

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Golden Sheepfold**



Once upon a time there was a beautiful young maiden called Ilsa, the only daughter of a rough knight, and she loved the forest with its birdsong, its fragrant flowers and trickling streams, and delighted to go for strolls with her old nurse, the only carer of her childhood years – Ilsa’s mother having died young – or to stroll alone, for no danger threatened her, and she feared none, not knowing the meaning of the word. Now one day Ilsa took the air all alone in the green grove that girded her father’s castle, and in which ancient trees alternated, here with picturesque rock-faces embellished with tall fern stalks, and there with rare plants and flowers, in the most charming manner; and the youthful maiden came to a grotto in the rocks which was new to her: she could not recall having ever seen it before, or having come near it. From inside the grotto there sounded a melodic humming, as of wind harps, and this lured Ilsa to walk ever deeper into the dry cave passage, even though it became narrower and narrower and, consequently, darker and darker as well. But just at the place where the grotto passage was at its narrowest and gloomiest, there appeared through a cleft a soft radiance, and many a glittering light, and Ilsa did not resist the urge to follow this glow

– she squeezed through the cleft in the rock and suddenly, to her amazement, found herself in a completely different world. The sounds swelled and resounded in her ears with greater resonance, the glow became brighter, and the air was lit up with the radiance of flowers; but all the flowers were glittering gems, and the leaves were other green stones of manifold shades. Small beings, two feet high at the most, swarmed over a meadow – an innumerable people – and Ilsa shortly found herself surrounded and bid welcome by a host of them, for the little creatures drew near to her in a trusting, one might even say an importunate, manner.

“Who are you?” Ilsa asked, completely astonished. “Never have I seen you, never have I heard of you!”

“We are the mountain folk, the *Crickets*!” one of the cutest beings answered in a clear, shrilling voice, that really did resemble the chirrup of a cricket. “Do not be surprised that you do not know us. Our grottoes are not open every day, nor even every hour of that day on which human eyes are able to perceive them.”

“I have never heard of a mountain folk, never heard of Crickets,” said Ilsa, who stood as one caught in a dream.

“Get to know us, and you will love us!” replied the speaker for those underground beings. “And if you love us, then you will become one of us, perhaps our Queen!”

“Queen!” – how this word flashed through Ilsa’s young girl’s heart. Ilsa had of course heard about queens in her father’s castle, that they were very rich and mostly also very beautiful, that everyone served and obeyed them – yes, her nurse had told her many tales about them. Why should not, why could not Ilsa also become a queen? – And so she willingly let her cute,

mischievous new acquaintances conduct her, and she walked with them through the underground realm which encompassed her with magic, dazzled her with its resplendence, and filled her soul with rapture through its melodic strains. And then, the soft murmuring of rolling streams, the distant roaring of waterfalls, whose waters pushed their way towards the light of the upper world, the gentle twilight, brighter than moonlight and yet not so bright as sunlight – everything enthralled Ilsa's mind, for she was, after all, still half a child; and the friendliness of the Crickets, who were the most delightful playmates, as Ilsa believed – everything aroused in her the wish to stay forever in this underground realm, for there was no love to draw her to the upper world. Her father was a rough and grim knight, who had never particularly cared for her, and her nurse was old and could die soon, then Ilsa would have to mope away her days utterly alone and joyless in her father's lonely castle which all other people shunned.

And these thoughts were joined by the enticing whispering and purring of the Crickets: "Stay with us, and you will never grow old! You will bloom with the gleam of youth evermore. Every day will be a new delight for you! – Whatever you wish for – the best shall be yours!"

Captivated and enraptured, Ilsa now caught sight of a flock of sheep, which were admittedly no larger than lambs, but every one of them had a golden fleece; and even the lively little dog which bounded around this flock had golden hair. Ilsa did not descry a shepherd, but there was a shepherd's crook lying on the ground.

And then there stirred in Ilsa the desire to watch this flock, and she thought, You have the chance to put the Crickets to the test right now, and she said: "So if I were to stay with you, good Crickets, and I wished this

golden flock to be mine, and I myself to be allowed to watch over it – do you think you would grant and satisfy my wish?”

Then “Yes, yes!” rang out from many hundreds of soft little voices, and the Crickets stipulated only this: that Ilsa never again set foot in the upper world, and she oversee the golden sheepfold with care so that not one of the priceless sheep be lost. Then they presented her with the golden shepherd’s crook, decorated it with silver ribbons, and, amidst great jubilation, welcomed her as henceforth one of their own.

Ilsa, in the realm of her underground world of innocence, saw nothing more of the days, months and years that glided past in the upper world, of the changes of the seasons and the mighty shifts of Providence that move the hearts of men. Up above, she was missed, given up for lost, mourned, and then forgotten – her nurse had died, her father had fallen in a feud, and his enemies had devastated and destroyed his castle; the latter now jutted up as merely a solitary ruin on the vertex of the hill that the green grove encircled. But the old grove was long gone; all of its trees had been chopped down and now a new forest was greening, the trunks of its trees being already quite strong. Ilsa continued to watch over her golden flock, played with the childlike Crickets, and learnt from them many secrets of nature and of the underground realm; and the remembrance of another world, in which she had formerly lived, was as a dream to her. Yet this remembrance did not die, but rather began to awaken and gain force – to become a yearning. Ilsa had gradually perceived that a Cricket here and a Cricket there had dealings in the upper world, while she had been strictly forbidden all contact with it – and she gradually came to revolve thoughts in her mind that wrecked the innocent happiness she had hitherto enjoyed.

What good is my flock to me? Ilsa thought. I watch over it, but it is not *mine*; I cannot do anything with it. I was to become a *Queen* of the Crickets – so I was led to believe – but I have become the sheer opposite of this, a poor *shepherdess*. Everything thrusts upwards, to the beautiful, glorious sunlight! Roots only gather sap in the bowels of the earth so they can push it upwards and drive it into the topmost crowns of trees. The springs, the subterranean streams, they all press towards the world outside, impetuously forging a way. Where has the blue sky gone which I used to see? Where are the stirring spring breezes? Where is the festive ringing of church bells? The Crickets have no God, no Church, and no Heaven. But I want to see the heavens again – I want to, I want to!

And now Ilsa revealed her desires to the Crickets. They hung their little heads sadly; they had a foreboding of all that would come to pass.

“You promised us you’d want to stay with us always!” the Crickets objected.

“You promised me that all my wishes would be fulfilled,” Ilsa retorted.

“But we made it the first condition that you not return to the world above,” the Crickets reminded her.

“And I do not want to return to it!” said Ilsa; “I only want to see it again, the world and its blue sky, and breathe its wondrous spring scents.”

“Then you will no longer be one of us,” the Crickets protested. “If the zephyrs of the upper world so much as touch you, then you will fall victim to the lot of mortal men, who pass away like the wind; you will lose your bloom, you will grow old and die. Only in our realm does eternal youth blossom.”

Ilsa said no more – but she grieved – her yearning became ever stronger – she paid no more heed to her golden sheep, nothing could give

her pleasure any more, she spoke no more to the Crickets, and they lamented: “She is lost to us, one way or the other – therefore let us grant her wish.”

Ilsa walked into the high-lying grotto, which she had passed through to enter the realm of the underground folk, and towards the sunny light of a fine day on earth. Ah, how powerful were its rays! Her eyes delightedly flew over that part of the district where her father’s castle towered up – yet she soon began to feel uneasy. Rays of sunlight quivered golden-green through the tree-tops, the sky smiled down through them in sapphire-blue; the old rocks were the old ones still, but the trees were not the old trees any more – the paved path that had once led Ilsa to the grotto was no more; the forest-floor of the grove was all *one* sward covered with tall grass.

Ilsa looked up to the heights where she knew her imposingly built paternal home to stand, with battlements, towers, and oriels – and she started, for there was nothing, absolutely nothing to be seen there but the remains of the exterior wall, with a tall grey watchtower rising above it, around whose crumbling battlements kestrels hovered and screeched.

“What is this?” Ilsa mused. “Did it not seem to me that I dwelt down there for only a very short while – yet so much time has gone by! How old am I now, I wonder?”

Ilsa looked further away: she saw newly arisen villages and new castles in the distance; and others, whose location she remembered precisely, were no more.

Ilsa did not dare to take another step forward. She remained in the grotto, for she had promised this to the Crickets when she had finally, and reluctantly, been permitted to see the upper world again, and she tarried

there many a day, grave and brooding. She was allowed to take the golden flock out to graze on the mountain meadow before the grotto, but only on certain days and at certain hours; on the first day of May, on Ascension Day, on Whit Sunday, on Trinity Sunday, and on Midsummer's Day, at noon, when the Sun stood at its zenith, or in the midnight hours of the eve of these consecrated feast days. On these days, a number of the inhabitants of that region liked to walk on the mountain heights, a custom dating back to old heathen days, seeking healing herbs and digging up roots with magical powers. Then it would come to pass, every now and then, that Ilsa would be espied by these people – she who had grown a stranger to mankind, a pale, calm, and grave apparition, in a snow-white dress that never showed signs of aging; and many of them also saw her golden flock, but they were never able to catch one of the sheep, as much as they would have liked to, for the dog was very vigilant in guarding the sheep with the golden fleeces, and the moment he made the faintest sound, Ilsa would raise her golden shepherd's crook – and dog and flock were instantaneously lost to sight.

When good and pure people espied Ilsa and fearlessly approached her, she did give them answers to the questions they directed at her, but only to serious ones which had a serious object in view; and her answers would at times sound ambiguous, or admonitory and dehortative, or prophetic; and the people recalled that in the dim and distant past soothsaying priestesses had lived in time-honoured groves of the gods, and they called Ilsa by their common name: an Alruna.¹ All those white maidens

¹ The "Wise Women" or "Inspired Women" of the ancient Germans, who were regarded as sorceresses after the tribes converted to Christianity.

who, according to old legends, wander around ruined castles and in the groves of castle hills hoping for deliverance, were such Alrunae. Ilsa also hoped to be delivered from the spell and enchantment of the underground world and the sinister Crickets to which she had voluntarily yielded herself; but she did not know that her release from this spell was tied to almost inconceivable conditions.

One day, when Ilsa was again sitting in her rocky grotto in the twilight and letting her flock graze before it, a mortal woman walked over the mountain meadow. She was a Bilwis² or wicked witch, a woman who used secret magical charms to do mischief to man and beast. She called to Ilsa, asking: "Why do you dwell everlastingly alone, up here in your cave, High Alruna? Come, join the human race again! Feel with a human heart, and share pleasure and pain with others! Love and be loved!" Ilsa sorrowfully replied, "My word binds me – or I would gladly pass though the district with my flock!"

"You need only wish to! You have the power!" cried the Bilwis. "Simply make the sign of the cross with your shepherd's crook against the cleft at the back of your grotto, and it will instantly snap shut for ever. None of the Crickets will be able to follow you, and you will be completely free."

Ilsa, remembering her promise, was still hesitant to practice this magic when a youth of great beauty appeared and addressed her: "Entrust yourself to me, beauteous maiden! You shall sit enthroned up there, in your father's castle, which I shall build anew. You shall rule, at my side, over all of this thriving district. This woman who spoke to you is my mother, and great is our power." Ilsa made the sign of the cross against the cleft in the

² The Bilwis ("Bilbze") was also a corn demon, having originally been a benevolent grain spirit.

cave. From the other side the sound of soft strains ceased and was replaced by a whimpering lament from the Crickets, who had been cheated out of their golden flock. The Bilwis gave a revoltingly shrill cry of jubilation and her son tempestuously rushed at Ilsa to take her in his arms. Such behaviour was alien to Ilsa – she solemnly pointed her crook at the Bilwis's son and made the sign of the cross at him – the magic was broken and he collapsed, exhibiting ugly, abominable facial features, he who had appeared so handsome. And the Bilwis also crashed down to the ground, broke into convulsions, and was clearly revealed to be a nasty, ghastly witch.

“Just you wait for your reward, you miscreant girl! Just you wait!” screamed the Bilwis, furiously picking herself up from the ground; and running past Ilsa to the back of the grotto, she held some moonwort to the cleft in the rock. It instantly opened out once more to the realm of the underground folk, and the Bilwis yelled: “Come out, you Crickets! Take your flock back, punish this perfidious and faithless girl! Punish her with eternal longing and eternal disappointment.”

By now the Crickets were swarming around Ilsa in droves, and a numberless host pressed in between her and the Bilwis and her son.

“Ours you are, and ours you shall remain!” said the eldest of the Crickets. “On that day when no bell any longer peals, no church any longer stands, and evil people like this Bilwis are no more, then will the hour of your deliverance strike – no sooner! Wait and watch your sheep until that time. Till then, you shall not see days on earth again, except for once every seven years! At those times you may show yourself outside our mountain with your flock.”

And so did it come to be: to this very day, once every seven years, at the midday hour, this so cruelly cursed maiden can be seen with her flock, lonely, pale, and sad, in a snow-white dress. Evil people still walk the earth, and church bells still summon the faithful to the temples of the Lord.