

Scarlett: A Fairy Tale

by [James Como](#) (February 2020)



Boreas, John William Waterhouse, 1903

At dawn, Scarlett—who thought she was eleven years old but might have been ten—stepped out of the forest path to walk the hundred steps on the dirt road that led to the village. She had been there many times before, but still no one recognized her. They did not recognize her because no one paid attention to her, even though she was tall for her age, with long shiny hair, and a pretty face with cherry cheeks, and wide bright hazel eyes.

She came to the village every week, did some chores in exchange for porridge, cheese, bread, and milk, and walked around speaking to almost everyone. Then she would sleep in the meadow with the sheep and at dawn walk the path back into the forest. None of the villagers knew whence she came, or wondered where she went, or who she was, or even cared.

But they did care about the forest, or at least one part of it. About an hour's walk along the path, then off to the right, hidden by thick, twisted roots and full foliage of differing shades of green, yellow and even red, was a stone cottage with a thatched roof. It had one room, with a fireplace, a table, a chair, and a narrow bed. A very old lady—some called her a crone, which is rude—lived there. She was bent over and limped along painfully.

She was ugly, they said—which is also very, *very* rude—but she was also wise, so people from the village would visit to ask her questions about their decisions, and their future, and even about the weather, which was important for the raising of their crops and livestock. The walk to the cottage and back again was difficult and tiring, so in a given fortnight (which by the way is two weeks) no more than two or three villagers made the trip.

They would bring some food for the old woman, and always someone would fill her water tank from the nearby lake. So the arrangement was good for everyone, especially since her

advice and predictions worked out so well.

Now, you might ask, Why? Why did an old, old lady live her life this way, a life devoted, really, to the village and to the well-being of the villagers? And in asking that question you must know that she paid a price for her generosity. For example, she never married, had no children of her own, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, all of whom can bring great joy to old people.

Why then? Simple, really. She loved the village, where she had been born two hundred years earlier. She loved the people, because she knew and cared for their great-great-grand parents. But above that—above her loyalty and familiarity with the place, and its streets, and its crops and sheep, and its ancestors—she knew the secret: life is love.

Thus were the days in the village and in the forest. Scarlett would visit and leave, villagers would visit and speak with the old lady, and life would improve because of her guidance.

Now, you might think that *somebody* would have thought—as you probably already have thought—of a connection between Scarlett and the old woman, but these villagers were too wrapped up in their own lives to pay attention to somebody not from their village, and, to be fair, those lives weren't easy. What I can say is that the old lady, though definitely *not* a witch, *had* cast a mild spell over the villagers that sort of clouded their minds whenever Scarlett was nearby.

But if they had *paid attention*, they might have guessed at a connection. No, Scarlett was not the old lady's distant relative, or a foster child whom the old lady had taken in, or a friend from some distant cottage deeper in the forest. Scarlett and the old woman were one in the same person.

You see, the old lady (whose name was Naomi, by

the way) would turn herself *into* Scarlett. Then she would go to town for a very simple reason, namely, to learn about what the villagers liked and wanted, what they were planning, who among them was liked or not, who were the really good people, deep in their hearts (for example, they were the ones who gave Scarlett porridge with cinnamon), which ones were nice but sneaky, which ones grumpy but kind.

That way, when villagers visited the old lady, who, remember, was so old that lots and lots of wisdom had come her way, she could give the advice that made most sense, not the advice that people might want to hear or that would help *her*. Never. Sometimes she even gave advice that the whole village could follow, like whether to plant more grass for more sheep or to sell some of the sheep.

Of course there is the question of how the old lady had come by her power. That story is a good one, but telling it here would take us away from *this* story, so for now you must simply believe in the old lady's ability to change and in Scarlett's ability to change back.

Now, this changing had been going on for well over one hundred years, so the old lady decided it was time for Scarlett to be a year older. She would be slightly taller, her cheeks a bit less pudgy, her face still pretty but just a little more grown up. And Scarlett would comb her hair on the way to the village. Her dress was now just at her calf instead of to the ground, which was fine, but it had lots of patches. Maybe later she would get a new one.

Eventually the older Scarlett traveled to the village. As usual she would cheerfully make conversation with this villager and that one and offer to do some chores. The routine went on as usual. No one much noticed her.

Well, almost no one. For the first time someone stopped her, a boy a few years older. He said he was visiting

the village from a small town several hills away where his family were bakers. At first he seemed nice enough, but then, when he tried to hold Scarlett's hand, she walked away.

That's when his true colors came out. He shouted nasty words, called her a worm, and actually raised his hand to slap her. You see, because he wasn't from the village the old lady's small spell had not taken hold on him. And the odd thing was this. When the new boy became nasty, the spell on the *villagers* began to weaken.

Some of them gathered around Scarlett. They looked angry, and as they came closer and closer poor Scarlett became frightened. And then—well, you probably know what Scarlett did then. She did what you might do. She ran. And to the villagers that meant she had something to hide. And that meant she was dangerous.

That's right. No one was actually *thinking*, for the villagers, too, were frightened now as well as angry, though if you had asked them *why*, well, not a single one of them would have had an answer. So they began to throw rocks at Scarlett, and she finally fell, unconscious.

Then they picked her up, carried her to the lake, and threw her in, where she drowned. These villagers, including the mayor and the parson, now under no spell except, maybe, the evil influence of the nasty boy, felt no guilt at all. Instead they felt relief.

But—how wrong they were to feel *that!* Within the month crops and livestock began to die for no practical reason. So, of course, a group of people went to see the old lady. They would do anything, but there was nothing to do, because—of course—she was gone, and they returned to the village, sad and frightened.

And *still* they saw no connection at all between Scarlett and the old lady, or between what they had done to

Scarlett and the death of their plants and animals. You know—and I don't like saying this—maybe they were just that dumb.

This went on for a while. The villagers began to get skinny from lack of food, and, of course, they became short-tempered, not only because of their desperation but because everything around them was without color and life and was ugly, and that made for bad moods all around.

One day everyone was just sitting or walking aimlessly. No one noticed that the bad boy who had started the nastiness was long gone. But everyone did notice when two strange, new girls appeared. And how could they not notice. These girls—one Scarlett's age, the other a bit older—were not only strangers but strangely, unaccountably, unreasonably *happy*.

Alice, the older girl, with a quite lovely face and long, curling blonde hair, simply walked along smiling at everyone. The villagers could only watch her. The younger girl, Claire, with short knotty hair and a plump, open face, was speaking to everyone as she walked down the main street, even though no one answered. They were too distracted by Alice and also too surprised.

You know the feeling? Everybody is in one droopy mood, then along comes someone singing? And you don't know quite what to do? And some people begin to smile, then to sing along? And others not only get droopier but also angry, because some people cannot *stand* to see happiness in others, right?

Well, that's what happened! The town became divided. And that's *exactly* when the nasty boy showed up. Out of nowhere. Right then—oh, I'm sure you know—even people who had begun to be happy began to get sad and angry.

And that would have gotten worse and worse—if

Claire had not jumped into the middle of the group and begun to spin around, slowly at first, but soon faster and faster, until there was a whirlwind, a tunnel of dusty, swirling air with Claire somewhere inside.

Of course, upon seeing that, everyone became quiet, even the boy. Slowly, the whirlwind began to move along the ground, and suddenly it jumped—it actually left the ground and pounced! —on the boy. Finally the whirlwind stopped, and there stood Claire, smiling. The boy was gone.

At that, Alice joined Claire, looked around at all the people, and said, “you must say sorry.” The mayor, pulling up his chin and puffing out his chest, said, “sorry? Sorry for what?” But a young man—hardly more than a boy himself, but a bit older than Alice—said, “for the murder we did. Of the strange girl. Who had done nothing but be cheerful and helpful and kind. The girl whose name we never knew—though I think I knew it once but now cannot remember—and whom we never invited into our homes, who slept with the sheep and left us happier than we had been.”

“But—” said the mayor. “No ‘buts’,” interrupted the pastor. “I will say a prayer of repentance. Say ‘amen’ when I am done.”

At that moment—that exact moment—a strong wind began to swirl. Dust whipped into the air, the sky darkened, and a torrential downpour began, so heavy that within seconds all were drenched. The villagers began to rush for shelter.

And the young man (his name was Henry, by the way) shouted, “stay! We must say this prayer, no matter the elements sent to confuse us.” And they stayed, amidst the pouring rain, the tearing wind, and the frightening darkness. And the pastor prayed. This is what he said.

“Dear Lord God, loving Creator, Master of the Universe, forgive us our sin of murder, we implore you.

We beg that you take our victim Scarlett to your bosom in paradise, for she was blameless, having been nothing but happy and kind. This we ask from the depths of our hearts and souls. Amen.”

And the villagers all repeated, “amen.”

At that, one old man shouted, “now we must take shelter!” So the villagers all ran indoors, where they stayed for three days of rain, wind, and darkness.

Finally, when the wind stopped and the sun shone, Henry decided to go to the lake, thinking he might catch a fish, even if only a small one. He couldn't be confident, because no one had caught a fish in weeks, but still he walked with his head up and a smile on his lips. “Why not?” he thought, “the sun is warm and a cool breeze blows.” That's the kind of a young man he was.

So, with the lake sparkling like one huge diamond, he clearly saw the marvel that was happening. There, stepping onto the bank, was none other than . . . Scarlett herself, soaking wet. But she walked right up to the young man anyway and said, “I've been waiting, Henry.”

And they hugged like long lost friends hug. Because that is exactly what they were: friends from long ago who had gotten lost. (But that is part of the *second* tale I've mentioned, the one about who the old lady is and how she acquired her powers.)

Eventually, after sunning themselves and Henry telling Scarlett all that had happened, they went off to the village. High above them a single bird circled and dipped and sang, keeping them company almost all the way to the village.

Of course, when they arrived everyone was surprised, to say the least. At first they could only stare, then they rushed to Scarlett –completely ignoring Henry, whom

they already knew—and hugged her and offered her food and shelter.

Scarlett thanked them all, as you know she would, told them all was forgiven but warned them to be careful in the future, adding, “no thank you. I prefer to sleep with the sheep in the field and, at the dawn, to return to the forest.” And that’s what she did.

A few days later someone said maybe two or three villagers should go into the forest to see if the old woman had returned. Now, that is typical, isn’t it? Where some people get the point right away, others take forever for understanding to land in their brains. They just don’t pay enough attention to people and to the things around them.

Three people (*not* including the Mayor or the Pastor) went to see the old lady, and there she was. They gave her food and filled her water tank, and she told them to gather their gold, to buy fertilizer from the neighboring villages, and to let eggs hatch instead of gathering them to sell.

She asked, “do you understand all I’ve told you?” And they promised they did, and they thanked her deeply. So that when they left the forest path and entered the road to the village, they could already see a bright difference. The field had a golden glow, and they could hear sheep bleating and cows mooing and hens clucking. Now Scarlett was watching.

And all at once they fell to their knees and prayed their gratitude.

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