic coats!

THIRD CITIZEN: *(Calling.)* Let us tear them to pieces!

FOURTH CITIZEN: *(Calling.)* At them, Citizens! Tear them to shreds!

GOODY: *(Looking up; speaking aside.)* Here come the Wild Swans! Now we shall see what we shall see!

(Eleven Wild Swans descend from the sky and alight on the cart. Each wears a golden crown.)

FIRST CITIZEN: Back, Citizens, back! Wild Swans have alighted on the cart!

FOURTH CITIZEN: What do we care for Wild Swans? Forward, Citizens!

FIRST CITIZEN: Back, I say! The Swans are beating us with their strong wings!

SECOND CITIZEN: Back! Back, Citizens! We dare not approach the cart!

GOODY: *(Calling to the people.)* The Swans have come to save the queen! 'T is a sign from heaven that she is innocent!

WICKED UNCLE: *(Angrily.)* Be silent, old woman! *(He turns to the Executioner.)* Executioner, do your duty!

EXECUTIONER: Out of the cart, witch!

(Eliza shakes her head; takes up coats from floor of cart. The Executioner turns to the Wicked Uncle.)

EXECUTIONER: She will not come!

WICKED UNCLE: Seize her—I command you!

FIRST CITIZEN: Seize her! Seize her!

GOODY: Look, Citizens, look! She is spreading the coats over the Swans!

(Eliza throws the eleven coats over the eleven Swans, who turn to eleven little princes, but the youngest has a swan's wing instead of an arm, for the last sleeve was not finished.)

FIRST CITIZEN: Do you see that, Citizens? They are princes! She has saved them!

SECOND CITIZEN: She is no witch!

THIRD CITIZEN: She is an angel from heaven!

THE ELEVEN BROTHERS: Dear sister, you have saved us!

ELIZA: Now I may speak—I am innocent!

ELDEST BROTHER: *(To King.)* Yes, she is innocent!

NINTH BROTHER: How you have suffered for us, dear Eliza!

CITIZENS: *(To Eliza.)* Forgive us!

KING: *(To Eliza.)* Forgive me! I did not understand.

WICKED UNCLE: *(Annoyed, but trying to conceal it.)* And I did not understand, I—

KING: *(Sternly.)* Be silent! *(To Guards.)* Seize him!

(The Guards seize the Wicked Uncle.)

KING: Take him to the mountains where the stinging nettles grow.

WICKED UNCLE: Mercy! Mercy!

KING: You had no mercy on brave little Eliza! Now you shall gather nettles for the rest of your life. Away with him, Guardsmen!

(The Guards take the Wicked Uncle away. The King turns to his servants.)

KING: Let the music sound! Bring forth the queen's golden crown! *(To Eliza.)* My whole kingdom shall do you honor! This land has never seen a more beautiful thing than your love for your brothers.

GOODY: *(Whispering aside.)* Ring, church bells! Ring of yourselves!
(All the church bells are heard ringing.)

CITIZENS: Hear the church bells! They ring of themselves!

KING: They ring for this sweet queen whose heart is as good as her face is beautiful. Come, Citizens! Away now to the castle! Away to the banquet-hall!