Children of the Forest

–David B. Schock–

Once upon a time there was a couple—a wife and her husband—who tended the great forest. This was the work that was given them to do by the king of that land. He told them that if they would tend the forest for a quarter of a century he would give them a great reward, a reward beyond their imagining. And so they did that work. Every day they would leave their snug cottage in the middle of the great forest and go out to tend the trees. They would trim off limbs that were dead or damaged, clear out the overcrowded seedlings that—left untended—would choke out each other, and harvest the fruits and nuts in season. The most of these they delivered to the King's larder, but of their portion they were free to keep for their own use or to sell in the marketplace in the castle town. They did everything they could to make the trees grow as well as they could.

And the wife and her husband were very happy. In addition to imagining the reward beyond their imagining, they enjoyed the work and they loved and enjoyed each other. In fact, with all the joy of their lives there was one sadness and one sadness only: there were no children. The husband said it must have been the will of the Great God that they were not parents. The wife said she was not so sure. In fact, she said, she believed that children were coming, but not in the usual way. So every day she tended the extra bedrooms in the snug cottage, making sure that all was in readiness just in case some children came.

A few years rolled by in their seasons, and the husband and the wife worked all the while. In fact, they grew to cherish their work so much that they forgot entirely that the king had promised them a great gift if they should prove true to their work.

One early summer morning the wife went out to tend the apple trees that grew in a copse in the middle of a large meadow in the wood. The trees, when she first found them, grew only crabbed and vile-tasting apples, but her trimming and clearing away the undergrowth had given the trees small but very sweet and smooth apples. She was on her way to see how the young crop was setting.

David B. Schock is a filmmaker, musician, and writer. He earned his doctorate in creative writing and literary criticism under the tutelage of Dr. Russell Kirk. He and his wife, Kathy Neville, are adoptive parents of three children, now grown. He lives in Grand Haven, Michigan.

The copse of apple trees basked in the morning sun and the wife could see as she began to cross the meadow the bees and the birds active around and above the trees. In fact, so intent was her gaze on the trees that she was distracted from concentrating on her path, and she twisted her ankle on a rock that stuck half way out of the earth. She fell to her side and, stunned, sat there as her ankle began to throb; she had sprained it. She had suffered sprains before . . . cuts and bruises, too . . . and knew that even a bad sprain would discommode her only for a week or so. She could rest the ankle IF she could somehow get home.

There was not much danger in her situation. It's true there were wolves in the forest, but they rarely wanted anything to do with humans. Only during the harshest of wintertime was there any threat from them. And few people wandered the forest or came so far off the roads through the woods as this, so there was little danger from robbers or vagabonds. She knew that if she didn't return to the cottage for their supper meal that her husband would set out in search of her. And she had, as was her habit, told him where she intended to work this day. She knew, too, that he was some miles distant working with the beavers to set up a dam to empond the Raven Creek. There was no fear or alarum, then, when from her seated position she heard the grasses of the meadow swaying as something or someone approached. She arched her back and stretched her neck to see who might be coming toward her. Then she glimpsed a ways off a parting of the tall grasses. She couldn't see what was parting the greenery exactly, but she could see where it was traversing, and by turning her head from side to side, she could catch something just out of the corners of her eyes, something that looked black, glossy. With a sharp intake of breath, the wife thought that here was an enchantment.

She sat up even straighter as it came directly toward her. At last, the movement stopped a few feet away. The woman could not look on this—or IT—directly. Instead she had to partway close her eyes, turn her head slightly and allow the sides of her eyes take in what was before her. It was most like something of a bird, perhaps even a giant bird, perhaps one too heavy to fly.

But no. With a tossing aside, a kind of cloak was removed to reveal a very small and elderly woman, a woman who had been wrapped in a cloak of feathers.

"Oh, I am glad to be found by you," said the wife. "I have turned my ankle and fallen. I'm not sure if I can stand on it just yet."

"Yes," said the woman in a croak. Her voice was large but sounded as though it were rusty from disuse. "I saw."

"Were you watching me, then?"

"I saw," croaked the old woman again.

The wife was growing uneasy beneath the unblinking eyes of the crone. She sat for some moments, trying to assuage the pain in her ankle and to comprehend what the old woman wanted.

At last she boldly asked: "You seem in no hurry to offer help, so you must want something."

"Water," came the reply.

The wife looked about her and found the basket she had been carrying. In addition to the small saw, the loppers, and a grafting knife, she had carried her midday meal and a stoppered jar of water. It had survived her tumble and was within reach of her outstretching arm. She handed over the container and the old woman took it, pulled the stopper and sniffed at the contents. Then she drank. And drank. And drank more. At last the jar was emptied and the old woman took it from her lips. She cackled.

"That was good. And I've left you none," said the old woman with some glee.

The wife reflected sadly that some water would have been good just then and might be even more desirable later.

"No matter," said the old woman. "You'll not be thirsty." Catching the look of dismay in the wife's eyes the old woman softened slightly. "Ah, I see you grow concerned just what kind of mad beldam you've found. You've naught to fear from me. No . . . I've come to do you a service . . . Your ankle? Pah! That's a matter of healing. No, what I offer is greater than pearls and rubies." She paused, leaned forward, and then pronounced: "It's children!"

At the mention of children, the good wife felt a pang in her breast. Children! . . . All she thought she lacked in her life.

"So, you like that idea?" asked the crone. "I thought so."

"But how?" asked the wife. She knew enough about enchantment to understand that such things did not always work out well.

"These will be children who have no one else to care for them. Without you they may even die. With you there is only a chance for them, and that is not a guarantee."

The wife was somewhat dismayed, and yet her heart longed for children she could call her own, children who would gladden the table. She remained silent.

"First it is necessary that you rest. Then I will bring the children to you, for you must choose among them. And then . . . well, then you go home." And so saying, the old woman drew her raven cloak about the wife. And the wife, after a startled intake of breath fell into a deep sleep. She disappeared beneath the cloak as the crone made final adjustments in covering her.

And it is that cloak that accounts for the wife remaining undiscovered for several days. The woodman, her husband, followed her path several times and came to the clearing. He even found her basket and the spilled utensils. But he did not trip over her slumbering form and he could not see her. To him she was not there. He feared that she had been attacked and maybe even eaten, and he spent days and nights in the forest, calling her name, looking everywhere. At the worst he feared that he might find her body or anything that might remain of it and so he looked in bears' caves, in badgers' dens, by the foxes' burrows. He even scanned the trees to see if perchance a bird might have taken a scrap of her clothing. He feared she was dead, for he knew that she would not leave him of her own free will.

On the fourth day the husband was out looking on the other side of the forest and the old woman returned and withdrew the concealing cloak. The wife, who had sustained no ill treatment in her hard slumber, awakened and looked at the old woman. The old woman offered in her outstretched hand the same jar she had shared four days earlier.

"It's full again," said the old woman. "And it will always be full. Full of the best and coldest water. This jar is now yours for all time."

The wife thanked her, drank, and drank again. The water was good. She wiped her mouth and looked up at the old woman.

"Did I sleep, then, with you here?"

"With me here and with me not here. You have slept for four days."

"Four days! But my husband! What will he think?"

"He will think that perhaps you are dead," said the old woman. "He has been searching for you everywhere, in every place he can think to look. He found your basket and took it away. He was crying. And he has found you not. He mourns for you."

"I must go to him and tell him I'm alive. Oh, my poor husband. He will think I've left him."

"He does not think so. Would you? Would you like to leave him? Now may be your

chance if you want." The old woman's eyes glittered.

"No," said the wife. "He is the best and truest of men. We are well suited and take joy in one another."

"So, you would stay with your goodman, then?"

"Oh, yes. Until the darkness of death takes one of us."

"So be it."

"And so I must seek him out," said the wife, attempting and succeeding in standing. The pain was that of stiffness. "My ankle is healed. I can go to him now."

"Would you wait if there were children to be had?"

The wife hesitated. She looked eagerly at the crone. "If that's what's to be, yes."

The elder invited the wife to go and wash in a nearby brook, to restore herself, and to return quickly.

"I will have them here for your inspection," she said.

The wife did as she was bid and returned in a quarter hour. The old woman seemed to stand alone. But something flickered by her side, and the wife was not surprised as the old woman drew aside a smaller raven cloak to reveal three very young children . . . Well, really children of a sort. They were part elvish with pointed ears and very delicate features.

"Are these your children?" asked the crone. "You must choose."

"If this is the only choice, then they are my children," said the wife. "But they are not like us at all. They are of the elves, and as lovely as they are, I fear they would die away from their own kind. And if they lived I fear they would find our home too much of men and women and not enough of the wood."

"This is not your only choice," she the elder. "And you choose wisely so far. You have two more choices." She wrapped the cloak about the children and they slumbered.

She turned to another spot where the grasses were glimmering and withdrew a second cloak. Here were three more children, clothed in purple, whose eyes opened on the wife with disdain.

"You, there," said the eldest of the three. "Fetch our robes and water . . . no, bring wine. What is this rude place? Who are you?"

"Are these your children?" asked the old woman.

The wife shuddered. "If you say they are. But I fear they are born to a royal estate and would find out home rustic, crude, and not to their liking. We—my husband and I—would not be to their liking either, I fear."

"So, that would mean," said the elder as she wrapped and napped the three royal children, "that those who remain are yours?"

"As you say," said the wife as she looked upon the last trio the old woman revealed. They were human and not elvish, ragged and not clothed in splendor. They cowered before her, hugging their shoulders.

The youngest looked up at her with golden eyes and said one word: "Please?"

The wife let out her breath and nodded. Then she knelt and opened her arms. The children, with some care, looking at each other (and all through golden eyes), moved into the woman's arms. They closed their eyes as the goodwife encircled them.

"They are yours?" asked the old woman.

"Yes," said the wife. "They are ours."

She rose and led them from the clearing, into the forest, and to the home they would share.

The old woman took the three smaller cloaks, joined them with the one that had concealed the wife, and shook them into a single garment that she wrapped about her shoulders. And, of course, she vanished.

The other children? Into thin air. They were illusory simulacra and had never really been there, their images borrowed from the

elves of the deep woods and the royals in the castle. The real children from whom these likenesses were drawn were not so much diseased as to have been troubled by a bad or unsettling dream.

The real children, though, had suffered from long privation. They were next to naked, hungry and cold. The wife gathered food for them to eat as they went along and she shared her own clothing to warm them. And she held their hands and told them of the lives they might lead.

At last they came to the cottage and the woodman heard his wife's trilling laughter and her shout and rushed from the front door to embrace her.

"I thought you dead!" he said, crying with tears of relief. He embraced her and was loath to let her go. At last he opened his eyes and saw the three young children around them. He started.

"Wh-wh-who are these?" he begged.

"They are ours," said the wife. "Let me but bring them inside to feed and warm them and I will tell you all that has happened."

Food first, warmth while eating, then washing, clothes of odd sizes and fit, and then sleep in real beds. The children were transported to slumber.

"Husband," she said when at last they were seated at the table, "these children are a gift, given to us by an old woman who was an enchantress."

She went on to tell him all that had transpired . . . from her injury, the appearance of the crone, the raven cloak, to the children she was shown and from whose number she was bid to pick.

"The first were elven and would not have survived here; they needed to be with their own kind.

"The second were human children but of high estate. Never would they have gone with us willingly to hew and trim. Nor would they have borne with the daily tasks of our living. They were not for us here.

"But these who remained had need and nowhere else to go. They might become like us. They might learn to love the wood and all its mysteries. They might become our children even if they were not born our children."

The husband listened and thought. He trusted his wife and understood that her understanding exceeded his own. If she thought it so, so would he.

And so day by day the children increased in health, in appetite, and in a loosening of the bonds of care that had so straitened them. They learned to play together in the safety of the hearth and yard, their shouts of delight ringing through the house. They also learned to work and worked to learn. Their minds were quick and their understanding often intuitive. They displayed no hesitancy to draw near to the fire that makes up a family.

But the husband took note of one or two oddities. How could he not? He studied them whenever he was in their presence and he thought of them when he was absent. He noted the pattern of their walking, how their toes came down first and their heels followed. They moved with steely concentration when they passed through the wood, their eyes reaching out far in front of them. They tussled much like puppies do in their over-and-under play, full of yips and yaps.

The husband decided they were human . . . but something other, too. And that other?

"Wife," said the woodman one afternoon as they sat alone together. "Our children—love them as I do—are not altogether like us or like other humans."

The wife listened attentively and inclined her head to study the floor.

"I have seen the animal they most resemble," said the husband. "And that is the wolf."

It was true.

The wife had noted that when she looked straight on at their faces she saw children, happy, well children. But when she saw them out of the corners of her eyes she saw something slightly other . . . a shifting of shape, a suggestion of a muzzle and brilliantly golden eyes set in the midst of grey and black fur.

"Are they bewitched?" she wondered aloud.

Her husband shrugged his shoulders. "For my part I don't much care as long as they don't eat us." And he laughed, but not entirely.

And so the matter stood for almost a full year. The children grew joyously. All were of help in the household and in the woods. And they KNEW the woods better than any other human children the goodman and his goodwife had encountered.

One day it fell to the woodman to be alone in the oldest part of the forest. He had worked all morning and was just sitting down to eat his meal when he espied something shimmering before the largest tree in the wood. With a flick of her wrist, the crone stood before him, holding her raven cloak in her hands.

"So, now you've come for me," said the husband, knowingly. "How many days will I be missing? How much grief will I cause my wife and how much fear for our children?"

"No days," said the old woman. "Hours only. And those we will spend in converse."

The woodman bid the old woman seated and offered her of his provender. She ate and drank, draining his water jug as she had his wife's. He smiled at the thought that hers now always refilled itself.

"You fear your own children," said the woman. "You fear they will devour you. You fear that they are not like you, that they are wolfish. They are, but through enchantment stronger than my own. It was that same enchantment that drove their parents mad and running off on all fours through the forest many years ago. They have long since died. The children have been waiting through time, though decades and ages, to be loved as you and your wife love them. But still you are uneasy. What is to be done?"

"Can't you change the spell that's upon them?" asked the woodman.

"Alas," she responded. "I have great powers, but that is beyond even me." She was downcast.

"If there were a way," reasoned the woodman, "that you could take away my fear—for I know it's there—then I could love them as completely as my wife already does. And she might love them even better. Could you do that?"

"Perhaps, but it might engender a great change . . . in you. And perhaps even in your wife. What then? Would you still be willing?"

The husband thought a long while before he spoke.

"As long as it meant not loving my wife less—or her me—I would venture it."

"So be it," said the crone and she threw her raven cloak over his head.

He didn't go to sleep or even grow tired. But things changed within him. He could smell the individual birds from whose feathers the cloak was made. He could scent the old woman and hear her heartbeat. And, in fact, he could see better in the dark under the cloak than ever he could outside at night when there was no moon. When she withdrew the cloak, he was himself, but different.

The old woman bade him farewell, assuring him that if ever he needed her, he had but to seek her as he had done.

He was mystified at that pronouncement—had he sought her?—but accepted it as a promise of value.

When he concluded his day's work, he found his way home. He was later than he had planned, but the gathering darkness

posed no problems to his eyes. And the smell of the wood caused him to linger. He found himself with his nose lifted to the wind, his eyes closed in pleasure.

When he arrived home everything was the same, but different. The children were more familiar to him. And his wife? She was as familiar as always. But she was different, too, and it came to him in just what ways after dinner as he sat sharpening his axe. When she spoke to him, he turned to look at her, but when he turned back to his axe he saw her from the corner of his eye. Her face, her lovely face, so familiar to him, was transformed. He could detect the suggestion of a muzzle, golden eyes, and very fine, dark fur around them. He barked a laugh and understood.

"Wife, wife," he said. "It was true, they were wolfish. They ARE wolfish. But now . . ." and he laughed. "So are we!"

And he told her of his encounter with the crone. "This was her way of making us a true family."

"But will ever we be able to go among men again?" asked the wife with some trepidation.

"That we'll have to see," answered the husband. "But I have often sensed that others have the influence of the beasts upon them: the porcine, the bovine, the feline, the equine, the vulpine, the canine, even the ursine. It may be that influenced as they are they will not notice the lupine in us."

The wife reflected on the piggish face of the butcher in the castle town. His name also fit the image: Swinehart. And there were others who embodied the animals in their visage or stance, or movements: those who showed the cow, the cat, the horse, the fox, the dog, or the bear. She smiled and thought that being in some measure of the wolf might be very good. And, besides, the world smelled far more interestingly.

And so they lived for many years. The children grew and found mates of their own and stayed close to their parents. All lived in harmony.

If anything, those in the castle town gave them even more respect than before . . . and a little distance.

And the king? At the conclusion of their years of service he had them brought to him and gave them many treasures and privileges. He also gave them their area of the forest to have for all time through all generations. And those generations in turn gave service to the king and the following kings and queens to serve as guardians of the forest.

The forest prospered, the kingdom prospered, and the family of the woodman and his wife prospered.

And of all the treasures they had been given, the greatest was not from the king. It was this: in each of them endured just the slightest trace of the wolf.