

The Nettle Spinner

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A rewilded retelling of a Flemish and French fairytale, collected by Charles Deulin in *Contes du roi Cambrinus* under the title “La Fileuse d'orties”, included by Andrew Lang in *The Red Fairy Book* (1890), retold by many women, rewilded by Wendy Wuyts, assisted by machines for translation.

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Once upon a time, both in days of old and still today, Ghent was a land abundant with nettles, and home to skilled women who had an intrinsic bond with the terrain. It was their careful stewardship of the land, and their collaboration with its natural inhabitants like nettles, that propelled Ghent to prominence. While many attribute Ghent's rise in the 19th century to the advent of textile machinery, I would argue differently. Machines, after all, are merely tools. Without the skilled hands to guide them, they are inert. What truly set Ghent apart was its legacy: centuries prior, women had mastered the art of spinning stinging nettles. They possessed the knowledge to transform a mere plant into a magnificent rug. It could even be said that Ghent's ascendancy was due to the shamans who resided there, individuals who communed with nettles long before the city's first homes were constructed. These shamans, living in symbiosis with the nettles, aided one another, sharing their resources and expertise in both hemp and flax.

However, as time passed, the intricate skills associated with nettles diminished, and the sacred bond between the people and the land began to wane. This decline was hastened by the arrival of men from the south, clad in unfamiliar helmets and armor, and thereafter by the peregrines from the west. They introduced new ideologies: ones that diminished the role of women, casting their ancient knowledge as the devil's work. Over the ensuing centuries, this valuable knowledge and set of skills faded into obscurity.

But not all knowledge was lost as long the nettles thrived and young girls and old ladies were willing to listen to them. There was a time, even before the rise of textile machines, when counts held sway over Ghent, and among them, one of the most notorious was Burchard. The townspeople knew him as Burchard the Wolf. So wicked was Burchard's heart that whispers spread about him chaining his peasants to ploughs, forcing them to till the land with their bare feet, the sting of his whip urging them onward.

In stark contrast stood his wife, a beacon of kindness and compassion. Whenever she caught wind of her husband's latest cruelties, she'd discreetly right his wrongs, earning her the adoration of the people. Where he was reviled, she was revered.

On a day when Burchard was out hunting, he found himself wandering through the forest of Malemmeersen. There, he came upon a solitary cottage where a young woman sat, spinning hemp.

"What is your name?" he inquired.

"Renelde, my lord," she replied with a courteous nod.

"Such a secluded place must surely weary you?"

"I've grown accustomed to it, my lord, and find solace here."

"Perhaps, but if you come to the castle, you could serve as a maid to the countess."

"My lord, I cannot. My ailing grandmother needs my care," Renelde explained.

"Insist as you might, I expect you at the castle by nightfall," he declared, continuing on his way.

Yet Renelde, promised to a young woodcutter named Guilbert, had no plans to heed the count's command. Her duty lay with her frail grandmother.

However, three days passed, and the count returned, displeasure evident in his features.

"Why haven't you come to the castle?" he demanded of the resolute young woman.

"As I informed you before, my lord, my grandmother needs my care," she reiterated firmly.

"Return tomorrow, and you shall be appointed as the countess's chief lady-in-waiting," he proclaimed before continuing his journey.

Yet, just like his previous offers, this too held no sway over Renelde, and she did not make her way to the castle.

On his subsequent visit, the count attempted a bolder proposition. "Should you come with me," he announced, "I'll send the countess away and take you as my wife."

However, Renelde remembered the kindness the countess had shown her family two years earlier when her mother had succumbed to a prolonged illness. The countess had extended a helping hand during their darkest hour. Thus, even if Burchard had genuinely desired to wed Renelde, she would have declined.

Weeks drifted by without any sight of the count. Renelde began to nurture the hope that he had finally relinquished his pursuit. But that hope was shattered when he suddenly appeared at her doorstep one day, bearing a duck gun and a hunting bag. On this occasion, Renelde wasn't spinning hemp but rather flax.

"What work are you engrossed in today?" he inquired gruffly.

"It is for my wedding attire, my lord," Renelde replied softly.

"You intend to wed?"

"Yes, my lord, if I have your permission," she said, recalling that in those times, peasants required their lord's consent to marry.

"I shall grant you this permission," Burchard began, his voice dripping with malice, "but only if you fulfill a condition. Notice the tall nettles growing over the graves in the churchyard? Gather them, and from them spin two exquisite lengths of cloth. One shall be your wedding dress, and the other, the shroud to cover me. You may marry only when I am buried beneath the earth." With those chilling words, accompanied by a scornful smirk, the count departed.

Renelde felt a cold shiver down her spine. The task of spinning nettles was unheard of in Malemmeersen.

Every evening, once his labor for the day concluded, Guilbert would come to visit his betrothed. That evening was no different, and upon hearing of Burchard's bizarre demand, he responded in heated passion. "Shall I confront the Wolf and cleave his head with my axe?"

Renelde recoiled at his violent proposition. Was Guilbert, the man she intended to marry, no different from the aggressive drunk villagers?

"No," she said firmly, "I won't have any bloodstains accompanying my wedding flowers. Moreover, we mustn't harm the count. Think of the kindness the countess showed my mother during her time of need."

In the midst of this exchange, a frail, aged voice broke the silence. It belonged to Renelde's grandmother, a wise hag who had spent most of her days in silent contemplation.

"My dear ones," she began, "in my long life, I've never witnessed nettles being spun. However, I've heard ancient tales of goddesses and their priestesses who graced this land before the arrival of clergymen. These wise women were believed to communicate with nature, understanding the essence of each plant and its purpose. Why shouldn't Renelde attempt the same?"

Renelde pondered this, then asked, "But how can I converse with nettles? They lack the means to speak."

The elderly matriarch, drawing from her reservoir of old wisdom, told her what to do.

As dawn's first light kissed the earth, Renelde found herself amidst a thicket of nettles growing over the graves in the churchyard. Before approaching, she respectfully sought permission from the place, subsequently pouring out her heart, sharing her challenges and concerns. The nettles stood in silent vigil, offering no verbal response.

"Could you be transformed into a wedding dress and a shroud?" she inquired.

Yet again, the nettles remained silent.

Following the advice of her grandmother, Renelde sat amongst the nettles, intently observing them until the moon, in its full glory, began to illuminate the night. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, she reclined and soon drifted into a deep sleep. In her dreams, as I was foretold, the spirit of the nettles appeared, elucidating the mysteries she sought to unravel.

When Renelde awoke and put the spirit's teachings into practice, she was astounded. The nettles, once processed, yielded a thread that was simultaneously soft, sturdy, and ethereal. In no time, she had crafted the first garment intended for her wedding.



With hope that she might not be compelled to create the second, she hastily completed the sewing. Just as she was admiring her handiwork, Burchard the Wolf arrived.

"So," he began with a smirk on his face, "how progress the garments you promised?"

"Behold, my lord," Renelde responded, unveiling the gown that radiated an unmatched purity and elegance.

Burchard's complexion drained of color, yet he managed a begrudging acknowledgment, "Impressive. Now, commence the crafting of the second."

Reluctantly, Renelde resumed her work. Meanwhile, an eerie sensation overtook the count upon his return to the castle, as though a spectral shadow had just traipsed over his grave.

His appetite vanished, and every morsel on his dinner plate became unpalatable. As he retired to bed, he was consumed by shivers, as if a fever was taking hold. Sleep eluded him, and the next morning, he was ensnared in the grips of his malaise. This rapid decline in his health, intensifying with each passing moment, deeply unnerved him. Surely, it was linked to Renelde's spinning—was fate ensuring that both he and his shroud would be prepared for the upcoming burial?

Burchard's initial response was to dispatch soldiers to Renelde, demanding an immediate halt to her weaving. Compliantly, Renelde ceased her work. That evening, Guilbert inquired, "Has the count finally consented to our union?"

She sighed, "No, he hasn't."

"Resume your spinning, love," Guilbert urged. "It's our sole hope. He's bound by his own word."

The subsequent day, after ensuring her home was tidy and her grandmother was fed, Renelde returned to her spinning wheel. Observing her defiance, the soldiers, acting on Burchard's orders, seized her, binding her limbs. They then dragged her to the river's edge, its waters raging from recent downpours. Without hesitation, they thrust her into the turbulent depths, waiting to see her vanish beneath. But fate had different plans. Renelde, against all odds, emerged, gasping for breath. Though not versed in the art of swimming, sheer willpower guided her to safety.

Back in her abode, with unwavering spirit, Renelde resumed her spinning. Yet, the relentless soldiers soon returned. This time, they weighed her down with a heavy stone, intending to ensure she wouldn't resurface, and cast her back into the turbulent waters.

The instant the soldiers' attention wavered, the weighty stone unexpectedly detached. With determination, Renelde navigated through the water, retraced her steps to her dwelling, and resumed her craft.

This tenacity prompted Count Burchard himself to intervene. Due to his frailty, walking was out of the question. Thus, attendants carried him in a sedan chair to the village. Yet, undeterred, Renelde continued her spinning.

Upon witnessing her defiance, he aimed his firearm and released a bullet in her direction, as one might target a menacing predator. Remarkably, the bullet ricocheted, leaving Renelde untouched, her focus unbroken on the spinning wheel.

Blind fury surged within Burchard. The intensity of his rage was such that he seemed on the verge of meeting his end. He lashed out, shattering the wheel into fragments. Overwhelmed, he collapsed and was hastily conveyed back to his abode, unconscious.

Yet by the following morning, the spinning wheel stood whole once more, and Renelde was back at her task. Sensing his life force wane with every rotation of the wheel, the count commanded that Renelde's hands be bound and insisted on constant surveillance over her.

Yet fate intervened. The guards, succumbing to fatigue, slumbered, and the chains that bound her inexplicably loosened. Unhindered, she resumed her spinning.

In a desperate bid, Burchard ordered the uprooting of every nettle plant within a significant radius around the churchyard. Yet nature seemed to conspire against him. No sooner were the nettles plucked from the earth than they seemed to rejuvenate, regrowing with an uncanny speed. Eerily, these resilient plants even sprouted on the well-trodden grounds of Renelde's cottage. Each time they were removed, more appeared, providing a relentless supply for the spinner, always ready for her craft.

With each passing day, Burchard's condition deteriorated, the shadow of death looming ever closer.

His devoted wife, the countess, out of deep compassion for her sick husband, unraveled the mystery behind his affliction. Desiring his recovery, she implored him to approve the union between Renelde and Guilbert. Yet, in his stubbornness, Burchard refused to yield.

Taking matters into her own hands, the countess, unbeknownst to her husband, approached Renelde. Invoking the memory of Renelde's late mother, she beseeched the young spinner to cease her craft, hoping to halt the curse that plagued the count. Out of respect and empathy, Renelde agreed.

That evening, when Guilbert visited and noticed no progress on the fabric, he sought an explanation. Upon hearing of the countess's plea, he questioned, "Has the count agreed to our union?"

"No," Renelde replied.

"Then let fate take its course."

"But how will the countess feel?"

"She will realize you're not to blame. The count alone is the architect of his demise."

"Let's be patient a while longer. Maybe he'll relent."

Months dragged on—one, two, six, then a year. Renelde refrained from spinning, and while the count ceased his pursuit, he remained unyielding in his decision. Guilbert's patience waned. Renelde's heartache deepened. She yearned for Guilbert's embrace.

"Perhaps we should end our engagement," Guilbert finally suggested.

"Just a little more time," Renelde pleaded.

However, Guilbert's patience waned. His visits to Malemmeersen grew sporadic, until they ceased entirely. The weight of their unfulfilled love weighed heavily on Renelde's heart, yet she remained resolute.

Fate brought Renelde face to face with the count at a bustling market in Ghent. She approached him, her hands clasped in a desperate plea. "My lord, show mercy!" she pleaded.

But Burchard the Wolf merely averted his gaze, dismissing her with chilling indifference.

She could have reclaimed her power, returning to her spinning wheel to challenge his pride. But she chose restraint.

The heartache deepened when she heard of Guilbert's decision to leave the country. He didn't bid her farewell.

She relegated her once-busy spinning wheel to a desolate corner, surrendering to her grief for three days and nights.

Time continued its relentless march. As the cold grasp of winter released its hold, nettles once again claimed the land. Before long, word spread that the count had taken gravely ill. The countess, suspecting that Renelde had resumed her spinning in her weariness, visited the cottage. Yet, she found the spinning wheel untouched and silent.

Still, the count's condition worsened, baffling even the most seasoned physicians. They proclaimed his imminent demise, and the mournful toll of the death bell echoed through the castle. Yet, death eluded him. While he lay trapped in a liminal state between life and death, he was consumed by anguish, unable to find relief. His pleas for death to end his suffering went unanswered.

In his torment, a memory surfaced: his words to the young spinner. The realization dawned on him that his unresolved fate was tethered to the absence of a shroud for his final rest.

Without delay, he summoned Renelde to his bedside, urging her to resume her task of spinning his shroud. The moment her hands touched the wheel, a subtle transformation began. The count's excruciating pain began to wane.

As the wheel turned, a profound change overcame the count. He was overwhelmed by remorse for the injustices he had inflicted out of unchecked pride. With a softened heart, he sought Renelde's forgiveness, and without hesitation she forgave him. She then diligently continued her task, spinning day and night.

Once the nettle thread was spun, she took to weaving it, the rhythmic motion of her pendulum crafting the fabric of the end. Finally, as she sewed the shroud, each stitch seemed to ease the count's pain, drawing him closer to the inevitable conclusion. And as her needle made the final stitch, imbued with the essence of nettles, sealing the destiny intertwined with the fabric, the count breathed his last, finding peace.

At the very same moment, Guilbert found his way back to the village. His desire for Renelde led him straight to her doorstep, where he proposed, hoping to make up for the lost time.

He was in for a surprise. Renelde, having grown stronger and wiser in her solitude, responded with a firm "No. You broke my heart when I needed you. I am worthy of more."

And she embarked on a new journey.

Joining forces with the countess, they established a unique academy. Here, young girls weren't just taught the art of spinning but were also guided to attune

themselves to the whispers of nettles and the desires of their hearts. This academy soon became renowned for producing the most exquisite dresses, each one a blend of craftsmanship, intuition and openness to the magic of plants.

And because of these young girls and the nettles, I tell you, Ghent became a rich place.

And the spinning wheel bends, and the story ends.

