

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Royal Children**

In a forest there was a small, secluded cottage, in which a mother lived with her daughter, the latter being already quite grown-up. The mother was a very wicked and cunning woman who got up to all kinds of mysterious things. Her appearance caused every stranger who saw her to shudder with fear. Her face was incomparably ugly; her eyes were fiery-red and flashed restlessly and uncannily; on her head she always wore a black scarf, over which her stiff grey hair hung down. In summer her suntanned nape, breast and arms were uncovered, and a black bodice enclosed her stooping frame; a red skirt clashed glaringly with her bare, dark brown legs and the snow-white sack she had hanging from her shoulder. But the most uncanny thing of all was a ring she wore on the index-finger of her right hand, which was made of gold and studded with fiery red stones, and shone with a blinding light. Thus did the old woman ever creep around in the forest. If she saw a wanderer or a travelling coach, she pressed herself on the people and told their fortunes, prophesying truly wondrous things, while begging for money. And if she found children in the forest, she lured them to her home and slaughtered them. Her daughter, on the other hand, was a really kind-hearted girl who often wept bitterly in secret over the evil deeds of her mother and besought the good Lord to deliver her from that wicked woman. Yet the latter had, as it seemed, life eternal; she never fell ill, and although her limbs were old and stiff and quite emaciated, yet she possessed the power of the strongest man. For all of this she had her magic ring to thank; and for much more besides, for the hand which wore the ring was always invisible, so whenever she addressed a stranger out in the forest, she would, without fail, reach into his pocket for his purse at the

same time and pull out what she found there without the other noticing in the slightest. Furthermore, the red, flaming rays of the stones on her ring made animals stand still: when they flashed in their eyes, the animals had to look fixedly at the rays until the old woman turned the ring on her finger. So she often crept around in the forest carrying a large pot, and by flashing the ringstones in the eyes of hinds she made them stand still, and then she milked them.

One day, in the evening, she was sitting at home with her daughter, drinking this hind-milk, when there was a knocking at the window; and when she looked out two children, as pretty as a picture and exquisitely dressed, were standing outside crying, and the bigger of the two, a boy, said: "Oh, we have lost our way and now night is falling, old mother, be so good as to let us sleep in your house this night, tomorrow we shall try to find our way back home." The old woman grinned with diabolical joy, and quickly opening the front door she let the children in. But she lost no time in treating them very ill: after pulling off their lovely clothes so that they were totally naked she put them in a dark stable. Then she took an old saucepan, poured milk into it, and laid it down before the children with the words: "Here, drink the milk, so you'll soon become fat, so I can slaughter you; you're no use for anything else on this earth, are you, you brats."

Oh, how bitterly the poor children wept! They could not eat anything for sorrow; but soon a sleep came over them which removed their heartache. They dreamed that they were at home with their dear mother and their father, and they were playing the most delightful games. But when they awoke and again became aware of their sad situation, they began to

weep and lament anew. Finally they heard the stable doors opening – someone was coming – and they were greatly afraid, thinking to be fetched and slaughtered any minute. This time, however, it was the daughter who came, for the old woman had already gone out into the forest. The good girl was sincerely sorry for the dear children and would have liked to help them, but she herself had good reason to be very afraid of her wicked mother. She kindly asked the children, “So, what are your names?” The boy answered, sobbing, “I am called Irmin and my sister is called Elmine, now what is your name?” She said, “I am called Katie. But who is your father? And where are you from?” – The boy said, “My father wears a golden cloak and a crown, and our home is so lovely, you should come and visit us someday.”

Katie said, “I’ll try to free you, but that cannot happen right now; just be calm and patient, I will never let you be slaughtered. Drink your milk, and I’ll bring you strawberries and bread as well, just be calm, dear children. And until the time that I have thought of a plan to save you, you should take these two sticks, and when my mother comes and says, ‘Hold out your finger; I want to see if you’re fat yet,’ then hold out these sticks, so she will find you not yet fat enough and will not slaughter you.”

The children felt comforted by Katie’s words and stopped crying; they ate and drank, and were heartily glad that they would be going home. In the evening, when the old woman came back, she invariably went to the stable and called to the children: “Stick your fingers out,” but the children held out their sticks, the old woman cut into them with a sharp knife, and each time she said, “You’re still scrawny!” and went away. And in the

morning, when the old one had gone out, good Katie came to the children, bringing them food and comforting them. But one day, when the old one came to the children in the evening, they had lost their sticks and had to hold out their delicate fingers, and she cut into them and screeched with glee: "You're fat now, tomorrow I'll slaughter you!" Oh, what heartache for the poor children! That same evening, Katie had to bring water for the children to be boiled in after they had been slaughtered. And Katie wept to herself and thought and thought how she could yet free the poor children. In the night she silently crept out of her bed, spat on it, and said in a quiet voice:

"Dearest, dearest bed, when my
Mother calls me, you reply."

After that, she spat on her chest, on the stairs, and in the kitchen, making the same entreaty each time. Then she opened the stable, let the children out, and fled with them.

In the morning the old woman called out, "Katie, get up this minute and stoke up the fire," and the answer came, "I'm already up!" After a while, Katie not having appeared, the old one called out again: "Katie, are you not coming yet?" And the answer came, "I'm sitting on my chest, putting on my stockings!" But another while passed and Katie did not come, and the old woman called out, "Katie, what's keeping you?" And a voice replied, "I'm on the stairs!"

The old woman went back to sleep, and when at last she awoke once more and all was quite silent outside her chamber she angrily shouted, "Katie, you lazy strumpet, wherever are you?" The reply came, "Why, I'm in

the kitchen!” But the old one did not hear the slightest sound, so in the end she got out of bed, intending to give Katie a proper scolding and thrashing, but behold – there was no Katie to be found, and the children were gone as well. – Now the old woman was beside herself with rage, and she strode rapidly forth to search for her daughter and the children and exact an appalling revenge.

By dint of her magic ring she had discovered the trail of the fugitives at once, and so rapid were the steps she took that in next to no time she could perceive the three in the distance. The children had looked round and noticed, to their terror, the wicked old woman; in their fear they did not know which way to turn to escape the old woman in time, for she was coming towards them with giant strides. There was a huge black eagle sitting by the road, and the children called to it in voices filled with fear:

“Oh dearest eagle, bear us away

To our good parents without delay.”

And the bird spread its wings and, swift as an arrow, bore the small fugitives, together with Katie, through the skies, and set them down before a magnificent castle. Then there came a man attired in a gold-embroidered cloak and wearing a crown on his head, and a beautiful woman came out with him; they greeted and welcomed their beloved children, who had been lost for some time, with the greatest delight. And good Katie had to stay with the children for evermore, and she was very well taken care of. But the eagle had flown away, and when he espied the ring with the fiery red stones on the finger of the hotly pursuing old woman, he greedily shot down towards her, snatched her up in his claws, and kept pecking at her finger

until he had the ring in his beak, whereupon he let the old one go.

Screaming blue murder, she plunged down in front of the beautiful castle – but into a pond, and that same moment a mighty fish leapt up with its mouth agape and devoured her.