

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Queen of Roses**

Once upon a time there was a King who lived very happily with his beautiful, virtuous wife; Heaven had gifted them a single son, and he was the delight of his parents. Yet peace reigned not only in the King's noble family, but in his whole realm; everywhere, even in the tiniest hamlet, there was profit and prosperity, and the people were content and amiable. From a wise and gentle government there blooms order, order brings prosperity, prosperity satisfaction and amiability.

However, the good King had to suffer a most bitter fate; his beloved wife died and left him alone, with the now motherless Prince. Deeply did the King grieve, and the whole land with him. The Prince's pious little child's heart was also sunk in sorrow, for he had clung to his mother with all of a child's love. On her deathbed she had blessed him, and while departing this life had exhorted him to all that is good, to a true faith in God, and to love and gentleness towards all men.

"And when you have become a young man," were her last words, "then choose only a maiden of a good and pious heart for your wife, and honour the memory of your mother and her last words." This had made a deep impression on the soft heart of the boy; the Prince constantly remembered his dying mother, and it often seemed to him that she were floating around him and smiling at him beatifically. So the Prince grew up with pious habits and became a handsome, blooming young man.

But the King his father's royal eyes had been blinded by a princely, artful lady who, in next to no time, had so slyly fettered the ruler with her affected charms that he yielded to her and she had complete control over him. Soon the dazzling wedding-feast took place. The aged King, formerly

so good and gentle, had become an old fool, and had chained his life to an artful, evil snake's heart; all too soon did he have to taste the bitter fruits of his folly. The wicked wife instigated conflict on all sides, inciting the father against the son and the son against the father, and the master and mistress against the servants; and she continued to practise her iniquitous captivating arts, so that the hearts of men young and old were inflamed with love for her. A short while later, and the King's rueful life was at an end. The Prince became King and ruled the people with the prudence and gentleness which always foster the true weal of a land. And the wicked stepmother practised her arts on him in vain; he secretly despised her and always sought to keep a salutary distance from her.

Then the people of the realm wished that the youthful King take a wife; he too, deep inside, bore a silent desire to share his fortune with a worthy woman, yet the one he would choose would be graced not with rank and riches or a crown but with a good, pious heart, as his dying mother had wished. And he had found such a heart, one that, it was true, belonged only to a poor, simple gardener's-girl, but was full of pure love and pious thoughts. Soon the King's son and the maiden were such intimate friends that the young man fell at her feet and swore everlasting love and fidelity to her. Tenderly and in tears did the charming girl snuggle into the youth's breast and whisper: "Ah, remember that you can't take me to wife, don't you see I'm poor, I'm no Princess?" – "Be at ease, dear heart," said the youth, "you shall be my wife, my Queen, you and no other."

The wish for the King to be married grew louder and more pressing; from all sides the fathers of princely daughters began to make suggestions

to the King. The wicked stepmother, imagining the so youthful King to be entirely under her control, presumed to choose a wife for him. She ordained dazzling festivities to which many princesses were invited, and they showed up richly adorned and full of hope. The feast had already lasted eight days and the King had still not chosen a Princess for his bride, and he had ignored all of his stepmother's suggestions. On the ninth and final day of the feast the decision was to be made – so the King himself had promised. The stepmother had every confidence that the King would concur in her choice, for she had chosen for him a royal Princess, ugly of face and figure, to be sure, but unspeakably rich in money and means. A dazzling ball was to conclude the feast, and on this occasion every Princess was doubly laden with jewellery and gems, as each of them believed she would gain the victory. But as they were all awaiting the King in the most eager anticipation, the leaved doors opened and the King walked in, smiling, with his charming gardener's-girl, who appeared so modest and demure dressed in a white frock without any jewellery at all. Then did many eyes in the circle of Princesses flash with anger and fury, but those of the stepmother rolled the most wildly, and they hurled wrathful flashes at the happy pair of lovers. Now these two approached the royal stepmother, who stood in the middle of the hall, surrounded by spitefully smiling Princesses; and the King spoke gently and affably: "Royal, revered mother, here I bring you my beloved, pious bride, and ask with her for your blessing." But the lady spoke, filled with rage and fury: "King, are you then so forgetful of your honour as to wed a common maidservant? O shame on you, for grieving me so deeply and asking for my blessing for a lowly maid."

And she turned her back on him and strode, full of wrath and malice, into a side chamber. But the King followed her and spoke with a severe, threatening solemnity: "Woman, those words will lie heavily on your conscience. Truly, I shall show you that this poor girl is more worthy to be called Queen than you and every vain Princess under the sun. I once learnt an art from an old hermit: how to enchant people and test their hearts to see if they are good or bad. Swear, noble lady, to choose for me the fairest, once all the maidens here have been enchanted in the form of a flower, and I shall be obedient to you. But if your choice lights upon my poor gardener's-girl, then the magic will fall on you, and you shall find yourself in its tangles forever." – The King fell silent; and the proud lady grinned, full of confidence in her victory. "Oh, my noble artist," she replied, "go ahead and enchant all the maidens here present, I shall choose the fairest for you; and I am certain that I shall not fall a party to your threat. This strange whim of yours will be a delightful jest to me."

And she sat down on a velvet armchair and awaited the things to come.

Then the royal youth spread out a large white cloth, silently led one Princess after the other into the side chamber and covered them with the cloth, whereupon they all instantly fell asleep. Then he cut the heart out of each one of them, and last of all out of his dear gardener's-girl. The ballroom changed into a viridescent flower-garden, enclosed by a golden fence, through which singing birds fluttered. Then the youth buried the hearts and said to every one:

"Blossom, blossom, blossom

Out of the earth!
If you are devout,
Fair blooms from you will sprout;
But if your heart is wicked,
Then let wild thorns shoot out.”

Soon little branches and leaves put out shoots and sprouted up. Wild thornbushes grew apace out of the earth; only here and there did a colourful flower open.

But in the middle of the garden was a flower-stalk whose delicate calyx unfolded to show a splendid rose, a *Queen of Roses*. Glistening dew trickled down from her, and the green leaves tenderly nestled into the flowers. Now a flock of nightingales came flying up, and they circled around the Rose-Queen and sang,

“Pretty rose, pretty rose,
Noble Queen of Flowers!
You, the fairest of them all,
You, the purest of them all,
Shall the whole world overpower
With a heartfelt love divine,
Noble Queen of Flowers!”

But around the thorn-bushes, black ravens flew and cawed their song:

“Wild thornbushes, wild thornbushes,
Black as our nocturnal garment.
You, with claws that grow pell-mell
In their thousands, please us well.

You shall feed the fires of Hell
Down in everlasting torment,
Black thorn-bushes, night-time garment.”

Then the King led the proud lady into the garden that she might choose the fairest of the flowers for him, and when she saw the enchantingly beautiful rose and heard the nightingales singing as they fluttered over it in a circle, when she heard the charming ditty – then she stood there so ashamed, and was moved and touched by the magical power of the rose; she seemed to feel a sensation of warm love, and at this moment she recalled with remorse the malicious deeds and intrigues she had perpetrated. And then, when she saw the thorn-bushes, over which the black ravens cawed a song of Hell, she was seized with fear, a dread of death, and she said: “My Prince, I must choose the sweet rose for you, it is the fairest.” At once, the branches and leaves and flowers of the rose stirred and softly blended into the body of a charming girl who was none other than the pious gardener’s-daughter. And she looked even lovelier and more modest than ever.

The other flowers and thornbushes formed themselves back into Princesses, who awoke as if from a heavy dream. But the King’s stepmother had sunk down from shame and remorse and lay in a stupor. And the black ravens pecked out her heart, and she turned to stone, entwined with wild thorns. The Princesses hurried fearfully away but became better and more humble in their hearts.

And the King lived a happy and pious life with his spouse, the gardener’s daughter, and Heaven’s blessing was upon them.