

THE WILD SWANS

Far from here, where the swans fly to when we have winter, there lived a king who had eleven sons and one daughter, Elisa. The eleven brothers – they were princes – went to school with a star on their breast and sword at their side; they wrote on tablets of gold with diamond styluses and could learn things by heart as easily as read them – you could tell at once that they were princes. Their sister, Elisa, sat on a small stool of mirror glass and had a picture book that had cost half the kingdom.

Oh, how well everything went for those children – but that was not going to last!

Their father, who was king of the entire country, married a wicked queen who did not wish the poor children well at all – they noticed this from the very first day – there were great festivities throughout the castle, and the children played ‘guess the stranger’, but instead of getting all the pastries and baked apples they could eat, she only gave them sand in a tea-cup and said they could pretend it was something else.

A week later, she had the little sister Elisa placed with some farming folk out in the country, and it didn’t take long before she had got the king to believe so many things about the poor princes that he no longer cared about them.

‘Fly out into the world and take care of yourselves!’ the wicked queen said: ‘fly out as great voiceless birds!’ but she was unable to make things as bad as she would have liked; they turned into eleven beautiful wild swans. With a strange cry they flew out of the castle windows, across the grounds and over the forest.

It was still quite early in the morning when they came past where their sister Elisa lay asleep in the farmer’s living room; here they swept over the roof, turned their long necks and beat their wings, but no one heard or saw it; they had to be off again, high up among the clouds, out into the great wide world, where they flew out into a great dark forest that stretched right down to the seashore.

Poor little Elisa stood in the farmer’s living room and played with a green leaf, she had no other toys; and she made a hole in the leaf, looked through it up at the sun, and then it was as if she could see her brothers’ clear eyes, and every time the warm sun’s rays shone on her cheek, she thought of all their kisses.

Each day passed like the one before. If the wind blew through the large rosebushes outside the house, it whispered to the roses: ‘Who can possibly be more beautiful than you are?’, but the roses shook their heads and said ‘Elisa.’ And if the old woman sat reading her hymn book by the door on a Sunday, the wind turned the pages and said to the book: ‘Who can possibly be more devout than you are?’ – ‘Elisa!’ the hymn book said, and what the roses and the hymn book said was the simple truth.

When she was fifteen years old, she was to return home; and when the queen saw how beautiful she had become, she was angry and hateful towards her; she would have liked to turn her into a wild swan, like her brothers, but she did not dare to do so right there, for the king naturally wanted to see his daughter.

Early the next morning the queen got into the bath, which was built of marble and lined with soft cushions and the loveliest of carpets, and she took three toads, kissed them, and said to the first one: ‘Sit on Elisa’s head when she gets into the bath so that she can become as lethargic as you are! Sit on her forehead,’ she said to the second one, ‘so she can become as ugly as you, so that her father won’t recognise her! Rest close to her heart,’ she whispered to the third one, ‘let her mind become so

wicked that it will cause her suffering!' Then she placed the toads in the clear water, which immediately turned a greenish colour, called Elisa, undressed her and let her step down into the water, and as she immersed herself, one of the toads sat down in her hair, the second on her forehead and the third on her chest, but Elisa seemed not to notice it; as soon as she got up three red poppies were floating on the water; if the animals hadn't been poisonous and kissed by the witch, they would have been transformed into red roses, but flowers they became even so from having rested on her head and close to her heart; she was too devout and innocent for the magic to have any power over her.

When the wicked queen saw this, she rubbed her skin with walnut juice so that she became quite dark brown, smeared her beautiful face with a foul-smelling ointment and let her hair become all tangled; the beautiful Elisa was now impossible to recognise.

So when her father saw her he was quite horrified, and said that this wasn't his daughter; nor would anyone else have anything to do with her, except the watchdog and the swallows, but they were poor animals and of no importance.

At this, poor Elisa wept and thought of her eleven brothers, who were all gone.

Sadly she stole out of the castle, walked all day long across fields and marshes into the great forest. She had no idea where she wanted to go, but she felt so sad and longed for her brothers, they too, like her, had been chased out into the world; they were the ones she would try to find.

She had only been in the forest a short while when night came; she had strayed from any road or path; so she lay down on the soft moss, said her evening prayers and leant her head against a tree-stump. It was so still, the air was so mild, and around her in the grass and on the moss over a hundred glow-worms gleamed, like a green fire; when she gently touched one of the branches with her hand, the gleaming insects fell down to her like shooting stars.

All night long she dreamt of her brothers; they were playing again, as children, writing with diamond styluses on tablets of gold and looking at the wonderful picture book that had cost half the kingdom; but on the tablets they didn't write as before, only noughts and strokes, but about the great deeds they had performed, everything they had experienced and seen; and in the picture book everything was alive, the birds sang, and the people came out of the book and spoke to Elisa and her brothers, but each time she turned the page, they immediately leapt back in, so that the pictures didn't get muddled up.

When she woke up, the sun was already high in the sky; she couldn't see it properly, the tall trees spread their branches out into a dense tracery, but up there the sun's rays played like swaying golden gauze; there was a scent of greenness, and the birds almost sat on her shoulders. She could hear the gentle splashing of water, there were many large springs, all of which ran down into a pond with the loveliest sandy bottom; there were dense clusters of bushes around it, at one point some deer had burrowed a large opening, and through it Elisa went down to the water – it was so clear that if the wind hadn't touched the branches and bushes and caused them to move, she would have believed that they had been painted on the bottom of the pond, so distinctly was every leaf mirrored, both those the sun shone through and also those completely in shadow.

As soon as she saw her own face, she was horrified – it was so brown and ugly, but when she moistened her small hand and rubbed her eyes and forehead, the white skin shone through once more; she then took off all her clothes and went out into the fresh water: there was no lovelier royal child than her to be found in all the world.

When she had put on her clothes again and plaited her long hair, she went over to the bubbling spring, drank out of her cupped hand, and walked deeper into the forest, without any idea of where she was heading. She thought of her brothers, thought of the Good Lord who would not abandon

her; he let the wild crab apples grow to feed anyone who was hungry; he showed her such a tree, its branches heavy with fruit – here she stopped for her lunch, placed supports under its branches and then entered the darkest part of the forest. It was so still that she could hear her own footsteps, hear every small shrivelled leaf that bent under her foot; there was not a bird to be seen, not a sun's ray could break through the dense boughs of the trees; the tall trunks stood so close to each other that when she looked straight ahead it was as if one latticework of beams after the other encased her – oh, here was a loneliness she had never known before.

The night grew so dark; not a single tiny glow-worm gleamed from the moss, sadly she lay down to sleep; then it seemed to her that the branches about her moved to one side and Our Lord looked down on her with gentle eyes, and small angels peeped out above his head and beneath his arms.

When she woke up the next morning, she didn't know if she had dreamt it, or if it really was so.

She took a few steps forwards, then she met an old woman with berries in her basket, the old woman gave her some. Elisa asked her if she hadn't seen eleven princes ride through the forest.

'No,' the old woman said, 'but yesterday I saw eleven swans with gold crowns on their heads swim down the small river close by!'

And she led Elisa a little way further on to a hillside; at the bottom of this a small river wound its way; the trees on its banks stretched out their long leafy branches across towards each other, and where they were unable to meet on their own, they had pulled the roots loose from the earth and leant out over the water until their branches intertwined.

Elisa said goodbye to the old woman and walked beside the river, to where it flowed down to the large, open shore.

The entire sea lay before the young girl in all its beauty; but there was not a single sailing ship out on it, not a boat to be seen – how was she to get any further. She gazed at the countless pebbles on the beach; the water had rubbed them smooth until they were round. Glass, iron, stones, everything that had been washed up there had been formed by the water, despite the fact that it was far smoother than her fine hand. 'It rolls tirelessly, and hard becomes smooth – I will be just as tireless! thank you for teaching me this, you clear rolling waves; one day, my heart tells me, you will carry me to my dear brothers!'

On the washed-up seaweed lay eleven white swan's feathers; she gathered them into a bouquet, there lay drops of water on them – whether it was dew or tears no one could tell. It was lonely there on the beach, but she did not feel this, for the sea offered her constant variation – more in fact in the space of a few hours than fresh inland lakes can provide in the course of a whole year. If a large black cloud appeared, it was as if the sea wanted to say: I too can look dark, and then the wind blew and the waves turned their white side out; but if the clouds gleamed red and the winds slept, the sea was like a rose petal; at times it turned green, at others white, but no matter how calmly it rested, there was always a gentle movement at the shore even so; the water rose and sank slightly, like the breast of a child when asleep.

As the sun was beginning to set, Elisa saw eleven wild swans with gold crowns on their heads fly towards the land, they glided through the sky one behind the other; it looked like a long white ribbon; then Elisa climbed up the slope and hid behind a bush; the swans settled close to her and flapped their great, white wings.

When the sun dipped below the water, their swan-skins suddenly fell off and there stood eleven fine princes, Elisa's brothers. She let out a loud cry, for despite the fact that they were much changed, she knew that it was them, felt it had to be them; and she leapt out into their arms, called them by name and they were so delighted when they saw and recognised their little sister, who had now grown into so beautiful a young woman. They laughed and they cried and soon they

understood between them how wicked their stepmother had been towards them all. 'We brothers,' the eldest one said, 'fly, like wild swans, as long as the sun is in the sky; when it has set, we assume human form once more; that is why we always have to take care at sunset to have rest close at hand; for if we are flying up in the clouds then, we will, like humans, plunge into the depths. We do not live here; just as beautiful a land as this one lies on the far side of the sea; but the way there is long, we have to cross the great ocean, and there is no island on our path where we can spend the night, only a solitary small rock sticks up half-way – it is only just large enough for us to rest side by side on it; if the sea is rough, water drenches us in spray; but even so we thank our God for it. There we spend the night in our human form, without it we could never visit our dear native land, for we spend two of the longest days in the year on our flight. Only once a year are we permitted to visit the land of our fathers, we dare stay here eleven days, fly across this great forest, from where we can catch a glimpse of the castle where we were born and where our father lives, see the tall tower of the church where mother lies buried. – Here we feel that the trees and bushes are akin to us, here the wild horses gallop over the plains that we saw in our childhood; here the charcoal burner sings the old songs we danced to as children, here lies our fatherland, it is to here we are drawn and here we have found you, our dear little sister! two more days we dare stay here, then we must fly away across the sea to a lovely country, but one that is not our fatherland! how are we to bring you to it? We have neither ship nor boat!'

'How can I possibly free you from your spell!' the sister said. And they talked together almost the whole night, they only dozed a few hours.

Elisa awoke to the swishing of swans' wings above her head. The brothers had once more been transformed into swans and they flew in great circles and were finally far away, but one of them, the youngest one, remained behind; and the swan placed its head in her lap and she patted its white wings; they were together the whole day. Towards evening the others returned, and when the sun had set, they stood there once more in their natural form.

'Tomorrow we will fly away from here, we dare not return for a whole year, but we cannot just leave you behind! dare you come with us? My arm is strong enough to carry you through the forest, surely we all have wings that are strong enough to fly you across the sea.'

'Oh yes, take me with you!' Elisa said.

They spent the whole night plaiting a net out of pliant willow bark and resilient reeds, and it was big and strong; Elisa lay down on it, and when the sun rose, and the brothers were turned into wild swans, they grasped the net with their beaks, and flew high up towards the clouds with their dear sister, who was still asleep. The sun's rays fell right onto her face, so one of the swans flew above her head so that its broad wings could provide shadow. –

They were far from land when Elisa awoke; she thought she was still dreaming, it seemed so strange to her to be carried across the sea, high in the air. At her side lay a branch with lovely ripe berries and a bunch of tasty roots; these the youngest of the brothers had gathered and placed there for her, and she smiled gratefully at him, for she knew that he was the one flying directly above her head shading her with his wings.

They were so high up that the first ship that lay beneath them looked like a white seagull lying on the water. There was a large cloud behind them, it was a whole mountain, and on it Elisa saw her own shadow and those of the eleven swans, so huge they were flying there; it was a painting, more magnificent than any she had seen before; but as the sun rose higher and the cloud grew further behind them, the floating shadow-picture disappeared.

They flew on the whole day, like an arrow shooting through the air, although they were slower than usual now that they had their sister to carry. A storm began to blow up, evening was drawing

near; Elisa anxiously saw that the sun was setting, and the solitary rock in the sea was not yet in sight; it seemed to her that the swans were beating more strongly with their wings. Alas! it was her fault that they could not travel fast enough; when the sun had set, they would become humans, plunge into the sea, and drown. Then she prayed to Our Lord from the depths of her heart, but still she could not catch sight of any rock; the black cloud came closer; the strong gusts of wind announced the approaching storm; the clouds rose up into one great threatening wave that shot forward like lead; one flash of lightning followed the other.

Now the sun had reached the rim of the sea. Elisa's heart shook with fright; then the swans shot downwards, so fast that she thought she was falling – but then they levelled out once more. The sun was half-submerged; and only then did she catch sight of the small rock beneath her, it looked no bigger than a seal poking its head out of the water. The sun was setting so fast – now it was no bigger than a star; then her foot touched solid ground, the sun went out like the final spark in burning paper; arm in arm she saw her brothers standing round her – but there was no more space than that precisely needed for them and her. The waves beat against the rock, and sprayed over them like a sudden downpour; the sky gleamed like a constantly blazing fire and thunderclap followed thunderclap; but sister and brothers held hands and sang a hymn, which consoled them and gave them courage.

At break of day the air was clear and still; as soon as the sun rose, the swans flew with Elisa away from the island. There was still quite a heavy sea, from high up it looked as if the white foam on the black-green waves was millions of swans floating on the water.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, Elisa saw ahead of her – half-floating in the air – a mountainous country with gleaming masses of ice on its peaks, and in the middle of it there was a castle that must have been miles long, with the one daring colonnade on top of each other; below it rocked forests of palm trees and magnificent flowers, as big as mill-wheels. She asked if this was the country she was to go to, but the swans shook their heads, for what she saw was the lovely, ever-changing castle in the sky of Fata Morgana; into it they dared not take any human being. Elisa stared at it – then the mountains, forests and castle all collapsed, and instead there stood twenty proud churches, all similar, with tall towers and pointed windows. She thought she could hear the sound of an organ playing, but it was the sea she heard. Now she was very close to the churches, when they turned into a whole fleet of ships sailing off beneath her; she looked down, and it was only sea-mist chasing across the water. Yes, everything constantly changed before her eyes, and now she saw the real country she was to travel to; there the lovely blue mountains towered up, with cedar woods, cities and castles. Long before the sun set, she was sitting on the mountain in front of a large cave that was overgrown with fine, green twining plants; it looked as if they were woven tapestries.

Now we shall see what you dream here tonight!' the youngest brother said and showed her her bedroom. 'If only I could dream how I could free you from your spell!' she said; and this thought so preoccupied her; she prayed fervently to God for his help – yes, even in her sleep she continued to pray – then it seemed to her that she flew high into the air, to the castle in the sky of Fata Morgana, and the fairy came to meet her, so beautiful and shimmering, and yet she looked like the old woman who had given her berries in the forest and told her about the swans wearing gold crowns.

'Your brothers can be freed from their spell!' she said, 'but you must have courage and endurance. The sea is admittedly softer than your fine hands, yet can still grind the hard stones – but it does not feel the pain your fingers can feel, it has no heart, does not suffer the fear and torment you must endure. Do you see this stinging nettle I am holding in my hand! many such nettles grow round the cave where you sleep; only those and the ones that grow on the graves in churchyards can be used – note this – those you must pick, although they will burn and bring your

skin out in blisters; if you break the nettles with your feet, you will get flax; from its fibres you are to twist and bind eleven shirts of mail, with long sleeves, throw these over the eleven wild swans, and the magic spell will be broken. But remember that from the moment you begin this task, right up until it is completed – even though it may take years – you must not speak: the first word you utter will pierce your brothers' hearts like a death-dealing dagger; their lives depend on your tongue remaining silent. Make sure you remember this!

And she immediately touched the nettle close by her hand; it was like a burning fire, and this woke up Elisa. It was broad daylight, and close to where she had been sleeping there lay a nettle like the one she had seen in her dreams. Then she fell on her knees, thanked the Good Lord, and went out of the cave to begin her task.

She grasped the horrible nettles with her fine hands – they were like fire, they brought out great blisters on her hands and arms, but she was more than willing to suffer this as long as she could free her dear brothers from their spell. She broke each nettle with her naked feet, and twisted the green flax into linen.

When the sun had set, her brothers came and were alarmed to find her so silent; they thought it was a new spell cast by the wicked stepmother; but when they saw her hands, they realised what she was doing for their sake, and the youngest brother cried, and wherever his tears fell she felt no pain and the stinging blisters disappeared.

She spent the night working away, for she could find no rest until she had freed her dear brothers from their spell; all the following day, while the swans were away, she sat there all on her own, but time had never flown by so quickly. One shirt of mail was already finished, now she started on the next one.

Then hunting horns rang out between the mountains; she felt very scared; the sound came closer; she heard dogs barking; in great fear she sought refuge in the cave, among the nettles she had gathered and hacked, in a bundle, and sat down on it.

At that very moment, a great hunting dog leapt out of the underwood, and immediately afterwards one more, then yet another; they barked loudly, ran back, and came out again. Before many minutes had passed, all the hunters were standing outside the cave, and the handsomest among them was the country's king – he walked up to Elisa, never had he seen a more beautiful young woman.

'How have you come here, you lovely child!' he said. Elisa shook her head, she dared not speak, her brothers' lives and liberation depended on that; and she hid her hands under her apron so that the king would not see what suffering she had to undergo.

'Follow me!' he said, 'you cannot stay here! if you are as good as you are beautiful, I will dress you in silks and velvet, place a gold crown on your head, and you shall dwell in my richest castle!' – and then he lifted her up onto his horse; she cried, wrung her hands, but the king said: 'I only desire your happiness! some day you will thank me for this!' and then he set off between the mountains, holding her in front of him on his horse, and his hunters behind him.

At sunset, the magnificent royal city, with churches and domes, lay in front of them, and the king led her into the castle, where great fountains gently splashed in the tall halls of marble, where the walls and ceiling were adorned with paintings, but she had no eyes for all this, she wept and grieved; she let the women dress her in all the royal garments, plait pearls in her hair, and pull gloves on over her badly stung fingers.

When she stood there in all her splendour, she was so dazzlingly beautiful that the court bowed even more deeply to her, and the king chose her as his bride, although the archbishop shook his

head, and whispered that the beautiful forest girl was without doubt a witch, she had blinded them and spellbound the king's heart.

But the king refused to listen, ordered music to be played, the most exquisite dishes to be brought in, the loveliest girls to dance round her, and she was led through sweet-smelling gardens into magnificent halls; but not a smile passed her lips or shone from her eyes – sorrow stood etched there for ever. Now the king opened the door to a small room close to where she was to sleep; it was decorated with priceless green tapestries and looked just like the cave where she had been; on the floor there lay the flax from which she had made linen, and under the ceiling hung the shirt of mail that had been completed; all of this one of the hunters had brought along, as a curiosity.

'Here you can dream you are back in your former home!' the king said. 'Here is the work that you were occupied with there; now, in the midst of all your splendour, it will amuse you to recall how things were.'

When Elisa saw what was so dear to her heart, a smile played on her lips, and the blood returned to her cheeks; she thought of freeing her brothers from their spell, kissed the king's hand, and he clasped her to his bosom, and had all the church bells announce the wedding festivities. The lovely mute girl from the forest was the country's queen. Then the archbishop whispered evil words in the king's ear, but they did not sink down to his heart, the wedding was to take place, the archbishop himself would have to place the crown on her head, and out of sheer ill-will he rammed the narrow ring of the crown down hard over her forehead so that it caused her pain – but there was a heavier ring around her heart, her grieving for her brothers, and she did not feel the physical pain.

Her lips remained silent, for one word would mean her brothers losing their lives, but in her eyes there lay a deep love of the good, handsome king who did all he could to make her happy. He became dearer to her for every day that passed – oh, if only she could confide in him, tell him of her torment! but she had to remain silent, in silence she had to complete her task. So she slid away from his side at night, went into the small closet that was decked out like the cave and completed one shirt of mail after the other – but when she started on the seventh, she did not have any more flax to make linen.

She knew that there were nettles in the churchyard that she could use, but she had to pick them herself, and how was she to get out there.

'Oh, what is the pain in my fingers compared to the torment my heart suffers!' she thought, 'I must risk it! The Good Lord will not abandon me!' In an agony of fear, as if she was committing some dreadful deed, she tiptoed through the moonlit night down into the garden, went along the long avenues, through the lonely streets, out to the churchyard. There, on one of the widest gravestones she saw a circle of ghouls, horrible witches – they took their rags off as if they were going to bathe, then dug down with their long skinny fingers into the fresh graves, took the corpses out and started to eat their flesh. Elisa had to pass close by them, and they fixed their evil eyes on her, but she said her prayers, gathered the stinging nettles and carried them back to the castle.

Only one person had observed her, the archbishop, he was up while the others were asleep; now he felt that his premonition had been proved right: that things were not as they should be with the queen – she was a witch, so she had spellbound the king and the whole people.

At confessional he told the king what he had seen, and what he feared, and when these hard words came from his lips, the carved figures of the saints shook their heads, as if they wanted to say: It is untrue, Elisa is innocent! but the archbishop interpreted this differently, claimed that they were witnessing against her, that they were shaking their heads at her sin. Then two heavy tears rolled down the king's cheeks, he went home with doubt in his heart; and he pretended to be asleep at night, but no soothing sleep came to his eyes, he noticed how Elisa got out of bed, and every night

she did the same thing and every time he silently followed her, and saw her disappear into her closet.

As each day passed, his expression darkened; Elisa noticed this but did not understand why, but she was anxious about it for the sake of her brothers! down onto the royal velvet and purple flowed her salt tears, they lay there like glittering diamonds, and all those who saw the great splendour wanted to be the queen. Soon, however, she would have completed her task, only one shirt of mail still remained – but now she had run out of flax for linen, there was not a single nettle left. Once more, just this last time, she would have to go to the graveyard and pick some more handfuls. She thought fearfully of the lonely walk, and the terrifying ghouls; but her will was unwavering, just as her trust was in the Good Lord.

Elisa set off, but the king and the archbishop followed her, they saw her disappear through the wrought-iron gate of the graveyard and when they got closer to it, the ghouls were sitting on the gravestone, as Elisa had seen them, and the king turned away, for among them he thought he could make out the one whose head had been resting against his chest that very night.

‘The people must pass judgment on her!’ he said, and the people did so – she was to be burnt in a blazing fire.

From the magnificent royal halls she was taken down into a dark, dank dungeon where the wind whistled in through the barred window; instead of velvet and silks they gave her the bundle of nettles she had gathered, she was to rest her head on that – the hard, stinging shirts of mail she had plaited were to be her blanket and bedspread. But they could not have given her anything more precious – she set to work once more and prayed to God. Outside, the street urchins sang mocking songs about her; not a soul comforted her with a kind word. Then, as evening drew near, a swan’s wing swished close by the bars of her window – it was the youngest of the brothers, he had found his sister – and she sobbed aloud with happiness, although she knew that the night that lay ahead might well be the last one she would live to see; but now her task was almost complete and her brothers were here.

The archbishop came to spend the last hour with her – he had promised the king that – but she shook her head, indicated with her look and expression that he was to leave, for that night she had to complete her task, otherwise everything would have been in vain, everything, the pain, tears and sleepless nights; the archbishop left with cruel words, but poor Elisa knew that she was innocent, and kept on working.

The small mice ran across the floor, they dragged the nettles over to her feet, so as to help her a little, and the thrush sat by the bars of the window and sang all night long, as cheerfully as it could, so that she would not lose heart.

It was not yet quite daybreak, the sun would not rise for another hour, when the eleven brothers came to the gate of the castle, demanded to be led to the king, but that was not possible, they were told, for it was still night, the king was asleep and they dare not wake him. They begged, they threatened, the guard came, and finally even the king stepped out and asked what all this was about – at that moment the sun rose, and no brothers could be seen, but high above the castle there flew eleven wild swans.

People poured out of the city gate, they wanted to see the witch burnt. A pitiful horse pulled the cart in which she sat; she had been dressed in a smock of coarse sackcloth; her lovely long hair hung loosely round her beautiful head; her cheeks were deathly pale, her lips moved slightly, but her fingers were twisting the green flax – even on her way to her death she did not cease to carry out the task she had begun, the ten shirts of mail lay at her feet, she was plaiting the eleventh. The mob mocked her.

'Just look at the witch, how she's muttering! no hymn book in her hands, oh no, she's still up to her evil magic – take it from her and tear it into a thousand pieces!'

And they all crowded round her and wanted to tear it to pieces; then eleven swans flew down, sat round her on the cart and beat their great wings. Then the crowd drew aside in fear.

'It's a sign from heaven! she must surely be innocent!' many whispered, but they did not dare to say it out loud. Now the executioner took her by the hand, then she hurriedly flung the eleven shirts of mail over the swans and there stood eleven handsome princes, but the youngest of them had a swan's wing instead of an arm, for there was one sleeve of his shirt of mail missing, she had not had time to finish it.

'Now I dare speak!' she said, 'I am innocent!'

And the people who saw what had happened bowed deeply to her as to a female saint; but she sank lifeless in her brothers' arms – the tension, fear and pain had had such an effect on her.

'Yes, she is indeed innocent!' the eldest brother said, and now he explained everything that had taken place, and while he spoke, a scent as of a million roses spread out, for every piece of wood in the fire had taken root and put out branches – there stood a fragrant bush so high and large with red roses, and at the very top there was a flower, white and gleaming, it shone like a star, the king broke it off, placed it on Elisa's breast – and she then woke up with peace and bliss in her heart.

And all the church bells rang of their own accord and the birds came in great flocks; there was a wedding procession back to the castle such as no king had ever seen before.