

## THE THREE SWANS.

[From the German.]

**A**MONG the mountains near Wimpfen on the Neckar is a little lake, of which this story is told:

A boy sat alone on the shore of the lake playing with flowers. He had often looked out upon the water and wished for a boat that he might float about here and there over the smooth surface, but he had only the plank which lay beside him that would serve to float him. Again he looked out on the lake, and see! there were three white swans upon its bosom. With proud mein they glided about on the water and finally came toward him. The boy was delighted with their appearance and quickly hunted some crumbs from his pockets with which he fed them. The swans seemed so tame, looked at him so friendly and came so close to the shore that he thought they must want to know him. But when he put out his hand to catch them they sped away, just out of his reach. The tamer they appeared and the oftener he failed to catch them, the more he wished to bestride one of them and flit about over the water on its back.

Finally he seized the plank beside him, pushed it into the water and placed himself upon it. It bore him. With a loud hurrah! he pushed away from the shore, and using his hands to propel him carried himself forward. The swans were always in front of him, but never could he touch them. Now they were in the middle of the lake. A feeling of anxiety and weakness came over the boy, and he was forced to let his tired arms sink by his sides and rest. Wherever he could see was an expanse of water, and he trembled with fear as to how he should ever again reach the shore. The swans gathered about him as though to comfort him. The boy forgot his danger, reached suddenly with his hand toward the prettiest swan, but ah! the uncertain plank turned, and he sunk into the blue depth.

When he awoke from unconsciousness he found himself upon a couch in an elegant palace, and before him stood three wonderfully beautiful maidens.

"How came you here?" asked one of them, taking his hand with a friendly air.

"I know not myself," answered the boy, "how it happened, but I wanted to catch three white swans on a lake, and fell into the water."

"Will you remain with us?" the maiden continued. "You will be welcome; but you must know that if you pass three days here you can never again return to your home, for you will not be able to breathe its air, and must die."

The kind friendliness of the sisters filled the boy with confidence. His young heart knew no harm, and he rose from the couch and said gladly: "Yes, I will remain with you."

The sisters led him through their fairy palace; they showed him its magnificence and splendor, each thing richer than the last, and the bewildered boy gazed upon the beauty all about him with unsated eyes. Everything glittered and sparkled. There were pearls like walnuts, diamonds large as eggs. Gold lay about in long bars;

every wall was covered with silver and all the floors were laid with silver tiles. In the gardens were fruits more inviting than he had ever seen—apples like a child's head; plums the size of ostrich eggs; cherries as large as billiard balls; grapes like those brought to Joshua; and other fruits just as rich, and all of the most beautiful colors. The boy had often read of paradise. "This," cried he, "is it, indeed. Here I am well satisfied."

Weeks and months passed, but he took no note of time; for new objects constantly appeared to draw his attention and claim his thoughts; and as he lay beneath the trees and ate of the beautiful fruit he never once thought of his home.

Finally, however, a year may have passed, when suddenly there came upon him an irresistible longing for his little village. Nothing please! him—he enjoyed nothing any more. The knowledge that he could never leave the fairy palace was an inward sorrow, and when the bushes of the garden hid him he cried bitterly. When the sisters were by him he tried to appear pleasant; but they saw plainly written in his face the traces of the grief that was in his heart—the red eyes, the pale cheeks, these he could not hide—and they soon divined the cause of his trouble. They often asked him confidently what ailed him, but he always evaded the true cause and tried to elude them with the excuse of sickness.

One evening as the sun went down he laid himself upon the soft, green grass by the side of a little stream that ran laughingly on. All nature about him was so charming, so luxuriant, so glorious and beautiful. Everything invited to happiness and enjoyment. Sweet perfumes filled and refreshed the air. The birds sang their evening songs, while in the meadows before him was a happy medley of merry, laughing workers. It brought before him the picture of his home, his beloved village, his little playmates, his mother mourning for her son. The boy groaned aloud and wept bitterly. The happiness and beauty about him served only to make his own condition more wretched, and to bring upon him by comparison an overflowing sense of his own unhappiness. Covering his face with his hands he buried it in the high grass; and the hot tears dampened the earth under him as he moaned and wept in anguish and despair. As he lay thus he heard his name spoken. Suddenly starting up, he saw before him a woman bent with age, withered and hideous. Her face was brown and covered with deep furrows, her eyes dim, and the wasted form leaned heavily on a thick staff for support. Never before had the boy seen so horrible a creature. A cold chill crept over him. He attempted to cry for help, he tried to run away, but he could do neither.

"What do you want?" he finally asked, in a trembling voice.

The object of horror grinned.

"If you will come with me, dear child, I will return you to your home."

"Leave me, monster!" cried the boy, full of anger. "Leave me! Never will I part from my benefactresses