

In those days when the Goddess was worshipped across the face of all the earth, there was a maid who lived alone in a hut of sprouting willows in the deep woods. And there she tended the wild beasts and healed their wounds with her herbal potions and gentle care. She especially loved those animals that had lost their mothers, and said that the Goddess had made her their protector. All the beasts and birds of the wood were without fear in her company, and there were those who claimed to have heard her talk and sing to the beasts in a strange language unlike any of the tongues of earth. Her gay and carefree spirit won her many friends from the nearby city, who often brought her gifts and stayed to eat with her and hear her singing. For her voice was a rare wonder in those days, sweet and clear.

And one day towards the middle of summer, several of these friends were gathered at the Wood-Maiden's home. And they called on her to sing their favourite song, which told of her childhood. And so she sang of her early life in the city and of her mother's death which had stricken her dumb and filled her with terror so that she ran blindly into the woods. She sang of her ceaseless weeping and of her prayers to our Lady, and of how the Goddess had led her to a young fawn whimpering beside its mother's corpse, so that she forgot her own sorrow in comforting and caring for the little one. And finally she told how our Lady had restored her voice and increased its beauty so that never a day passed when she failed to raise it in songs of praise and thanks to Her.

And after this her friends spoke of fears of famine in the city. The uninhabited grassland and forest further inland had suffered badly from drought so that the birds had flown toward the city to look for food. Usually the people did not mind the birds taking some of the grain, but this time they feared that the fields would be stripped. "And what is being planned?" asked the Wood-Maiden. But her friends were silent, and she guessed that there were some urging that the birds should be destroyed.

This so worried the Wood-Maiden that she went into the city to find out if it was true that they would kill our Lady's creatures. And she found the people so stricken with fear that they saw no other course. So she prayed to the Goddess for guidance. Then she went into the fields, black with birds, and began to sing in a high and piercing tone so that the birds flocked to her, and the people covered their ears. For the space of three hours the maid sang, and then the birds rose in a flock and flew towards the mountains. The Wood-Maiden told the people that the birds were going to a safe place. But she would say no more, and ran away to the woods as soon as she could, for she found the thanks of the people embarrassing.

About a year after this, some of the maiden's friends visited her in great distress. Some ambassadors had come from another city, famed for its philosophers, who had laughed at the people's devotions to the Goddess. For, they said, She did not care for earthly creatures who were beneath Her contempt. And they said that She had a consort and a son whom She loved greatly, but She did not love the people, nor consider them Her children. And the maid's friends told her that the people believed this and had abandoned all their devotion. The Wood-Maiden thought it at first mere foolishness, but the more she thought about it, the more she thought it wrong and wicked.

"But it is nonsense!" she cried, "for She created us and is our Mother, and no mother would neglect any of her children. We have only to look at this beautiful world to know it is a gift from Her. And She loves us all equally, as a perfect mother will not favour any of her children. Even we know that it is wrong, although we sometimes do it."

And the maid went once more into the city and said these things. But the people would not hear her arguments, thinking the philosophers must know better than a simple maid from the woods. And she was perplexed. And as she was leaving, she saw a child throwing stones at a dog that he had tethered to a tree. She took hold of the child and shook him, saying: "How can you do that to one of our Lady's creatures?" But he said: "If She doesn't care about us because we're lower than Her, why should we care about animals?" And he ran away. The Wood-Maiden wept, and took refuge in the temple, which was now quite cold and empty, praying for the Goddess' aid.

She rose next morning very early with joy in her heart, for the Goddess had spoken to her in a dream. She sang softly and thrillingly until the city was filled with her singing. Some of the elder people stirred restlessly, but only the children woke, and were compelled to run to her. She told them that she would take them to a beautiful garden and bade the older children fetch the babies.

When the people awoke to find their children missing, they were frantic with worry. And it was not until the next day that the Wood-Maiden returned to the city. They begged her to tell them where their children were, but she refused, saying only that they were safe and happy. She told them they were not fit to raise children if they could tell them nonsense that made them cruel and wicked. After much persuasion she seemed to relent, and said she would return some of the children, but only those who were favourites and worthy of love. But the people protested, saying they loved all their children and wanted them all back, even those who were naughty and rebellious. And the Wood-Maiden laughed and said: "And can you not see that your Mother in Heaven loves you all? And that She has not picked out two of Her creatures to be with while she neglects the others? Believe that and I will return your children." And the people thought and saw that the maid was right after all, and this was not only because they missed their children but rather because their own hearts had been saddened to think the Goddess did not love them; and they now realised that it was a foolish notion.

So the Wood-Maiden brought back the children, who were happy and excited and talked of the beautiful country they had visited. And some thought the Wood-Maiden must have sent the birds there because there had been so many.

And about this time the ambassadors came again and said the the philosophers had changed their minds and discovered why the Goddess loves us. But the people only laughed at them. And they never listened to philosophers again, but only to their own hearts.

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