

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Helen**

Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl called Helen. Her mother had died young and the stepmother she had received persecuted her in every possible way. Helen took the greatest pains to win her love, diligently and indefatigably performing the hard tasks that were imposed upon her, but the wicked stepmother's hard heart remained unmoved, and she demanded ever more of the girl. For, Helen being so industrious and tireless that she always finished her chores in good time, the stepmother thought the work she had set the girl had been too easy and too slight, and so she devised new and onerous tasks. One day, the old woman demanded of Helen that she strip off twelve pounds of feathers in *one* day, and she threatened her with severe chastisement if she came back home in the evening with her work unfinished.

The poor, tormented girl sat down to her work in anguish and tears and could hardly make a start for sorrow. When she at last had a heap of stripped feathers lying before her, she could not help thinking of her plight and crying bitter tears, and her sighs scattered the feathers. So it happened with her again and again, and her fear became extreme. Covering her face with both hands, she bent over the table and cried out through her tears, "Oh! Isn't there anyone on God's earth who will take pity on me?" And all at once a kindly voice answered, "Be comforted, my child, I have come to help you." Startled, Helen looked up and perceived a fairy, who gently asked, "Why are you crying so?" It was long since Helen had heard a friendly word; placing her trust in the apparition, she told her what kind of task she had been set, and how she could not possibly finish it by the appointed time. "Be without worry, my child!" spoke the friendly fairy, "just you lie down and

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sleep; in the meantime I shall carry out your task.” Helen laid herself down to rest, and under the fairy’s hand the feathers flew from the quills by themselves, so that the work was finished long before the set deadline. Then the fairy roused Helen, who had slept all her sorrow away, and disappeared just as she was about to thank her. In the evening the wicked stepmother came home. What was her amazement when she found Helen calmly sitting beside the finished work! She did indeed praise her industry, but at the same time she privately devised further and more onerous tasks.

On the following day, she ordered Helen to ladle out, with a spoon, a large pond which lay nearby, and the spoon she gave her for the task was full of holes. Helen got down to her work, but she soon realised that it was impossible to carry out the command of her wicked and spiteful stepmother. Filled with deep grief and anxiety, she was on the point of throwing the spoon away when suddenly the good fairy was standing before her, kindly asking her why she was so distressed? When Helen had told her about the stepmother’s command, she said, “Depend on me; I shall perform your task for you. In the meantime just lay yourself down to sleep.” Helen was comforted and laid herself down to rest, but she was soon gently wakened by the fairy, and she saw that the work had been completed. Filled with joy, she hurried to her stepmother, hoping that her heart would finally soften. But the stepmother was annoyed that her malicious acts had been so miraculously foiled, and her mind turned to even more difficult tasks.

When the next day dawned, she ordered Helen to build, by evening, a beautiful castle that was ready to move into at once, and which must be lacking nothing, neither kitchen nor cellar nor any matter of thing. Helen sat

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down dejectedly on the rock which had been assigned her to build on, finding comfort only in the hope that the good fairy would help her out of trouble this time also. And it did happen so. The fairy appeared, promised to build the castle, and sent Helen off to rest again. At the fairy's command, rocks and stones rose up and fitted into one another, soon giving rise to a magnificent castle. By evening everything inside was also ready, in all its splendour. How grateful and joyful Helen was when she saw the onerous task completed without her having done anything. The stepmother, however, was not pleased, but went sniffing and questing through the whole castle from top to bottom, looking to see if she could not find some fault for which she could scold and punish Helen. Finally, she wanted to examine the cellar as well, but the moment after she lifted the trapdoor and began to climb down, the heavy door suddenly swung back, causing the wicked stepmother to tumble down the steps and so fall to her death.

Now Helen was the mistress of the castle and lived in peace and quiet. Soon there came many suitors who had heard of her great beauty. Among them was a King's son by the name of Flashman, and he won the love of fair Helen. One day they were sitting together quite familiarly under a tall lime-tree in front of the castle when Flashman told Helen that he had to leave her and travel to his parents to obtain their consent for his marriage, and he asked her to wait for him under the lime-tree. He swore that he would return to her as soon as possible. At their parting Helen kissed him on the left cheek and asked him, for the time he was away from her, not to let himself be kissed on that cheek by anyone else. She would wait for him under the lime-tree.

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Helen had an unshakeable trust in Flashman's fidelity and sat three full and entire days, from morning to evening, under the lime-tree. But when her bridegroom still did not return, she became deeply concerned, and she resolved to set out in search of him. She took as much of her jewellery as she could, and she took three of the most beautiful of her dresses, one embroidered with stars, the second with moons, and the third with so many suns of pure gold. She wandered far and wide throughout the world, but nowhere could she light upon a clue as to her bridegroom's whereabouts. In the end she utterly despaired of finding him and gave up her search, but she did not wish to return home to her castle, for without her bridegroom everything there would be bound to strike her as dreary and desolate; she would rather remain in foreign lands. So she hired herself out to a farmer as a herdswoman and buried her jewellery and her beautiful dresses in a secluded spot.

So she lived now as a herdswoman and watched her herd, while thinking of her bridegroom. She habituated one calf from the herd to her, and it became her pleasure; she fed it out of her hands and trained it to kneel down before her when she said to it:

“Calf, go down on your knee,
And do not forget your honour, as he
Did, Prince Flashman, forgetting poor Helen,
While she sat beneath the green lime-tree.”

After she had passed several years in this way, she heard that the daughter of the King of the land where she was living was to marry a King's son by the name of Flashman. All the people were rejoicing, but there came

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over Helen a greater pain than any she had suffered before, for she had always trusted in Flashman's fidelity. Now it just so happened that the road to the royal capital passed not far from the village where Helen had hired herself out as a herdswoman; and so it happened oftentimes when she was watching her herd that Flashman rode past her without noticing her, being wholly immersed in thoughts of his bride. Then it occurred to Helen to put his heart to the test and see if it were not possible to bring herself back to his remembrance. Not long afterwards Flashman came past once again; then Helene said to her calf,

“Calf, go down on your knee,
And do not forget your honour, as he
Did, Prince Flashman, forgetting poor Helen,
While she sat beneath the green lime-tree.”

When Flashman heard Helen's voice, he thought it reminded him of something, but nothing took distinct shape in his mind; and he had not heard the words clearly, for Helen had spoken very quietly and in a trembling voice. Also, her heart had been far too agitated for her to be able to pay any heed to the impression her words made, and by the time she had composed herself Flashman was far away. Yet she saw that he rode slowly and thoughtfully, and so she did not yet entirely give herself up for lost.

Around this time a great feast, lasting through several nights, was to be held in the royal capital. Placing her hopes in this, Helen resolved to seek out her bridegroom there. Once evening had arrived, she secretly set out and went to her hiding-place, where she put on the dress that was adorned with golden suns and her jewellery; and she let loose her beautiful hair,

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which she had kept hidden under a headscarf all this while. Thus embellished did she go to the town and the feast. When she appeared, all eyes turned towards her, and everyone was astonished at her beauty, but no one knew who she was. Flashman also was like a man enchanted by her beauty, without suspecting that he and this girl had formerly been one heart and one soul. He did not leave her side until morning, and only with difficulty could she escape from him in the crowd when it was time to return home. Flashman sought her everywhere and eagerly awaited the next night, when she had promised to come again. On the second evening, fair Helen betook herself to the feast again as early as she could. This time she had on the garment that was all adorned with silver moons, and she wore a silver half-moon on her forehead. Flashman was happy to see her again; she seemed to him far more beautiful than on the previous day, and he danced throughout the night with her alone. But when he asked for her name, she replied that she must not tell it or he would be shocked. Thereupon he implored her to come again the next evening, and she promised him she would. On the third evening, Flashman went to the hall early, unable to wait, and he did not take his eyes from the door. Finally, Helen arrived in a garment that was embroidered all over with gold and silver stars and held fast by a star-studded belt; she had tied a starry ribbon around her hair. Flashman was more enchanted by her than ever, and he pressed her with pleas to finally reveal herself to him. Then Helen silently kissed him on the left cheek, and now Flashman suddenly recognised her again, and full of remorse, he asked for her forgiveness; and Helen, pleased to have won him back, did not make him wait long to receive it.