

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Seven Ravens**

As a great many wondrous things have happened in this world, so it once came to pass that a poor woman gave birth to seven boys at once; and they all lived and thrived. Quite a few years later, she also bore a daughter. Her husband was very diligent and efficient in his work, so those people who need a handicraftsman willingly engaged his services, by which means he was not only able to support his large family in an honest manner, but he earned so much that his worthy wife, through meticulous economy, could lay a little money aside for a rainy day. But this good father died in the prime of his life, and his poor widow soon fell into hardship, for she could not earn enough to feed and clothe her eight children. And furthermore, the seven boys grew ever bigger, and needed ever more, and, to the great grief of their mother, they became ever naughtier; indeed, they even became wild and malicious. The poor woman was so weighed down with worry and care that she was almost at the end of her tether. She wanted to bring her children up to be good and pious, but neither her strictness nor her leniency bore any fruit, for the boys' hearts were, and remained, obstinate. So one day, when her patience was quite at an end, she said, "Oh, you wicked black-hearted boys, I wish you were seven black ravens and you flew away so I never would see you again." Immediately the seven boys turned into ravens, flew out of the window, and disappeared.

Now the mother lived with her only daughter in deep peace and contentment, and they earned more than enough to meet their needs. And the daughter became a good, pretty, and demure girl. Yet after some years had passed they both, mother and daughter, began to feel a heartfelt yearning for the seven brothers, and they spoke of them often and wept: if only the



brothers would come back and be well-behaved boys, how comfortably we all could live on what we earn and how much joy we would have with one another. And because the yearning for her brothers grew ever more ardent in the girl's heart, she said to her mother one day: "Dear mother, let me go forth and search for my brothers, that I may reclaim them from their wicked ways and bring them back to you, to the honour and joy of your old age." The mother replied, "My good daughter, I cannot and shall not stop you from performing this pious deed, go forth, and God be with you!" Then she gave her a small gold ring which she had worn on her finger when a little child, at the time her brothers were turned into ravens.

Then the girl set out at once and wandered far, far away, and for a long time she found no trace of her brothers; but one day she came to a very high mountain, which had a small house on its summit. She sat down at the bottom of the mountain to rest, all the while looking up in deep thought at the house. It seemed to her to be now a bird's nest – for it looked grey, as if it were fitted together from stones and mud – and now a human dwelling. She thought: might not your brothers be living up there? And when, at length, she saw seven black ravens flying out of the house, her

conjecture was confirmed. Joyfully, she started to climb the mountain, but the path that led to the summit was paved with such strange stones, as smooth as glass, that she invariably ascended a stretch with great toil only to slip and skid back down. And she was dejected and did not know what she could do to get up the mountain. Then she saw a lovely white goose, and she thought: "If I only had your wings, I would soon be up there." And then she thought, "And can't I cut off your wings for myself? Oh, they would assuredly help me!" And she quickly caught the lovely goose, cut off its wings and its legs as well, and sewed these on to her body. And behold – when she tried to fly, everything went so smoothly, so easily and so well; and when she was tired from flying, she ran a short way on the goose's feet and did not slip again. In this way did she arrive quickly and safely at her long-desired destination. At the top she entered the house, but it was very small: inside there were seven tiny little tables, seven little stools, seven little beds, and there were also seven little windows in the room; and in the oven there were seven little bowls in which lay roasted little birds and boiled bird's eggs. The good sister had become weary from her far journey, and she was now glad to be able to have a proper rest; she also felt hungry. So she took the seven bowls out of the oven and ate a morsel from each of them, and sat a while on each stool, and lay down a while in each bed. And in the last bed she fell asleep, and she was still lying there when the seven brothers came back.

They flew through the seven windows into the room, took their bowls out of the oven, and were about to eat, when they noticed that some of their food had been eaten already. Now they wanted to lay themselves down to

sleep but they found their beds disarranged, and one of the brothers uttered a loud cry, “Oh, look at this girl lying in my bed!”



The other brothers swiftly flew over and were astonished to see the girl lying there asleep. Then the one said to the other, “Oh, would it were out little sister!” and they cried out to each other with joy, “Yes, it is our little sister, yes it is! She had hair like that, and a mouth like that, and at that time she wore, on her biggest finger, a ring like the one she is wearing on her little finger now!” And they all rejoiced, and they all kissed their little sister, but she slept so soundly that it was long before she awoke.

Finally the girl opened her eyes and saw her seven black brothers sitting around her bed. And she said, “Oh, I am heartily glad to see you, my dear brothers. God be thanked that I have found you at last; I have made a long, arduous journey for your sakes to fetch you back from your exile – that is, if you now have better sentiments in your hearts so you will never again vex your good mother, you will work diligently with us, and you will become your old mother’s honour and joy.” The brothers had wept bitterly during this speech, and now they said, “Yes, sweet sister, we shall be good, and never again insult our mother; oh, it is a wretched life we lead as ravens, and before we built ourselves this little house hunger and misery

often brought us close to death. There followed remorse, which racked us day and night, for we had to eat the corpses of poor, executed sinners and so were constantly reminded of the terrible end that awaits those who sin.”

The sister wept tears of joy at her brothers’ conversion and on hearing them speak words so full of pious sentiment. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “now all is well; when you come home and mother hears that you have changed for the better, she will forgive you with all her heart and make you back into men again.”

Now when the brothers were ready to travel home with their sister, they first said, as they opened a wooden casket, “Dear sister, take these pretty golden rings and flashing gems, which we found abroad, little by little, into your apron, and carry them home, for through these we can become rich when we are people again. As ravens, we collected them only for the sake of their beautiful glitter.”

The sister did as her brothers wished, and she took pleasure in the beautiful jewellery. On the journey home the raven-brothers carried their sister on their wings, one brother after the other, until they arrived at their mother’s dwelling; there they flew in through the window and asked their mother for forgiveness, promising to always be good boys from that time on. The sister added her pleas and entreaties, and the mother was filled with joy and love and she forgave her seven sons. Then they became men again, very handsome, blooming youths, the one as tall and as graceful as the other. They gratefully hugged and kissed their dear mother and loving sister. And soon afterwards all seven brothers took demure young wives and built themselves a large and lovely house, for they had received a

considerable sum of money for their jewels. And the house-warming was the brothers' sevenfold marriage.

Then the sister took a worthy husband, but she was persuaded by her brothers' pleas and entreaties to continue living with them.

And so the good mother had much joy of her children, and they took loving care of her and showed her filial reverence into her twilight years.