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The Wild Girl

Written by Kate Forsyth

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THE WILD GIRL



Kate Forsyth

FOREWORD



The fairy tales collected and rewritten by the Grimm brothers in the early part of the nineteenth century have spread far and wide in the past two hundred years, inspiring many novels, poems, operas, ballets, films, cartoons and advertisements.

Most people imagine the brothers as elderly men in medieval costume, travelling around the countryside asking for tales from old women bent over their spinning wheels, or wizened shepherds tending their flocks. The truth is that they were young men in their twenties, living at the same time as Jane Austen and Lord Byron.

It was a time of war and tyranny and terror. Napoléon Bonaparte was seeking to rule as much of the world as he could, and the small German kingdom in which the brothers lived was one of the first to fall. Poverty-stricken, and filled with nationalistic zeal, Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm – the elder brothers of a family of six – decided to collect and save the old tales of princesses and goose girls, lucky fools and unlucky princes, poisonous apples and dangerous rose-briars, hungry witches and murderous sausages that had once been told and retold in houses both small and grand all over the land.

The Grimms were too poor to travel far from home; besides, the countryside was wracked by repeated waves of fighting as the great powers struggled back and forth over the German landscape. Luckily, Jakob and Wilhelm were to find a rich source of storytelling among the young women of their acquaintance. One of them, Dortchen Wild, grew up right next door.

This is her story.



‘Wild by name and wild by nature,’ Dortchen’s father used to say of her. He did not mean it as a compliment. He thought her headstrong, and so he set himself to tame her.

The day Dortchen Wild’s father died, she went to the forest, winter-bare and snow-frosted, so no one could see her dancing with joy. She went to the place where she had last been truly happy, the grove of old linden trees in the palace garden. Tearing off her black bonnet, she flung it into the tangled twigs, and drew off her gloves, shoving them in her coat pocket. Holding out her bare hands, embracing the cold winter wind, Dortchen spun alone among the linden trees, her black skirts swaying.

Snow lay thick upon the ground. The lake’s edges were slurred with ice. The only colour was the red rosehips in the briar hedge, and the golden windows of the palace. Violin music lilted into the air, and shadows twirled past the glass panes.

It was Christmas Day. All through Cassel, people were dancing and feasting. Dortchen remembered the Christmas balls Jérôme Bonaparte had held during his seven-year reign as king. A thousand guests had waltzed till dawn, their faces hidden behind masks. Wilhelm I, the Kurfürst of Hessen, had won back his throne from the French only a little over a year ago. He would not celebrate Christmas so extravagantly. Soon the lights would be

doused and the music would fade away, and he and his court would go sensibly to bed, to save on the cost of lamp oil.

Dortchen must dance while she could.

She lifted her black skirts and twirled in the snow. *He's dead*, she sang to herself. *I'm free!*

Three ravens flew through the darkening forest, wings ebony-black against the white snow. Their haunting call chilled her. She came to a standstill, surprised to find she was shaking with tears as much as with cold. She caught hold of a thorny branch to steady herself. Snow showered over her.

I will never be free . . .

Dortchen was so cold that she felt as if she were made of ice. Looking down, she realised she had cut herself on the rose thorns. Blood dripped into the snow. She sucked the cut, and the taste of her blood filled her mouth, metallic as biting a bullet.

The sun was sinking away behind the palace, and the violin music came to an end. Dortchen did not want to go home, but it was not safe in the forest at night. She picked up her bonnet and began trudging back home, to the rambling old house above her father's apothecary shop, where his corpse lay in his bedroom, swollen and stinking, waiting for her to wash it and lay it out.

The town was full of revellers. It was the first Christmas since Napoléon had been defeated and banished. Carol-singers in long red gowns stood on street corners, singing harmonies. A chestnut-seller was selling paper cones of hot chestnuts to the crowd clustered about his little fire, while potmen sold mugs of hot cider and mulled wine. All the young women were dressed in British red and Russian green and Prussian blue, trimmed with military frogging and golden braid – a vast change from the previous year, when all had worn the high-waisted white favoured by the Empress Joséphine. Dortchen's severe black dress and bonnet made her look like a hooded crow among a vast flock of gaudy parrots.

At last she came to the Marktgasse, lit up with dancing light from a huge bonfire. Not one building matched another, crowded together all

higgledy-piggledy around the cobblestoned square with its old pump and drinking trough outside the inn.

Only the apothecary's shop was dark and shuttered, with no welcoming light above its door. Dortchen made her way through crowds buying sugar-roasted almonds, gingerbread hearts, wooden toys and small gilded angels at the market stalls. She slipped into the alley that ran down the side of the shop to its garden, locked away behind high walls.

'Dortchen,' a low voice called from the shadowy doorway opposite the garden gate.

She turned, hands clasped painfully tight together.

A tall, lean figure in black stepped out of the doorway. The light from the square flickered over the strong, spare bones of his face, making hollows of his eyes and cheeks.

'I've been waiting for you,' Wilhelm said. 'No one knew where you had gone.'

'I went to the forest,' she answered.

Wilhelm nodded. 'I thought you would.' He put his arms about her, drawing her close.

For a moment Dortchen resisted, but she was so cold and tired that she could not withstand the comfort of his touch. She rested her cheek on his chest and heard the thunder of his heart.

A ragged breath escaped her. 'He's dead,' she said. 'I can hardly believe it.'

'I know, I heard the news. I'm sorry.'

'I'm not.'

He did not answer. She knew she had grieved him. The death of Wilhelm's father had been the first great sorrow of his life; he and his brother Jakob had worked hard ever since to be all their father would have wanted. It was different for Dortchen, though. She had not loved her father.

'You're free now,' he said, his voice so low it could scarcely be heard over the laughter and singing of the crowd in the square.

Dortchen had to look away. 'It doesn't change anything. There's nothing left for me, not a single thaler.'

'Wouldn't Rudolf—'

Dortchen made a restless movement at the mention of her brother. 'There's not much left for him either. All the wars . . . and then my father's illness . . . Well, Rudolf's close to ruin as it is.'

There was a long silence. In the space between them were all the words Wilhelm could not say. *I am too poor to take a wife . . . I earn so little at my job at the library . . . I cannot ask Jakob to feed another mouth when he has to support all six of us . . .*

The failure of their fairy tale collection was a disappointment to him, Dortchen knew. Wilhelm had worked so hard, pinning all his hopes to it. If only it had been better received . . . If only it had sold more . . .

'I'm so sorry.' He bent his head and kissed her.

Dortchen drew away and shook her head. 'I can't . . . We mustn't . . .' He gave a murmur deep in his throat and tried to kiss her again. She wrenched herself out of his arms. 'Wilhelm, I can't . . . It hurts too much.'

He caught her and drew her back, and she did not have the strength to resist him. Once again his mouth found hers, and she succumbed to the old magic. Desire quickened between them. Her arms were about his neck, their cold lips opening hungrily to each other. His hand slid down to find the curve of her waist, and she drew herself up against him. His breath caught. He turned and pressed her against the stone wall, his hands trying to find the shape of her within her heavy black gown.

Dortchen let herself forget the dark years that gaped between them, pretending that she was once more just a girl, madly in love with the boy next door.

The church bells rang out, marking the hour. She remembered she was frozen to the bone, and that her father's dead body lay on the far side of the wall.

'It's no use,' she whispered, pulling herself out of Wilhelm's arms. It felt like she was tearing away living flesh. 'Please, Wilhelm . . . don't make it harder.'

He held her steady, bending his head so his forehead met hers. 'Our time will come.'

She shook her head. 'It's too late.'

‘Don’t say that. I cannot bear it, Dortchen. It’ll never be too late. I love you – you know that I do. Someday, somehow, we’ll be together.’

She sighed and tried once more to draw away. He gripped her forearms and said, in a low, intense voice, ‘I’ve been reading Novalis. Do you remember? He said the most beautiful thing about love. It’s given me new faith, Dortchen.’

‘What did he say?’ she asked, wanting to believe, if only for a minute.

‘Love works magic,’ Wilhelm said. ‘It is the final purpose of the world story, the “Amen” of the universe.’

She caught her breath in a sob and reached up to kiss him. For a long moment, the world stilled around them. Dortchen thought of nothing but the feel of his arms about her, his mouth on hers. But then the bonfire in the square flared up, sending the shadows racing away, and a great drunken cheer sounded out. Dortchen stepped back. ‘I must go.’

‘Must you?’ He tried to hold her still so he could kiss her again.

She turned her face away. ‘Wilhelm, we can’t do this any more,’ she said to the stones in the wall. ‘I . . . I need to make some kind of life for myself.’

He took a deep, unhappy breath. ‘What will you do?’

‘I’ll keep house for Rudolf, I suppose. And help my sisters. There’s always work for Aunty Dortchen.’ Her voice was bitter. At twenty-one years of age, she was an old maid, all her hopes of love and romance turned to ashes.

‘There must be a way. If the fairy tales would sell just a few more copies . . .’ His voice died away. They both knew that he would need to sell many thousands more before they could ever dream of being together.

‘One day people will recognise how wonderful the stories are,’ she said.

He took her hand and bent before her, pressing his mouth into her palm. She drew away from him, turning to the gate in the wall. She was shivering so hard she could scarcely lift the latch. She glanced back and saw him watching her, a tall, still shadow among shadows.

Happy endings are only for fairy tales, Dortchen thought, stepping through to her father’s walled garden. She raised her hand to dash away her tears. *These days, there’s no use in wishing.*

LANTERN IN THE NIGHT



October 1805

Dortchen Wild fell in love with Wilhelm Grimm the first time she saw him.

She was only twelve years old, but love has never been something that can be constrained by age. It happened in the way of old tales, in an instant, changing everything forever. It was a fork in the path, the turn of a key, the kindling of a lantern.

That afternoon, Dortchen had gone with her friend Lotte to visit Lotte's aunt, Henriette Zimmer, who was a lady-in-waiting to the Princess Wilhelmine. They had been accompanied by Lotte's mother, Frau Grimm, and three of her brothers, Karl, Ferdinand and Ludwig. It was a long walk back to the Marktgasse from the vast green park of the palace, but no one suggested hiring a carriage. The Grimms were poor, and Dortchen certainly had no money in her purse. It was both scary and wonderful to walk through the forest at twilight, imagining wolves and witches and bears and other wild beasts lurking in the shadows.

'Look at Herkules,' Lotte said. 'He's all lit up by the sun.'

Dortchen turned and walked backward, staring back up at the palace, square and grand on its low hill, with six heavy columns holding up a great stone pediment. On the crest of the mountain behind was an octagonal building of turreted stone, surmounted by a pyramid on which stood the immense statue of Herkules, symbol of the Kurfürst's power. As the sun

slid down behind the western horizon, Herkules sank back into shadow. Light drained away from the sky.

'Hurry up, girls!' Frau Grimm called. 'It'll be dark soon.'

Supper, Dortchen thought. She turned forward again and quickened her steps. 'I mustn't be late or Father will be angry.'

'He won't mind once he knows you've been with us, surely,' Lotte said.

Dortchen did not like to say that her father did not approve of the Grimm family. There were far too many boys for his comfort, and, besides, they were as poor as church mice. Herr Wild had six girls to settle comfortably.

The shadowy forest gave way to parkland, then the long, straight road ran between wide plots of gardens, each confined behind stone walls, the gateposts carved with the initials of the owners' long-dead ancestors. They approached Dortchen's family's garden plot, where she had been meant to spend all afternoon, weeding and hoeing. She ran in and caught up her basket and gardening gloves, then hurried to catch up with Lotte, who turned to wait for her, one hand clamped to her bonnet.

The road led inside the medieval walls, the cobbles bruising Dortchen's feet. The jutting eaves and chimneys and turrets of the buildings were dark against a luminous sky. The first star shone out, and Dortchen thought, *I wish . . .*

She hardly knew how to frame the words. She longed to have someone of her own to love – a friend, a twin, a soulmate. She glanced at Lotte, at her thin face and the curly dark hair so unlike Dortchen's, which was thick and fair and straight. Lotte was only thirteen days older than Dortchen. Almost close enough to be twins. They had both been born in May 1793, the year that the King and Queen of France had their heads chopped off and the people of Paris had danced in streets puddled with blood.

Dortchen had always been fascinated by the story of Maria Antonia of Austria, who had become Marie Antoinette of France. She sometimes imagined herself as a beautiful young queen, dressed in white, dragged to the guillotine through a jeering crowd. In her daydream, Dortchen was rescued at the last moment by a daring band of masked heroes, led by a handsome stranger with a flashing sword. He threw her over the saddle

of his horse and galloped away through the crowd, and the guillotine was left thirsty.

She wondered if Lotte ever imagined herself a condemned queen, a girl in a story.

Warm light spilt from the upper windows. The smell of cooking made Dortchen's stomach growl and her pulse quicken in anxiety. 'Let's hurry – I'm hungry.'

'I'm always hungry,' Lotte said. 'And all we have to eat is sausages. Sausages, sausages, every day.'

'It's better than stone soup, which is what I'll get if I'm home late.'

The small party reached the Königsplatz, its six avenues radiating out like the spokes of a wheel. In the centre of the square was a marble statue of the Kurfürst's father, the Landgrave Frederick, famous for having sent hundreds of Hessian soldiers to die fighting for Great Britain in the American Revolution.

'Did you know that there's an echo here?' Dortchen told Lotte. 'If you shout, you'll hear your voice bounce back six times.' She stood in the centre and demonstrated, much to the amazement of Lotte's three brothers, who at once came to stand beside her to test the echo too.

'*Ja!*' they shouted.

Back came the faint echo: *Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, ja.*

'*Ja! Ja!*'

Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, ja . . .

The church bells rang out and Dortchen remembered the time. 'Come on, I'm late. Father will skin me alive!' Catching Lotte's hand, she ran down the cobblestoned avenue that led through the crooked houses towards the Marktgasse. The gables shut out the last of the light, so they ran through shadows, with only the occasional gleam of candlelight through a shutter showing the way.

They burst out into the Marktgasse, the three Grimm boys racing past them, Lotte's stout mother panting behind. Dortchen saw at once that the windows of her father's shop were dark, and he had hung the quail's cage out the upstairs window. Her spirits sank.

A lantern bobbed across the square towards them. Behind it were two young men, dark shapes in long coats and tall hats. They strode up to Frau Grimm, arms spread in greeting. 'Mother, where have you been?' the younger one asked in mock reproof. 'We got home to a dark, cold house and an empty larder.'

'Jakob, Wilhelm, you're here at last.' Frau Grimm embraced them warmly.

'It's my other brothers.' Lotte ran forward to greet them, and Dortchen followed shyly. In the glow of the lamp, she saw two young men, both thin and dark and shabbily dressed. The elder of the two had a serious face, with straight hair hanging past his ears. The younger was the more handsome, with pale skin, hollow cheeks and wavy dark curls. He laughed at Lotte and swung her around by the hands.

Dortchen forgot about her father, forgot about being late, forgot to breathe. The world tilted, then righted itself.

'Lotte, not so wild! You're not a little girl any more,' the elder brother reproved her. Dortchen knew that he was named Jakob and that he was twenty years old, for Lotte had spoken often about her clever brothers.

'Don't scold, Jakob,' Lotte protested. 'I haven't seen you in such an age.'

Frau Grimm patted his shoulder. 'Look at you, so tall and manly. We've been so worried. What took you so long?'

'Professor von Savigny and I had to come the long way, through Metz,' Jakob replied. 'Strasbourg is full of French soldiers.'

'The Grand Army is on the move again? I thought Napoléon was all set to invade England,' Ferdinand said. He was the fourth of the five Grimm sons, seventeen years old, with the family's dark hair and thin, sensitive face.

'I guess he's changed his mind,' Jakob replied drily.

'Do they march against Austria?' eighteen-year-old Karl demanded.

'I suppose it was to be expected,' nineteen-year-old Wilhelm said. 'Austria did invade Bavaria, after all.'

'The French move so swiftly,' Jakob said. 'Napoléon left Paris after us, yet overtook us on the road. They say he drove for fifty-eight hours, only

stopping to change his horses. The ostlers had to throw water over the carriage wheels to stop them from melting.'

'You saw the Emperor? What is he like? Is it true he's a dwarf?' Ludwig asked. At fifteen, he was the youngest Grimm brother and three years older than Lotte.

'He's not tall by any means, but one hardly notices. There's such a presence about him. His eyes, they're full of fire . . .' Jakob's voice trailed off.

'What about the Empress? Was she very beautiful? Are her dresses as shocking as they say?' Lotte wanted to know.

'Indeed, I'd be sorry to see you emulating her clothes, as half of Europe seems to do. If you can call a few wisps of muslin "clothes". As for beautiful – she wears so much rouge you cannot see her skin at all!'

'I wish I could have gone with you to Paris,' Wilhelm interjected. 'It was lonely at university without you.'

'I'm glad to be back with you all again,' Jakob said. 'Stimulating as Paris was.'

'We're glad to have you back too,' Ludwig said. 'Although you'll miss the house at Steinau. We're all very cramped here in Cassel.'

'We were cramped in Marburg too, I assure you,' Wilhelm said. 'At least it's not so hilly here. At Marburg, we had to climb hundreds of steps every day just to get around. And sometimes you'd walk in through the front door of a house and find yourself on the top floor!'

Dortchen waited for a chance to say her farewells. She was eager to get to the safety of the kitchen before her father noticed her absence, yet she found their talk of the outside world fascinating.

Wilhelm sensed Dortchen's eyes on him and glanced her way. 'But who is this? A friend of yours, Lottechen?'

'Oh, that's one of the Wild girls,' Karl said. 'There's a whole horde of them across the way.'

'It's Dortchen,' Lotte said. 'Dortchen Wild. She lives above the apothecary's there.' She waved her hand at the dark shop, with its mortar and pestle sign hanging outside.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Dortchen. Is that a love name for Dorothea?’ When Dortchen nodded shyly, Wilhelm went on. ‘One of my favourite names. My mother’s name, you know.’

‘It’s really Henriette Dorothea,’ Dortchen said. ‘But no one calls me that.’

‘It’s a very pretty name, both the long and the short versions,’ he answered, smiling.

‘What about Charlotte?’ his sister demanded. ‘Isn’t that your favourite?’

‘I like them both. Two very pretty names.’

Dortchen felt heat rising in her cheeks. ‘I have to go. Thank you for taking me to afternoon tea, Frau Grimm. Bye, Lotte.’ She hurried down the alley that divided her father’s shop from the building in which the Grimms rented an apartment. Within seconds she was hidden in darkness, but she could hear the conversation of the Grimm family behind her.

‘She seems very nice,’ Wilhelm said. ‘How lovely to have some girls living right next door, Lotte.’

‘I hope they are sensible, hard-working girls, not like those silly friends of yours in Steinau,’ Jakob added.

‘Their father is very strict and keeps them close,’ Frau Grimm said.

‘She’s very pretty,’ Wilhelm said.

Dortchen smiled and clasped his words to her like something small and precious.

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