

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Plaintive Song**

Once upon a time there was a King, and he died, leaving behind his wife, the Queen, and two children, a son and a daughter. But the daughter was a year older than the son. And one day the two royal children quarrelled over which of them was to become King, for the brother said, "I am a prince, and when there are princes, princesses do not come to power," and the daughter contradicted: "I am the firstborn and eldest, so the precedence ought to be *mine*." What the two children said, they said in all innocence, having simply picked up the words from the court servants without really understanding their meaning. Now as they could not resolve their dispute, they went together to their mother and asked her: "Tell us, dear mother, which of the two of us will become ruler one day?" This question saddened the mother, for through it there peeped the seed of thirst for power, which should not take root in the mind of a child, and she answered: "Dear children! Take a good look at this beautiful flower here, and then go into the forest and seek it. The one of you who finds this flower *first* will be King one day." The children looked at the flower with their full attention; its stalk was shaped like a sceptre and ended in a half-open lily. And the children went into the forest together quite innocently and began to search, and as they were searching, they gradually separated, so that the one lost sight of the other. -And the little princess found the flower first, and she rejoiced, and she looked around for her brother but he was not there. And the child thought: he will surely come soon, I will wait for him here; and she lay down on the soft sward in the cool shadow of the trees, and it was so calm in the forest, with only the buzzing of beetles and bees, and the soft murmuring of a nearby spring, and the deep-blue sky peeped through the green treetops

down at the green forest-lawn. The little princess had taken her flower in her hand and, because it was so calm and she was a little tired, she sank into sleep in God's name.

It needed but a little while for the brother to come to the spot in the forest where his sister was sleeping; he had not found the flower he sought; and there he saw his sister lying on the ground in sweet slumber, and she had the flower in her hand.

Then dark thoughts rose up in the prince's soul, and dreadful ones entered his mind.

I must be King, I ! he thought, and my sister shall not be. I will rather kill her, and I'll take the flower and go home with it, and then *I'll* be King.

Ah, one may well say: no sooner thought than done. The prince murdered his innocent little sister in her sleep and buried her in the forest, and he covered the grave with earth, and the earth with grass; and not a soul learned anything of this evil deed, for when the prince arrived home he said his sister had left him in the forest and gone her own way. When he had found the flower, he had set off back home in the belief she would be there before him.



And many years have passed, and the old Queen has never ceased to mourn her lost daughter, for whom she bade the whole forest be combed, but in vain; and she has wished for death because she herself sent her beloved daughter away; and when her son reached the age of majority, *he* became King.

And after many, many years there came into that forest a shepherd boy, who kept watch over his flock there, and to pass the time and relieve his boredom he poked around in the grass with his crook, as shepherds often do, engraving many a heart and name and cross in the green sward; and by chance, he dug up a bone from the body of the murdered Princess, and it was as pure and white as snow. And the shepherd boy made a few holes in the bone, so it became a little flute, and he set it to his lips and blew. Then plaintive notes poured out of the bone, ah, so infinitely sadly, and it really was as if the voice of a weeping child were singing, so that the shepherd boy himself had to weep, and yet he could not stop playing. The plaintive song went thus:

“O shepherd mine, o shepherd mine,
You’re fluting on my dead white bone!
My brother slew me in a thicket.
He took from my hand,
The flower I found,
And said it was he who had picked it.
He smote me in sleep; his smite was severe,
He burrowed a grave, he buried me here,
My brother – he was young then.
Fluting on my bone,
You will make it known,
Bewailing to God and to men.”

And there was always only the one, always the one song to be brought forth from the bone flute, and the young shepherd played it always, and every

time bright tears rolled down over his cheeks.

When the plaintive song resounded in the forest, all the birds stopped their song and became sad, and hung their heads and dropped their wings and were silent; and the beetles and bees buzzed no more, and even the murmuring of the splashing, garrulous spring was no more to be heard – the woods truly had, as the saying goes, the silence of the grave.

If the plaintive song sounded over a pasture, the beasts of the meadow hung their heads in sorrow, and none of them uttered a sound; and the dog barked no more and did not, as was his wont, leap merrily around, but cowered and whimpered in a tiny voice, for there was something in the plaintive song that cut all creatures to the quick. But the shepherd boy could never weary of fluting this song, until one day a knight came by the grove, heard the song and felt his eyes watering, and he halted and would not relent until the shepherd boy had sold him, the knight, the ownership of the little flute. And now the knight travelled all over the land and played the song, and with it he moved all the world to tears.

And so he came to the Court, where there sat on the throne the young King of whom the song sang and complained, and the old Queen Mother still lived; and she was brought tidings of the knightly minstrel who fluted a song with a melody that made every heart tremble and filled every soul with deep sorrow.

But the old Queen, who was ever sad, said: “What could there be in the world that were sadder than *my* sorrow? I know of nought; the minstrel’s plaintive song will not make me any sadder than I already am. Let him come all the same.”

The knightly minstrel came and played:

“O knight of mine, o knight of mine,

You’re fluting on my dead white bone!

My brother slew me in a thicket.”

No sooner did the old Queen hear these few words than a flood of tears poured from her eyes – but when the song flowed on:

“He took from my hand,

The flower I found,

And said it was he who had picked it.”

the Queen gave a piercing scream and fell into a deep swoon. The minstrel was startled and would have broken off, but he could not – once it had been begun, the song would that it be played to the end, every time, and when the last note trembled away into silence with a low plaintive cry, the Queen awoke from her swoon and cried: “Give me, *me* the flute! All my treasures for – this flute *to me*!”

And the knightly minstrel let the Queen have the bone flute, saying he desired no treasures – and accepted nothing and went on his way. And the Queen shut herself up all alone in her innermost chambers and played the song and wept until she had almost no tears left to shed.

Now the King had become a lusty and pleasure-loving lord, who took delight in music and song, liked to hold merry feasts, and lived life to the full. One day it so happened that he had decided to throw a feast, and numerous singers and minstrels had been bespoken and numerous guests invited. In accordance with custom, the young King had never failed to invite his mother to a single one of his feasts, but she had never attended,

for she bore too much sorrow in her heart – as she bade her son be told, with her thanks. But when the invitation reached her this time, she sent word that she would attend. This surprised the King and disturbed him, and he did not know whether this were cause for celebration.

Now when all the guests were assembled in many-coloured splendour, and all the singers and minstrels were ready, and the court walked into the marvellously decorated Royal Hall in which the feast was being held, the sight of the old Queen in long, black, trailing mourning garments and a widow's veil well-nigh gave rise to an anxious amazement – but the instruments broke out in exultation – harps and drums, flutes and cymbals – and the choral singers began, in sublime strains, a hymn in praise of the King.

But what is the old Queen doing? She does not sit down, she stands as rigid as a marble statue. What kind of strange little sceptre is she holding in her hand? Ah – it is not a sceptre, it is a bone from a corpse. And why is she raising this dead bone to her mouth? Why is she holding it just as minstrels hold their flutes?

Hark! One note – and all the drums and harps and cymbals fall silent – another note, and every singer's mouth falls silent.

But there sits the King and looks, a monstrous dread running through his veins, with horror at his mother; and everyone, everyone, turns their gaze on the old Queen.

The old Queen is playing a solo on the flute.

“O mother mine, o mother mine,

You're fluting on my dead white bone!”

And every heart is exalted and trembles, and no eye remains dry, but household and guests, singers and minstrels, all weep.

“My brother slew me in a thicket.”

“Ha!” shouts the King, and the sceptre falls from his grasp, and he reaches for his crown with both hands.

“He took from my hand

The flower I’d found

And said it was he who had picked it.”

Then the crown rolled down from the King’s head, fell onto the marble floor, and smashed to pieces. It sounded like a skull rattling on the marble.

“He smote me in sleep; his smite was so rude,

He burrowed a grave, for me in the wood”

Then the King himself crashed down off the throne and fell on his face and groaned and whimpered.

“My brother – he was young then.”

The King writhed in his death-throes and jerked – and screamed: “Stop it! Mother – stop it!”

But the old Queen could not of her own accord end the plaintive song; it sounded on:

“Fluting on my bone,

You will make it known,

Bewailing to God and to men.”

And while these words were heard, dreadful and crushing although not at all loud, all the guests, minstrels, singers and court servants fled out of the hall by every door – smashing many instruments and chairs to pieces and

extinguishing the candles except for two; and when the song had sounded to its end, there was no one left in the wide hall but the old Queen in mourning garb and her dying son in his tinsel finery, richly trimmed with gold and studded with pearls. And she kneeled down beside her still prostrate son, and held his head in her hands, and bathed it with burning tears. Then one of the two candles which were still burning slowly went out.

The old Queen wept and prayed up to midnight – then, with her own hand, she snuffed out the last candle and shattered the flute so that never again would the plaintive song be heard.