

The Handless Maiden

Clarissa Pinkola Estés in Women who Run with the Wolves

Once upon a time there was a miller who owned a large stone mill that ground the villager's grain to flour. He had fallen on hard times, and had nothing left but the great rough millstone in a shed, and a large flowering apple tree that stood behind it.

One day as he carried his axe into the forest to cut deadwood, a strange old man stepped from behind a tree. "There's no need for you to torture yourself by cutting wood," wheedled the old man. "I shall dress you in riches if you will but give me what stands behind your mill."

"What is there behind my mill but the flowering apple tree?", thought the miller, and agreed to the old man's bargain.

"In three years time, I'll come to take what is mine," said the stranger, and he limped away disappearing into the trees.

The miller met his wife on the path. She had run from their house, apron flying, hair askew. "Husband, husband, at the stroke of the hour, into our house came a finer clock upon the wall, our rustic chairs were replaced by those hung in velvet, and the paltry cupboard abounds now with food, our trunks and boxes are overflowing. Pray tell me, how has this happened?" And even at that moment, golden rings appeared on her fingers and her hair was drawn up into a golden circlet. "Ah," said the miller, looking in awe as his own old jacket turned to satin. Before his eyes, his wooden shoes with the heels worn to nothing had turned into fine shoes. "Well, it is from a stranger," he gasped. "I came upon an odd man in a dark coat in the forest and he promised great wealth if I gave him what is behind our mill. Surely, wife, we can plant another apple tree." "Oh, my husband!" wailed the woman, and she looked as though she had been struck dead. "The man in the black coat was the Devil, and what stands behind the mill is the tree, yes, but our daughter is also there sweeping the yard with a willow broom."

And so the parents stumbled home, weeping tears on all their finery. Their daughter stayed without husband for three years and had a temperament like the first sweet apples of spring. The day the Devil came to fetch her, she bathed and put on a white gown and stood in a circle of chalk she'd drawn around herself. When the Devil reached out to grab her, an unseen force threw him across the yard.

The Devil screamed, "She must not bathe any more else I cannot come near her." The parents and the girl were terrified. And so some weeks went by and the daughter did not bathe until her hair was matted, her fingernails like black crescents, her skin gray, her clothes darkened and stiff with dirt. Then the Devil came again. But the girl wept and wept. Her tears ran through her fingers and down her arms - so much that her dirty hands and arms became purely clean. The Devil was enraged. "Chop off her hands, otherwise I cannot come near her." The father was horrified. "You want me to sever the hand of my own child?" The Devil bellowed, "Everything here will die, including you, your wife, and the fields for as far as you can see."

The father was so frightened he obeyed, and begging his daughter's forgiveness, he began to sharpen his axe. The daughter submitted, saying, "I am your child, do as you must."

And this he did, and in the end, no one could say who cried out in anguish the louder, the father or the daughter. Thus ended the girl's life as she had known it.

When the devil came again, the girl had cried so much the stumps that were left of her limbs were again clean, and the Devil was again thrown across the yard when he attempted to seize her. Cursing in words that set small fires in the forest, he disappeared, for he had lost all claim to her.

The father aged one hundred years, and his wife also. Like true people of the forest, they continued as best they could. The old father offered to keep his daughter in a castle of great beauty and with riches for life, but the daughter said she felt it more fitting she become a beggar girl and depend on the goodness of others for sustenance. And so she had her arms bound in clean gauze, and at daybreak she walked away from her life as she had known it.

She walked and walked. High noon caused her sweat to streak the dirt on her face. The wind disheveled her hair until it was like a stork's nest of twigs all tangled this way and that. In the midst of the night she came to a royal orchard where the moon had put a gleam on all the fruits that hung from the trees.

She could not enter because the orchard was surrounded by a moat. She fell to her knees. A ghostly spirit in white appeared and shut one of the sluice gates so that the oat was emptied.

The maiden walked among the pear trees and somehow she knew that each perfect pear had been counted and numbered, and that they were guarded as well. Nevertheless, a bough bent itself low, its limb creaking, so she could reach the fruit at its tip. She ate while standing there in the moonlight, her arms bound in gauze, her hair afloat, appearing like a mud woman. The handless maiden.

The gardener saw it all, but recognized the magic of the spirit who guarded the maiden, and did not interfere. After the girl finished, she withdrew across the moat and slept in the shelter of the wood.

The next morning the king came to count his pears. He found one missing, and looking high and looking low, he could not find the vanished fruit. The gardener explained: "Last night two spirits drained the moat, entered the garden at high moon, and one without hands ate the pear that offered itself to her.

The king said that he would keep watch that night. At dark he came with his gardener and his magician, who knew how to speak with spirits. The three sat beneath a tree and watched. At midnight, the maiden came floating through the forest, her clothes dirty rags, her hair awry, her face streaked, her arms without hands, and the spirit in white beside her.

They entered the orchard the same way as before. Again, a tree gracefully bent one of its boughs to within her reach and she supped on the pear at its tip.

The magician came close, but not too close, to them and asked, "Are you of this world or not of this world?" And the girl answered, "I was once of the world, and yet I am not of this world."

The king questioned the magician. "Is she human or spirit?" The magician answered that she was both. The king's heart leapt and he rushed to her and cried, "I shall not forsake you. From this day forward, I shall care for you." At his castle he had made for her a pair of silver hands, which were fastened to her arms. And so it was that the king married the handless maiden.

In time, the king had to wage war in a far-off kingdom, and he asked his mother to care for his young queen, for he loved her with all his heart. "If she gives birth to a child, send me a message right away."

The queen gave birth to a happy babe and the king's mother sent a messenger to the king telling him the good news. But on the way to the king the messenger tired, and coming to a river fell asleep and finally fell entirely asleep by the river's edge. The Devil came out from behind a tree and switched the message to say the queen had given birth to a child that was half dog.

The king was horrified at the message, yet sent back a message saying to love the queen and care for her in this terrible time. The lad who ran with the message again came to the river, and feeling heavy, soon fell asleep by the side of the water. Whereupon the Devil again stepped out and changed the message to say "Kill the queen and her child."

The old mother was shaken by her son's command and sent a messenger to confirm. Back and forth the messengers ran, each one falling asleep at the river and the Devil changing messages that became

increasingly terrible, the last being, “Keep the tongue and eyes of the queen to prove she has been killed.”

The old mother could not stand to kill the sweet young queen. Instead she sacrificed a doe, took its tongue and eyes, and hid them away. Then she helped the young queen bind her infant to her breast, and veiling her, said she must flee for her life. The women wept and kissed one another good-bye. The young queen wandered until she came to the largest, wildest forest she had ever seen. She picked her way over and through and around trying to find a path. Near dark, the spirit in white, the same one as before, appeared and guided her to a poor inn run by kindly woodspeople. They took the queen inside and knew her by name. The child was laid down.

“How do you know I am a queen?” asked the maiden.

“We who are of the forest follow these matters, my queen. Rest now.”

So the queen stayed seven years at the inn and was happy with her child and her life. Her hands gradually grew back, first as little baby hands, pink as pearl, and then as little girl hands, and then finally as a woman’s hands.

During this time the king returned from the war, and his old mother wept to him, “Why would you have me kill two innocents?” and displayed to him the eyes and the tongue.

Hearing the terrible story, the king staggered and wept inconsolably. His mother saw his grief and told him these were the eyes and tongue of a doe and that she had sent the queen and her child off into the forest.

The king vowed to go travel as far as the sky is blue in order to find them. He searched for seven years. His hands became black, his beard mouldy brown like moss, his eyes red rimmed and parched.

At last he came to the inn kept by the woodspeople. They bade him enter, and he laid down, so tired. The woman placed a veil over his face and he slept. As he breathed the breath of deepest sleep, the veil billowed and gradually slipped from his face. He awakened to find a lovely woman and a beautiful child gazing down at him.

“I am your wife and this is your child.” The king was willing to believe, but saw that the maiden had hands. “Through my hard work and my good care, my hands have grown back,” said the maiden. And the woodsman brought the silver hands from a trunk where they’d been treasured. The king rose and embraced his queen and his child, and there was great joy in the forest that day.

All the spirits and the dwellers of the inn had a fine celebration. Afterward, the king and queen and baby returned to the old mother, held a second wedding, and had many more children, all of whom told this story to everyone they knew, who told it to everyone they knew, and now I’m telling it to you.

The Handless Maiden

Grimm Brothers' Version of 1812

A miller, who was so poor that he had nothing more than his mill and a large apple tree which stood behind it, went into the forest to gather wood. There he was approached by an old man, who said, "Why do you torment yourself so? I will make you rich if you will sign over to me that which is standing behind your mill. I will come and claim it in three years."

The miller thought, "That is my apple tree," agreed, and signed it over to the man.

When he came home, his wife said to him, "Miller, where did all the wealth come from that suddenly has filled every chest and cupboard in our house?"

"I received it from an old man in the forest by signing over to him that which is standing behind the mill."

"Husband!" said the woman, terrified. "This is going to be very bad. The old man was the devil, and he had our daughter in mind, who was just then standing behind the mill sweeping the yard."

Now the miller's daughter was very beautiful and pious.

Three years later when the devil came, early in the morning, and wanted to take her, she had drawn a circle around herself with chalk and had washed herself clean.

Therefore the devil could not approach her, and angrily he said to the miller, "Keep wash water away from her, so she cannot wash herself any more, and I can have power over her."

The miller was frightened and did what he was told. The next day the devil returned, but she had wept into her hands and washed herself with her tears, and was entirely clean.

Because the devil still could not approach her, he was very angry, and ordered the miller, "Chop off her hands, so I can get to her."

The miller was horrified and answered, "How could I chop off my dear child's hands? No, I will not do it."

"Then do you know what? I will take you, if you don't do it!"

That frightened the miller terribly, and driven by fear he promised to do what the devil had ordered.

He went to his daughter and said, "My child, the devil will take me if I don't chop off both your hands, and I have promised him that I will do it. I beg for your forgiveness."

"Father," she said, "do with me what you will," stretched forth her hands, and let him chop them off. The devil came a third time, but she had wept so long onto her stumps, that she was still entirely clean, and the devil had lost all power over her.

The miller, because he had become so wealthy through her, promised to take the best care of her for the rest of her life, but she did not want to remain there.

"I must leave here," she said. "Compassionate people will give me enough to keep me alive."

She had the chopped-off hands tied to her back, and she set forth with the rising sun, walking the entire day until evening, when she came to the king's garden. There was a gap in the garden hedge.

She went inside, found a fruit tree, shook it with her body until the apples fell to the ground, bent over and picked them up with her teeth, and ate them. Thus she lived for two days, but on the third day the garden watchmen saw her, captured her, and threw her into prison.

The next morning she was brought before the king and sentenced to be banished from the land, but the prince said, "Wait, wouldn't it be better to let her tend the chickens in the courtyard?" So she stayed there for a time and tended the chickens. The prince saw her often and grew very fond of her.

Meanwhile the time came when he was to get married. Messengers were sent everywhere in the world to find him a beautiful bride. "You needn't look so far and wide," he said. "I know where one is very nearby."

The old king pondered this back and forth, but he could not think of a single maiden in his kingdom who was both beautiful and rich, "You surely don't want to marry the one who tends the chickens in

the courtyard?" But his son declared that he would marry no one else, so finally the king had to agree.

Soon afterward he died, and the prince succeeded him as king and lived happily for a time with his wife. Once the king had to go away to war, and during his absence his wife gave birth to a beautiful child.

She sent a messenger with a letter telling her husband the joyful news. On the way the messenger stopped to rest by a brook and fell asleep. The devil, who was still trying to harm her, came to him and exchanged the letter with one that stated that the queen had given birth to a changeling. The king was very saddened to read this, but he wrote that the queen and the child should be well cared for until his return. The messenger started back with this letter. When he stopped to rest at the same spot and fell asleep, the devil again appeared, this time exchanging the king's letter with one that ordered the queen and the child to be driven from the kingdom. This had to be done, however much the people all wept with sorrow.

"I did not come here to become queen," she said. "I have no luck, and I demand none. Just tie my child and my hands onto my back, and I will set forth into the world."

That evening she came to a place in a thick forest where a good old man was sitting by a spring. "Be so kindhearted as to hold my child to my breast until I have nursed him," she said.

The man did that, after which he said to her, "Go to that thick tree over there and wrap your maimed arms around it three times!" And when she had done this, her hands grew back on. Then he showed her a house. "You can live there," he said, "but do not go outside, and do not open the door for anyone unless he asks three times to come in, for God's sake."

Meanwhile the king returned home and discovered how he had been deceived. Accompanied by a single servant he set forth, and after a long journey he finally happened, one night, into the same forest where the queen was living, but he did not know that she was so close to him. "There is a little light from a house back there," said his servant. "We can rest there." "No," said the king. "I do not want to rest so long, but rather to continue searching for my wife. I cannot rest until I find her." But the servant begged so much and complained so about his weariness that out of compassion, the king gave in. When they came to the house, the moon was shining, and they saw the queen standing by the window. "That must be our queen; she looks just like her," said the servant, "but I see now that she is not the one, for this one has hands."

The servant asked her for shelter, but she refused, because he had not asked "for God's sake." He was about to go on and seek another place for their night's lodging when the king himself came up and said, "Let me in, for God's sake!"

"I cannot let you in until you have asked me three times, for God's sake," she replied. And after the king had asked two more times, she opened the door. His little son ran to him and led him in to his mother. The king recognized her immediately as his beloved wife. The next morning they all journeyed together back to their kingdom, and as soon as they had left the house, it disappeared behind them.

Recommended Reading:

- **The Pregnant Virgin**, A Process of Psychological Transformation - Marion Woodman (Inner City Books)
- **Coming Home to myself**, Reflections for Nurturing a Woman's Body & Soul - Marion Woodman and Jill Mellick (Conari Press)