



Giselle

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Giselle

Once upon a time there was a little village nestled in the heart of Europe. It was a quiet place filled with simple people but one crucial to the ruling class for it was a great producer of wine. The vineyards in that land were a source of only the finest grapes to be found east of the Rhine and the nobles maintained good business with the people of this village. Thus was it a prosperous and happy place for one to live.

Dwelling in this tiny village was a young girl named Giselle, daughter of the innkeeper Berta, and she was the darling of the town. She was beautiful and sweet but was cursed from birth. She had a loving but weak heart and was prone to illness. Many times her mother had sat by the girl's bedside, as she endured some malady, wondering fearfully if her daughter would even last the night. But, ill-fated as Giselle was, she must have had someone looking out for her for she always recovered well enough to rise the next morning and turn her sparkling eyes toward the sun.

Her hair was a deep brown and her mother often pinned it up in braids for her and told her not to frolic or it would fall down. Berta did not like for Giselle to exert herself in play or dance, for fear of overtaxing her heart or injuring her delicate body, and preferred for her to avoid any undue emotional stress. This, of course, meant love for love was a bringer of both great joy and greater pain. Although Giselle owed much to her mother, she resented that the woman treated her like a china doll; as if a single misstep would utterly shatter her. As a result, the girl led a sheltered life and, while her other friends were out playing or working in the vineyards or finding beaux for themselves, Giselle spent much of her time at the window watching the comings and goings of the village and wishing she could be a part of it.

All the townspeople loved Giselle and felt especially protective of her for her unfortunate condition, but none loved her more than Hilarion the stable boy. He would sit outside her window and talk with her when she was unable to leave the house and, every Saturday morning, he would gather wildflowers from the edge of the forest and leave them by the door of the inn. Giselle considered him her dearest friend but Hilarion had always wished for her to think more of him than that. To his dismay, she never did. Perhaps it was due to her mother's worries about men or perhaps Giselle, herself, was afraid. For whatever reason, she could not return his affection in the same way and it proved to be his one true grief.

One morning, as she stepped outside her door to sweep the walkway, she spied a young man she had never seen before leaving the house across the way. He was very handsome, she noted; tall with curly dark hair and a noble air about him. He returned her gaze and smiled, a thing that made Giselle's pale cheeks redden. She turned her glance toward the ground but briefly raised her blue eyes demurely before turning and retreating back into the house. This newcomer had stirred new feelings within her and, now more than ever, she wished she were not the frail and fragile specter of a human being that she thought herself.

In the coming days, she saw the young man every morning and her heart grew more tender toward him with each meeting. Early one bright Saturday Giselle heard a knock at her door and, opening it wide, found herself face to face with her charming neighbor.

“I hope I’m not being too forward,” he began with an awkward smile. “but I felt it was high time I introduced myself. My name is Loys and I’ve recently taken up residence across the road.” He took her hand and kissed it, to which she blushed deeply.

It took her some time to respond and she peered nervously from side to side, as if to make certain her mother was not around before she said anything. She was about to take her leave but looked into Loys’ happily glowing face and said, “My name is Giselle.”

“Giselle, would you care to take a walk with me this morning?”

The girl was hesitant to accept his offer, though she wished for nothing more. “My mother would not like it. She worries about me and would be cross if I left the house without telling her.”

“Well I would hate to get you into trouble, but we need not go far. Even just a bit down the street, for I only wish to talk a while.”

Giselle looked anxiously down the road and began to think that maybe her mother wouldn’t mind if she didn’t roam too far. Finally, her soft lips curled around a pearly grin and she nodded to him. He took her hand as they went and steadied her steps for he wanted her to feel safe with him. As they were leaving the inn behind, Hilarion was just coming around the corner to leave his bunch of wildflowers by Giselle’s door. But seeing her walking hand in hand with the handsome stranger stopped him in his tracks and he turned back, dropping the flowers upon the ground.

As they walked, Giselle peered up at her companion and said, “Your house has been empty for quite some time. I’m glad to see someone living in it again. Can I ask why you came to our village?”

“My father has always labored in the vineyards but, lately, not all regions have been so blessed as this one. This community thrives and there is plenty of work.”

“Does that mean you will work in the vineyard as well?” she asked with a sort of delight.

“Most probably,” he replied. “I’ve been working with my father since I was a boy.”

“Many of my friends pick grapes in the vineyard and I go sometimes to see them. Mother doesn’t like me to work there but I help from time to time when she’s not around.”

“Why, may I ask, is your mother so protective of you? Surely she does not treat you like this always.”

“She does,” Giselle answered looking up at the morning sky. The sun was bright but there were clouds gathering from afar. “My health is precarious and has been since I was a child. My heart is not strong and I easily fall victim to illnesses. She fears every day for me and, while I don’t blame her for that, I wish I could live like a normal girl.”

Loys stared silently at her delicate face as she spoke and he was touched deep inside with a desire to protect the girl. She was so lovely and full of life and yet harbored a profound sorrow within her. He suddenly felt the need to care for her like no other girl he had ever known. "Giselle," he said finally. "You are far from normal and I banish the thought of you ever being like other women. You are precious just as you are and you needn't fear. I'll protect you from any harm as if my own life depends upon it."

She closed her eyes for a moment and leaned her head against Loys' shoulder. "If only it were that simple," she said with a sigh. She could hear Berta calling her name from the window of the inn and the girl would not keep her mother waiting. She smiled again at Loys and turned toward home.

"Wait, Giselle," he called to her. "When will I see you again?"

"Tomorrow morning, I suppose," she replied and returned home. Berta fell upon the girl as soon as she stepped through the doorway.

"Where on earth have you been, child? I've been calling you incessantly."

"I merely went for a walk down the street."

"What have I told you about leaving the house without telling me? I don't do this because I want to lock you up but sometimes you give me few alternatives. Suppose your breath gave out from beneath you and I wasn't there?"

"If that happened, Loys would have been there."

"Who?"

Realizing she had said too much already, Giselle changed the subject. "There are plenty of people in the village who saw me and could have assisted were I in danger. You needn't keep me on a leash like some animal."

Her mother's frustration subsided and her face turned tender and sad. "I'm sorry if you think I treat you like less than a human being. The truth is you are so much more but I fear all the more to lose you. You are all I have left in this world and I am getting old. I haven't the strength I once had when you were young and I had your father's help. Sometimes I think you are all that keeps me alive, my little one. All I wish is to do the same for you." Giselle fell into her mother's arms and the two remained like that for what seemed like hours. Giselle had been born in her mother's arms and, at times, it seemed to the girl as if she had never left them.

The following morning, as it had been decided, Loys appeared at Giselle's door again, wishing to spend some time with her. She was more easily swayed this time and clung to his arm as they went. She showed him all the landmarks of their village and happily introduced him to the townsfolk and to her friends. They went on like that for many days growing closer and closer each time. And each of them changed somewhat in that span for they had both been very independent but now found themselves becoming quite attached to one another.

One morning, before their meeting, Hilarion arrived at Giselle's window in a very poor humor. He had become sick with grief since the girl had met the newcomer and the stable boy was determined to prove that Loys was wrong for her. "I don't trust that man," he said to her, peering at the dark house across the street.

“I understand how you feel, Hilarion, but please don’t be jealous of Loys. You will find someone yourself and, when you do, you’ll forget all about me.”

He turned to her with pale eyes and said, “I could never forget about you, Giselle.” But his face turned cross again and he added, “It is not jealousy that motivates me but concern for you alone. I simply do not trust Loys. Always his house is dark and never do I see him there except in the morning. Where does he go all night and why have I never seen him going to or from the vineyards? He speaks always of his father but I’ve not seen or heard of him from anyone else.”

Giselle placed a hand on his arm to calm him. “Please, Hilarion, don’t bear him any ill will. He is a good man and you’ll come to realize that when some time is passed between us.” The stable boy gave her a cold glance and left the window in a furious heat.

Not long afterward, Giselle watched Loys emerge from his house with a wave and the two met for their morning walk. The sky was grayer than the days before and the rain was not far away. Giselle only hoped it would not spoil the grape harvest, yet, she thought there was something wonderful about the late summer storms. She never felt safer or more comforted than when she was nestled in her bed during a raging thunderstorm and, afterward, everything seemed to glow with health.

They walked farther this time and passed the edge of the village, entering the meadows beyond. Ahead lay the graveyard, marking the boundary of the woods and Giselle stopped short. “We should turn back,” she said drearily.

“Why?”

“Mother always told me to avoid the old graveyard at this time of year, especially when the sun is not shining.”

“But why is that? Surely you aren’t afraid of a few graves.”

“She says this is the season of the Villis and it’s at this time that they look to snatch up young girls for their ghostly sisterhood. And you, especially, would be in great peril for they and their queen, Myrtha, hate all men and use their evil power to force them to dance until they die!”

Loys began laughing. “I don’t believe in ghosts and neither should you. That is just a legend your mother tells you to keep you within her sight; nothing more.” He held her close and they turned away from the dismal cemetery. “You needn’t fear ghosts nor demons nor all the Black Fairy’s hordes while I’m around.”

Shortly after Giselle and Loys had left for their walk, Hilarion arrived at the inn. When he found that she was not at home he suspected that she had gone with her new friend and stepped over to Loys’ house to investigate. He was not at home either and Hilarion’s assumptions were confirmed. Dejected and frustrated, he was about to leave when he saw a beautiful woman standing outside Loys’ door. Her hair was long and black as midnight and she was clothed in an ethereal white dress with black-feathered wings sprouting from her back. Her face was so gentle and lovely that Hilarion was certain she must be an angel.

No one else seemed to notice her but she beckoned to him with a wave of her milky hand and pointed toward the now open doorway of the stranger’s house.

Reluctantly, Hilarion accepted the apparition's invitation and stepped inside. Upon entering he found that the angel had now vanished but, being inside his rival's home, he was determined to find something that would confirm his suspicions that Loys was not right for Giselle.

The house seemed barely lived in and contained very little except for a leather satchel that had been dumped upon the bed. Though he didn't feel right about going through someone else's belongings, he thought about Giselle and how the angel had led him there and felt that surely their love was meant to be. As he rummaged through the bag his hands came across a small pack of provisions, some tools and a piece of lush fabric. He drew it out and found it to be a gorgeous red cloak lined with gold stitching; the like of which came only out of Rampionland.

Convinced that Loys was no mere grape-picking peasant, Hilarion returned to the bag and gripped something large and heavy. It was a sword with a richly etched golden hilt and set in a scabbard inlaid with gold and jewels. Drawing the sword out he found that the blade gleamed brilliantly with silver filigree twisting about the base. It was a fine weapon and one that only a nobleman could even dream about. Returning the blade to its scabbard, Hilarion crept out of the house and brought the sword to his stable, hiding it beneath a bed of straw.

He was long since gone by the time Giselle and Loys arrived in town and rested beneath the sloping roof of the inn. It was raining now, slowly at first but gathering strength every moment. Standing dry in each other's arms while a wall of water fell around them was better, to Giselle, than being warm in her bed like she so loved.

"I don't think Mother should see us together," she warned, while not wanting Loys to leave her for any reason. He felt her skin and found how cold she was.

"I should not have brought you out today," he said remorsefully. "You must promise to rest in bed in your mother's care for you must not be sick.

"I'll be just fine Loys," she assured him but her statement was followed by a fit of coughs. They were briefer and less violent than those she was known to suffer from but they frightened Loys all the same. Finally she nodded and promised him and, with a kiss, bid him goodbye for the day.

When Giselle had disappeared inside the inn, Loys dashed across the rainy street where a man awaited him outside the house. "Marist, what are you doing here?" Loys inquired, embracing his friend.

"I came to get you," he said plainly. "Your father sent me to fetch you."

"How is father?" Loys returned, smugly.

"Concerned, I can only surmise, considering you said you would be away three days and it is now over a week." He leveled his eyes at Loys. "*She* is on her way from Courland and, as I understand it, she's grown a bit impatient."

"Well what does he want from me?" Loys folded his arms and leaned back against a tree. "I came here to get away from all of that."

"Is that all you came here for?" Marist asked with a sly grin, motioning toward the inn across the road. Loys said nothing but glared at his companion. "Listen, fun is fun

but the old man is worried about you and the least you could do is show your face to allay his fears.”

“And what, precisely, is he so afraid of?”

“Perhaps that you won’t go through with it... *again*.”

“Perhaps I won’t,” Loys stated, sending a fleeting glance at the light in Giselle’s window before leaving with Marist, sharing the young man’s cloak to ward off the rain.

Giselle sat beside her bed for the remainder of the morning, with her arms folded upon the windowsill, staring up at the thundering skies and feeling the crisp, moist air against her face as the rain continued to fall. She watched as a butterfly fluttered nearby, seeking shelter from the storm. It landed silently on the sill and stretched its brightly painted wings. She marveled at the thing and how easily it took to the air once more, sailing off to unknown lands, and just wished she could do the same. Her mother entered her room in a huff and dragged her from the window, closing the shutters.

“Gracious, girl! Are you so eager to catch a chill? First cavorting in the rain and now opening your room to the wet and bitter air!”

“Mother, I’m fine I just needed some fresh...” Before she could finish her statement she was seized by a fit of coughing and settled back down on her bed once it had subsided. “... some fresh air.” Though her cheeks were flushed, the rest of her face was pale and Berta placed a hand upon her forehead. When she determined the girl was not ill, she breathed a sigh of relief. “I told you I was fine,” Giselle murmured softly.

“Well I think it best if you remain in bed for the rest of the day,” Berta recommended, already turning down the girl’s blankets and fetching her nightclothes.

“I don’t want to stay in bed. Look.” Giselle threw the shutters open and misty sunlight flooded through the window. There was a lull in the storm now and the rapid rhythm of the morning’s downpour had been replaced by a few scattered drips as remnants of water slid down the length of the roof and dropped off the corners. “The sun is up again and I should be as well.”

Berta was about to scold her daughter for her smart remarks but her thoughts were interrupted by a horn, sounding in the distance. She stepped outside to see what the commotion was about, for a crowd had gathered in the square in front of the inn. The horn was heard again and a hunting party was making their way down the road and into the square from the direction of the woods. There was a royal procession on horseback, with pages and attendants following on foot, and at its head were the beautiful Princess Bathilda and her father, the King of Courland.

Bathilda had been in the forest hunting with her father and, in light of the poor weather, decided to pay a visit to this little village and find some shelter. They had heard of the fine wine in that place and of the hospitality of its people. Berta herself greeted the princess, who alighted from her white palfrey, and took the woman’s hands into her own. Bathilda was dressed in a gorgeous red dress, with gold trim, and a wide-brimmed and feathered hat to match. She wore the most stunning jewelry and around her neck there hung a gleaming gold chain with a ruby locket.

Although her mother had told her to stay inside, Giselle could not resist investigating their new visitors for herself. Slowly she stepped outside and came up behind her mother. As Bathilda and Berta were discussing arrangements for some lodging and refreshments for the noble group, the princess spied Giselle and marveled at the girl's sweet prettiness. "Is this your daughter?" she asked, tipping her hat.

"Yes," Berta replied, briefly flashing her child a reprimanding scowl. "This is my Giselle." The girl bowed low before the princess and, gratefully acknowledging the noblewoman's admiration of her, set about making Bathilda and her companions comfortable. Seeing as the skies were clearing somewhat and the threat of rain had ceased, tables were brought outside for the nobles and wine was sent around. Hilarion led the horses to the stables, but not before throwing a scrutinizing eye over the regal company for a moment and glancing nervously at Giselle.

The people of the village were honored to host the king and princess and dancers and musicians were called to perform for them. Meanwhile, many excited whispers went around the villagers in the square. "Princess Bathilda is so beautiful and kind," some of the women said.

"But she'll have her hands full after she marries that prince from Silesia," others replied.

"Yes. Albrecht, isn't it? I've heard he's a real lothario and a philanderer; has a girl in every city."

"He'll have to mend his ways when Bathilda gets a hold of him, but you know what they say about old dogs and dishonest men."

Luckily Bathilda heard none of the gossip about herself and her fiancé from Silesia, for she was thoroughly entertained by the singing and dancing and was dutifully attended by Giselle who always made certain the cups and plates were full and always served her guests with a sincere smile. The princess was impressed by the girl, and had quickly grown quite fond of her. Perhaps she saw a glimpse of herself in the young woman's sweet heart; a glimpse of the gay and carefree girl she once was before the pressures of love and politics had been set upon her shoulders.

"How old are you, Giselle?"

"Sixteen," she answered gently.

"You are such a pretty thing. Is there someone dear to your heart?" Giselle did not make an immediate answer, as if afraid stating anything out loud might jinx her good fortune, but the beaming look in her face spoke volumes. "I thought as much," said Bathilda cheerfully, removing the gold chain from around her neck. "When he sees you with this it will make his spirit sing." The girl did not quite understand that the princess was giving her such a lavish gift. "Go ahead, my dear, it will look wonderful on you."

Finally, with a grateful curtsy, Giselle received the necklace and lowered it around her head, resting the brilliant ruby locket on her breast. She was so excited that she went around the square and showed all her friends and her mother, whose stern attitude of that morning had all but melted away now. She spied Hilarion by the side of the inn and ran to him, holding the stunning locket in her white little hands.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, dumbfounded by the regal treasure.

“Princess Bathilda gave it to me.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “Why?”

“Oh I don’t know.” She turned the thing over in her fingers as the light glinted off of the jewel’s polished surface. Suddenly her face lit up and she said, “I can’t wait for Loys to see it.”

“About Loys,” Hilarion interrupted, uneasily. “He isn’t who you think.”

She looked up at him with a momentary veil of concern that was quickly thrown aside. “Oh really, Hilarion, you aren’t going on about that again, are you?”

“But it’s true! That man is no peasant, to be sure, and I doubt his name is even Loys at all. He is an impostor and I have proof of it in my stable, proof shown to me by an angel!”

Now Giselle’s appearance took a harsher turn and she said, “Have you into my mother’s private store of wine again? I warned you about that before and, if Mother finds out...”

“I am neither mad nor drunk! You’re the one who is too drunk with infatuation to see the truth!” Then he turned and dashed around the corner in a huff. Giselle stayed there for a time, worrying for her deluded friend and running his words over in her head. They seemed nothing more than the product of jealousy and paranoia, but they managed to get to her all the same. She had nearly begun to worry for herself when she heard her mother’s voice calling to her.

Some time later, Bathilda, her father and her companions retired to the inn for the night, but the celebrations outside continued into the following day. Again the dancing and drinking and singing commenced with the morning light and, again, Giselle was out and about with the other villagers, proudly sporting her necklace. She wondered where Loys had gone for she hadn’t seen him since the previous morning, and it was now after noon.

Hilarion appeared, once again beseeching the girl to listen to him, but Giselle had invested too much happiness in this long overdue love affair to even allow herself to believe the stable boy’s words. She even found herself getting cross with him, though she couldn’t quite understand why. She had never harbored any ill feelings toward him for she knew that, if nothing else, Hilarion cared about her. But now she found that her patience with him had worn quite thin and, this, she made as clear to him as possible.

This sudden turn in Giselle’s attitude wounded him but it was the appearance of Loys that finally pushed Hilarion away. He had fought the temptation to uncover his proof but he felt he had been pushed far enough now and fled to the stable. Overjoyed at seeing Loys again, Giselle ran to him and enfolded herself in his arms.

“Where did you go to?” she asked. “I’ve missed you.”

“I went on a short trip with a friend,” he said. “but I thought of you every moment I was away.”

She was so deep in the throws of ardor that she nearly forgot to show him her beautiful gift. “Look, Loys!” She held up the ruby locket on the gold chain and her lover’s eyes gleamed as he beheld its magnificence.

But the smile on his face faded quickly and an unexpected look of fear and confusion came over him. "Where did you find that?"

"I didn't find it," she answered gleefully. "The princess gave it to me."

"Not Princess Bathilda?"

"Well yes. How did you know?" A similar look had now descended upon her as well.

"Never mind," he said with a shake of his head. "It isn't important. It's lovely, Giselle, it really is. But not half so lovely as you."

All her cares were driven away and she invited him to join the revelry. They danced together for what seemed like hours; until all of her friends were becoming jealous that quiet little Giselle had found such a charming love of her own. For a moment, she was so overcome with delight that she became lightheaded. Loys took her by the hand and led her to a bench to rest, but the girl assured him that she was all right and wanted to resume their dance.

In that moment Giselle felt as content as she expected she ever would. She had been favored by royalty, admired by friends and now adored by her very own true love. She closed her eyes as Loys twirled her about the square. There was no shadow of dread upon her heart except the fear that this was all a beautiful dream that she would awaken from to find that she was still just poor, frail Giselle. But it was no dream and knowing that was perhaps the most blissful feeling in the world. She was awake and this was truly her life.

Then she opened her eyes and the dream was over. Her view was obscured by a dark object; a long and slender form draped in red velvet. She looked about and saw Hilarion holding it up, his body standing between she and Loys.

"I did not wish to do this," the stable boy said with a grave expression. "but I can't bear to allow this charlatan to take further advantage of you." With that, he revealed a brilliant, gem-studded sword and held the lush velvet cloak in the other hand.

"But I... I don't understand," Giselle stammered, looking from one object to the other. "What does this mean?"

"I found this sword and cloak in Loys' house; unusually lavish possessions for a peasant."

"I can explain, Giselle," Loys blurted out, attempting in vain to step around Hilarion.

"You needn't explain anything," the girl responded confidently. "After all, I am poor and yet I have this opulent necklace! The sword and cloak must have been a gift." She did not look up as she spoke for she was afraid the tears surfacing in her eyes would rob her argument of its weight.

"Yes," Loys concurred. "They were given to me by Bathilda as well, for my friend and I met her on the road while we were traveling."

"Nonsense," Hilarion spat angrily. "These were in your house long before your so-called journey to unknown parts."

"Then you are a thief!" Loys returned.

“If he says they are gifts,” Giselle continued, still looking away. “then they are gifts.”

Hilarion looked all around at the assemblage, searching for some support, but he found none. “Very well,” he said grimacing. He threw the incriminating objects to the ground and strode over to the inn where Bathilda’s party was lodged. Hanging on a peg beside the door was the party’s hunting horn and Hilarion, with a mixed look of triumph and terror, blew upon the horn. Its deep and melodious call wafted through the air of the village and it was not long before the door of the inn swung open and Princess Bathilda emerged, followed closely by her father and their countrymen.

“What is going on?” Bathilda inquired, turning her gaze upon Hilarion.

The stable boy was dismal as he pointed toward Giselle and Loys and said, “I believe your betrothed wishes a word with you.”

She was quite confused by this cryptic answer until she realized who was standing in the square beside the innkeeper’s daughter. “Albrecht?” Her face pale and contorted, Bathilda moved toward them with uneasy steps. “What are you doing here?” She looked him up and down. “And why are you dressed like this?” Then she looked at Giselle and she realized that she was a fool, and not the only one. She turned away from him. “I should have known I couldn’t change you.”

“Bathilda,” he said, reaching out to her. “Please. Listen to me.”

“Loys,” Giselle squeaked, the tears coming anew. “What is she talking about?” He said nothing but turned his pathetic eyes upon her as if he wanted to speak but could not find the words.

“His name is not Loys!” Hilarion shouted. “His name is Albrecht and he is prince of Silesia.” A wave of murmurs ran through the crowd, as the prince had a certain reputation attached to him. “I warned you not to trust him, Giselle,” Hilarion said, his tone becoming sad, and he moved to put his arms around her. However, she was struck with such terror that she would not allow him near her.

She turned toward Albrecht and, trembling, awaited some vindicating speech to fall from his tender lips. But all that he said was, “Bathilda and I are to be married.” The young girl’s eyebrows shot upward as if she had just felt a stinging pain in her gut. “In one week,” he added.

Giselle staggered over to him and placed her slender hands upon his arms. “Tell me you are not going through with it,” she said, suddenly adopting a tense smile. “Tell me you love me and you are not going to marry her.” One by one, all of her dreams were dying upon the vine but she knew that all could be well if only the right words would meet her ears now. Everything depended upon it.

“I’m sorry, Giselle,” Albrecht muttered. “I must marry her. I thought I would only come here to entertain my whims for a while before my wedding. I never expected to meet someone like you.” Her face twisted as he spoke. “Believe me when I say that you are sorely dear to my heart for it is aching for you now. But I don’t think our love can ever be. Not now.” He shut his eyes for the words were causing him pain as well.

Giselle turned away and felt her head going light again. She heard her mother’s voice calling to her and saw Berta’s hazy image coming toward her. But the world was

spinning and her body was going numb all over. Then she felt it; deep inside her chest; a searing pain. She smiled and even laughed a little as the tears streamed down her face for, as terrified as she was, she now knew what it was to die of a broken heart. Another short moment and she was prostrate upon the ground.

Albrecht ran to her, the color bled out of his face, and he tried to put his arms around her. Berta, however, cuddled her daughter's body and warned him shrilly to get back. She called desperately to her beloved child but the girl made no answer for she was dead. The shock and strain had weighed too heavily upon Giselle's brittle heart and all in the village fell to lamentation, though none wept more grievously than the two men who had vied for the girl's affection.

"This is your fault," Albrecht bellowed, throwing an accusing finger at Hilarion. "It was the shock that killed her!"

"It was your two-faced betrayal that killed her," Hilarion returned savagely. "You never deserved her and you know it! She may not have loved me but at least I was true to her! Everything you told her was a lie!"

"No! That isn't true!" Albrecht threw his head in his hands as he realized two things for certain. First, that he *did* love Giselle, more than he thought he could ever love anyone. In another day or so, he may very well have broken his engagement to Bathilda and left his royal life altogether, just for Giselle. But fear and guilt over his dishonest past led him to believe that going through with the marriage was perhaps the best thing for him after all.

He was sorely mistaken, which led to his second great revelation; that he, and he alone, killed the woman he loved. Overcome with grief, Albrecht fled the village and the scornful eyes of his distraught fiancé and the wailing townspeople. But no matter how far he ran, he could not escape the image of his beloved's perfect face, now cold and lifeless. And Berta could not be prided from her ill-fated daughter, even as the hours passed. Giselle was the one thing the woman had left, and now she was gone and the world around them had grown dark indeed.

Dusk was settling over the sky and the air was chilled when Hilarion trudged toward Giselle's grave; a bundle of wildflowers clutched in his hand. The girl had not been buried in the graveyard but, rather, in a clearing not far from the edge of the woods. It was long considered a hallowed place and the area was dotted with the stone markers of others the village considered deserving of special treatment. Giselle was not particularly important in the usual sense of the word but everyone adored her and it was universally believed that she had been taken from the world far too soon.

Her stone was large and in the shape of a cross with her name etched along the crossbar and the year of her birth upon the base. It was decided that the year of her death would not be carved on the marker for she scarcely lived long enough for it to matter. Preserving that tragic fact in stone would only keep the sorrow alive forever and, without it, what would prevent generations to come from seeing it and imagining that Giselle had lived a long and fulfilling life? Sometimes forgetting the past is the only way to face the future.

Hilarion could not allow himself to forget, even if he had wanted to. Every Saturday he continued to bring flowers and place them upon her grave, and always his head swirled with blissful fantasies of what could have been; what better fates could have been in store for them both had she just listened to him from the beginning. But he did not blame her. He never blamed her. He reserved that for Albrecht alone.

His tears stained the petals of his fragrant offerings as he laid them down upon the darkening ground. The light in the sky was fading fast and a dense fog was rolling in between the trees. He had many questions and no one to answer them.

“Why did she die?” Hilarion’s melancholy voice muttered to himself in the darkness. “Why did you lead me to that sword?”

“Don’t cry,” the angel soothed, caressing Hilarion’s shoulder with her stark white hand. Her black-feathered wings had nearly blotted out what little light was left to him and, soon, the imprint of Giselle’s name and the grainy surface of her headstone were swallowed up by the shadows. “Some things are just meant to be no matter how they may hurt.”

“I thought it was because Giselle and I were meant to be in love. She wasn’t supposed to die. So why did you lead me there?”

The angel’s black lips curled into a smile and she whispered, “She was never meant to be yours. She was meant to be mine.”

Hilarion felt her black nails against his collar and he turned with a start. He didn’t know why but he felt, just for a moment, that he was not alone; that there was someone else there with him. He peered all about the glade but found nothing but the silent graves and the cold mist to keep him company. He shivered as an eerie feeling touched his heart and rose to his feet, thinking only about leaving that sad place behind. Suddenly there was nothing peaceful about the area around Giselle’s grave. There was only anger there and it terrified him.

Overhead there was the low rumble of a rolling thunderbolt and the skies flashed with power. Hilarion dreaded another storm for, in the days following his beloved Giselle’s death, the rains came without mercy. The harvest that season had been ruined and much of the prosperity of his little village had become a memory. He felt the droplets against his hands and face but, before he could flee the scene for shelter, a ghastly wail hovered upon the wind and he became transfixed where he stood.

He had quickly become aware of a strange light emanating from the heart of the fog-laden woods, glowing bright but not warmly. It was a light that chilled him to the core and it was fast approaching the glade. As it came nearer it drew itself up into the delicate shape of a woman in white raiment, with black hair and black wings. Her skin and dress were as pale as a winter snowfall but her eyes were dark as the fathomless depths of midnight, and they were like an abyss that Hilarion feared falling into.

As she stepped before him, her wings fluttering softly, he knew her to be the angel who had appeared to him those many months ago. However, he now saw nothing gentle or lovely about her. She was hard and distant now and he perceived in her a dire cruelty which had somehow surfaced in her otherwise beautiful features. He knew now that she was no angel but a wraith, a spirit from beyond the grave, and he was stricken with fear.

Hilarion dropped to his knees before the apparition and, clasping his hands in supplication, cried, "Please have mercy upon me! If you are the angel who guided me to the sword please tell me why you did so! Why did innocent Giselle have to die?"

"It was better that she knew the truth about her precious prince," the ghost answered with icy indifference.

"But it proved the death of her and I am to blame!"

She threw a piercing glance over him and said, "Of course you are." Then she stepped over to Giselle's headstone, hardly even touching the misty ground, and began dancing upon her grave. "But now the time has come to call our sister back to us." She raised her white arms above her head and, in moments, the glade became filled with darting lights and ominous moaning. They flitted in between the trees and morphed into the shapes of girls who, like their mistress, had white dresses and feathery black wings. The dark angel standing upon Giselle's grave called the girls to her side for she was Myrtha, fearsome Queen of the Villis.

The Villis were a race of vengeful spirits; the ghosts of young women betrayed by their lovers. Once a year they would scour the world looking for the hopeless souls of devastated girls to induct into their dreadful sorority. Their faces were full of a sad beauty but their eyes and lips were dark, like Myrtha's, showing the mark of the grave. But it was confounding to think that such lovely creatures could have been so callously mistreated in their lifetimes by men who were surely fools.

The Villis danced gracefully within the glade, more of them appearing by the moment, and soon the place was filled with the forms of their luminous dresses as they swayed in the fog. They were so magnificent that Hilarion felt the uncontrollable urge to dance with them and the sheer terror he felt at being in their presence could not halt his steps for he was in a hypnotic trance. He did not know how long their revelry lasted because, enthralled as he was by their spectral power, his senses were overcome.

Meanwhile, Myrtha stood above the lonely grave flanked by her two dearest disciples, Dido and Medea, calling to Giselle's heartbroken spirit. "Come, my darling one," the Villi Queen beckoned sweetly. "Come and join your sisters in the dance." But the phantom congregation ceased its frolicking as a hunting horn was sounded in the distance. "Men," Myrtha spat with contempt, and the Villis fled, bemoaning, into the shadows of the wood. The Queen's eyes grew large and she gripped Hilarion by the shoulders, saying, "The prince approaches, my stable boy; your sworn enemy. Kill him! Kill him and avenge the one you loved!"

Hilarion was too overtaken with fear and grief to even think of revenge, and he had no intentions of killing anyone at all. But his conscience had been mutilated by Myrtha's atrocious hatred for the living and, upon hearing the horn again, drew his dagger. Myrtha's virulent laughter mocked him and she said, "You cannot kill a prince with a knife, boy." With those words, he found that a sword with a black hilt had inexplicably appeared in his grip, and the Queen of the Villis had vanished. The bitter stable boy, with blade in hand, crept into the darkness and concealed himself behind an old oak as the sound of turgid hoof beats approached.

Albrecht had not been in these parts since Giselle's death for he feared to return there. But at last his wretched heartache had brought him back to this place of misery for he had much to say to his beloved. Marist had invited him on a hunt to bolster his spirits for much that he had known was now changed for the worse. Princess Bathilda had broken off their engagement and the weight of this calamity wore heavy upon Albrecht's father, whose health was already precarious. Now the prince was alone with his melancholy and he had no way of making amends for his sins. So, while his friends maintained their hunting party, Albrecht trudged solitarily in search of Giselle's resting place, hoping to find some solace in facing the source of his great pain.

It was past midnight when he came upon the quiet glade, mist swirling around his horse's legs with each step. The other stones could barely be seen through the thick fog but Giselle's grave marker rose high above the sea of vapor and Albrecht alighted from his mount and fell before the stone cross. He did not speak and kept his head down, Hilarion noted from the shadows. He could sneak up behind and slay his enemy easily. But the stable boy recovered his composure and would not allow himself to achieve vengeance in so cowardly a manner.

He therefore announced himself and stepped into the moonlight, rousing the prince from his silent prayers, and leveled the tip of his blade at the man. "I did not expect you ever to return to this place you two-faced worm!"

Albrecht remained still and held his hands up passively, replying, "I am a worm, it is true, but I came only say my peace to Giselle."

"She will have no peace while you live," was Hilarion's only response, and he dove forward, cleaving the bitter air. Albrecht stepped backward and drew his own sword, countering his attacker's blade and soon the once peaceful clearing had erupted with the clashing of steel. Hilarion's strokes were guided by rage and by the knowledge that he had the righteous power of the Villis behind him, but Albrecht was far more skilled in the art of swordplay and handily disarmed his furious opponent. His blade lost in the murk and mist, Hilarion fled, fuming, into the night.

Now Albrecht was alone once again and he fell to lamentation over Giselle's grave. He wept as a seemingly endless string of regrets and pleadings poured from his tear-stained lips. Finally, when no more words could be spoken and no more tears could be shed, he rested the back of his head against the frostbitten earth and closed his eyes in sleep.

Delicate hands rose up from the noiseless depths of the ground now; slender fingers reaching toward the black expanse of sky and the coldly burning moon. Like the tail of a great black bird her hair flowed in dark torrents about her milky shoulders and was caught upon the arms of her ebony wings. The moonlight stung her little eyes for she had seen nothing but the wide and lifeless void for so long. How long, she did not know.

"I thought someone was calling me," she said, barely above a whisper for the sound, too, was new to her. She peered around the misty glade and her eyes fell upon the figure slumbering nearby. She recognized the form, even through the shadow and fog, but the details were lost to her. She wasn't quite certain she even remembered who she,

herself, was. But when she turned and read the name on the stone behind her, she began to sob quietly for the memories were returning, little by little.

The sound of whimpering roused Albrecht and he opened his eyes now only to find that he was no longer alone. A radiant young woman stood near to him, crying, with her face hidden beneath an inky wall of hair. She was like an angel but the feathers of her wings were stained black and her stark gown was shredded at the edges.

“Why do you weep?” He asked her, rising from the ground and placing a tender hand upon her arm.

“I weep because I am lost to the world. My home is the grave and I have been taken from it.” She turned toward him and instantly their eyes locked. She knew him now but, more remarkably, he knew her. Remarkably, for her eyes were not as they once were, nor her lips nor hair nor the supple complexion of her cheeks. Everything in that gentle face death had turned to black and white and, yet, he knew her for her sight stirred his heart to warmth.

“Giselle! My most precious one!” He placed a hand against the side of her face and his eyes welled up anew. “What have I done to you?”

“Do not be too hard on yourself, Albrecht, for I was not destined for a long life.”

“But I destroyed you, whom I loved so much, all because I was a coward and a fool.”

She placed her head upon his chest and held him as tightly as her ghostly arms would allow. There was much that she did not understand but only two things mattered at that moment; he had returned to her and she had returned to him. “Albrecht,” she said without looking at him. “No matter what happened in the past or what may happen in the days to come you must know that I love you. So dearly that, should I have survived, I do not think my heart would have been strong enough to contain my love anyway.”

“Do not speak that way, Giselle. Nothing you say can ever absolve my sins.”

She looked up at him now and her spirit was greatly grieved. “Then tell me what *will* do so, for I would do anything to make you understand that I do not blame you nor anyone for what happened.” She looked away again and took in the sight of the dreary forest. “We can, neither of us, escape our fate.” They remained enveloped in each other’s arms, afraid to let go, until the moon slid over the treetops and nearly out of sight. The night was growing old and, enthralled as they were by each other, they hardly noticed.

“Why did you not slay him as I commanded?” Myrtha’s dark eyes glowered upon Hilarion’s kneeling form, brimming with ire. He stared down at the ground as the Villi Queen reprimanded him, never speaking. “Do you not hate this prince?” she spat ruthlessly. “This swindler of hearts who stole your beautiful Giselle and crushed her before your eyes?”

“Yes,” Hilarion finally blurted out. “I do hate him. Yet,” he reluctantly brought his eyes to meet hers. “Yet, I could not kill him. I wasn’t certain I even wanted to anymore.” His gaze sunk slowly downward and it seemed his fierce spirit had been quenched at last.

Myrtha was silent, gazing down at him, and her expression was difficult to gauge even by the other Villis gathered round. It seemed, at once, to pity the poor man’s misery

but also to despise his rank cowardice. One thing it did not do, without a doubt, was respect the merciful turn in his brokenhearted soul. Rather, the unforgiving queen of wraiths came to abhor this change in Hilarion's mettle, for she could feel sympathy for no living thing. But she would not allow her anger to show.

"Dear Hilarion," she said kindly, raising him up from the ground. "Do not be sad for Giselle, for she is with her sisters now, where she belongs. And do not trouble yourself with her lover prince for I shall deal with him myself." As she said this, his anxious mind began to clear and his humor was made light and gay. "Dance, Hilarion, and be glad for all will be well soon enough."

The beautiful Villis gathered around the stable boy and incited him to step happily about with them; their brilliant gowns spinning so rapidly they seemed to blend together in a single white light. Surrounded by the lovely creatures, he had become lost in a blissful dream, a dream from which he hoped never to awaken. For, in this delightful fantasy, he was at last at peace. His love for Giselle was no longer dependant upon her returning that love and he bore Albrecht no ill will for loving her as well. He even forgave the prince for his thoughtless deceptions for he knew that Albrecht had already suffered dearly for his mistake.

So serene was Hilarion's spirit that he did not realize what had happened until it was too late. He was not dancing for joy at all. Myrtha and her vengeful daughters had hexed him with the curse of St. Vitus and he had fallen victim to their evil magic. He gaped in horror once he finally discerned the change that had occurred in the once gentle Villis around him. Their revolutions had reached a fever pitch and they were possessed by a sudden mania. Their charming faces were twisted now in malevolent glee and they seized Hilarion by the arms and legs, hoisting him into the air. His shouting for help could not move the spectral maidens to pity but seemed only to amuse them, for they drowned his cries with their mocking laughter.

They dragged him, screaming, through the forest and those who did not carry the man gathered closely round and excitedly gave chase. Finally their journey came to an end as the wood's edge came into view. Beside the forest was a river, deep within a ravine, and the Villis now bore Hilarion to this high place. With a shriek of malefic joy they cast him full over the edge of the cliff and into the ravine, to disappear into the darkness. They laughed with girlish delight until their queen appeared amongst them.

Myrtha was quietly pleased that Hilarion had finally been punished but her demeanor was grave as she looked around at her phantom sisterhood. "Where is our new sister, Giselle?" Then her calmness was broken for she realized that her initiate had gone astray. "Dido! Medea! All of you! Go and find her!" Like a shot, the Villis scattered into the woods and hunted the forest for their wayward sister and her mortal lover.

Giselle felt a twinge of dread in her soul and pulled herself away from Albrecht; a shadow of terror over her face. "You must go now," she warned. "The Villis will be searching for you and will surely destroy you if they find us!" The prince looked around for his steed but the beast had been frightened off long ago. Giselle grasped his arm and led him through the wooded paths while the cruel Villis scoured every rock and tree for

them. “You should not have come, Albrecht. I fear you shan’t be safe until you reach the village.”

They emerged from the dense and darkened forest and the graveyard came within sight. The road was just ahead and Giselle felt her prince was beyond the Villis’ reach at last. But they halted as the dreadful queen appeared, filled with evil fury. She spread her terrible wings and pointed a clawed finger at Albrecht; her piercing gaze dragging him to the ground in agony. Giselle placed herself between the prince and the Villi queen as her ghostly sisters gathered eagerly around.

“Surely you are not defying your queen!” Myrtha raged. “Surely you are not protecting this fiend of a man who betrayed your love and spurned your heart!” But Giselle would not remove herself from the prince’s side. For all his flaws she loved him and she would not allow the wicked Villis to injure him, though they closed menacingly around the hopeless pair. She would rather be destroyed along with him than see any harm come to him. The Villis and their queen scornfully approached and prepared to exercise their unholy power when a sound rose up in the village beyond, filling even these wrathful ghosts with fear.

The cock’s crow sounded in the distance and Myrtha shuddered with horror. The bells in the church tower were tolling and the horizon was set aflame with the morning sun. It filled the Villis’ dark eyes with blessed light and it stung them fiercely so that they were forced to hide themselves from it. As the sun rolled slowly over the hills and the night began to wane the Villis shrank back into the darkness of the forest, beckoning for their sister to join them. But Giselle would not move from Albrecht’s side.

Myrtha stared contemptuously at them and moved forward to strike them both into endless oblivion but the bells rang out again, the rooster crowed once more and the sunlight was swiftly filling all she saw with golden purity. She could stand it no longer and the great and terrifying Queen of the Villis cringed and vanished into the shadows beneath the earth, leaving Giselle and Albrecht alone in the swelling daylight.

With the night of the Villis at last over Giselle felt the foul power of Myrtha lifting from her. Albrecht had once promised to protect her from all the dangers in the world but, in the end, it was his fragile Giselle who had saved *him* from the ghastly clutches of death. He rose to his feet and beheld his savior. The marks of the grave had steadily vanished from her face and her dark eyes became as bright as they once had been. The black bled, like ink, from her hair until it regained its healthy chestnut color and the feathers of her dark wings became a pure and brilliant white.

All care and fatigue had been lifted from her face and it now bore a tranquil optimism that had never been there before, even while she lived, for she had shed every fear or sorrow that could afflict a person. She had transcended all of that now and she was free. She smiled warmly and placed her soft hand against the side of Albrecht’s face.

“Your love has saved me and the Villi’s hold over my soul has been broken. Thanks to you, my spirit is at peace.”

“If you are truly free,” the prince said, taking her hands into his own. “then come away with me and we shall be together forever.”

“Indeed we shall,” she replied, shedding a tear. “but not today. Mine is not the world of the living and yours is not the land of the dead.” Her tears flowed freely now, not for herself, but for him. For, to Giselle who would dwell in Heaven, the passing of the years would be as swift as the blink of an eye. She wept for Albrecht for his life would be long and lonely while she waited for him. She kissed him tenderly and he moved to embrace her, wishing only to hold onto her forever. But all he grasped was a fleeting beam of light and, in moments, she was gone and he was once again alone.

As the sun rose fully, Albrecht spied his horse trotting slowly from the road. The beast’s fright had passed and he came now to aid his master. The prince climbed into the saddle, took a sad final look at the place, as if hoping to glimpse his angel again, and rode cheerlessly away. Giselle had been right. Albrecht did, indeed, live a long life. He never married nor did he ever love again. He lived always with only one name in his heart and had no room there for any other.

Many strange stories went around about the sad prince who had everything in the world but happiness, until he had become bent and gray. Now he could not enjoy his wealth, he could not see or hear; he could barely even move or speak, the weight of the years was so heavy upon him. But now he smiled. Now he was content. And one morning he settled into his armchair before the roaring hearth of his palace and he closed his eyes on the world of the living forever.

That day he was at long last reunited with his darling Giselle and they danced amongst the clouds. Their hearts had become as fire and wind and burned together as a single light in the vast sky. Never again would they be parted, though the stars wheeled overhead and the earth tumbled beneath their feet, for they had conquered all and were content to dwell forever in the place where all time ends, all sins fade and all darkness pales; forever in each other’s arms.

THE END