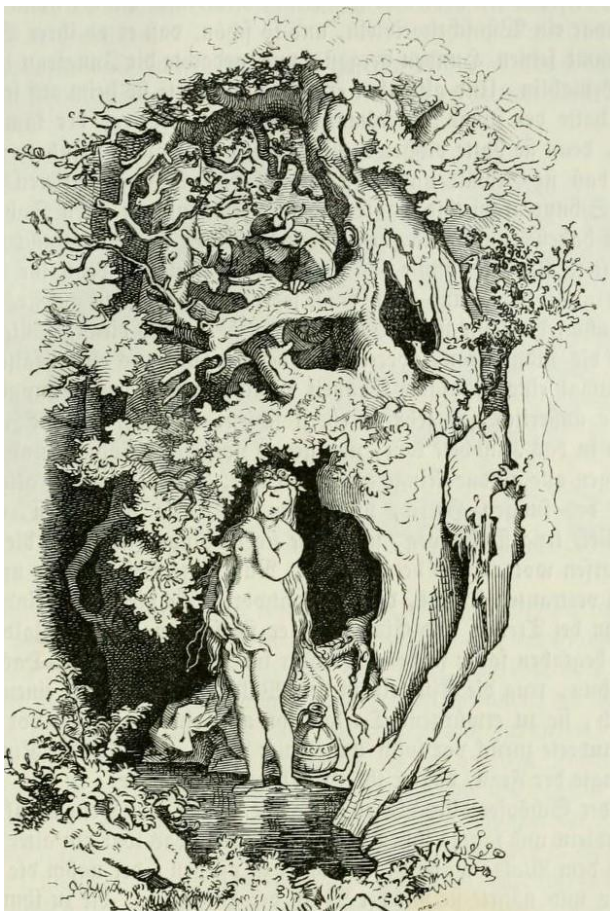


The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Seven Swans**

There was once a young knight who was handsome and rich and had a magnificent castle. One day he rode with his hounds into the forest to hunt, where he saw a hind that was whiter than snow, and it started up and fled from him through the wild tall bushes into the mountains. The knight followed it at a great pace and came at last to a wild, dark valley where he lost sight of the hind because of his dogs, so he rode hither and thither



calling his hounds back together.

Thus he arrived at a river, by the side of which a beautiful maiden stood washing herself, and she held a fine golden chain in her hand. And as this maiden pleased him greatly, he softly dismounted, crept up close to her and suddenly took the golden chain from her hand. This chain possessed special power and the magic of the planets, and the young lady was a wish-maiden, and she was so fair that the knight forgot the

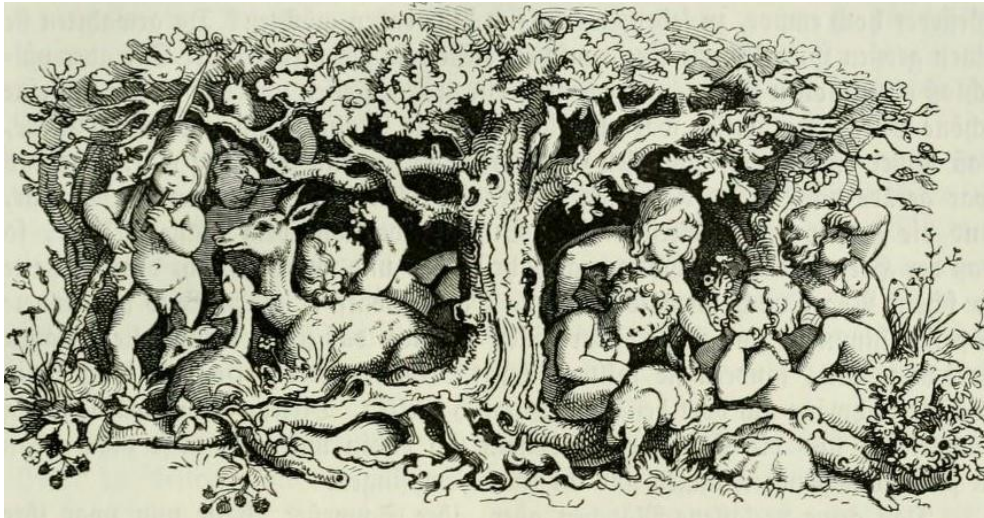
hind and his hounds in contemplation of her beauty and thought to take her home as his wife. And he did so, and took her back to his castle.

Now the young knight had a mother who was greatly incommoded by her daughter-in-law, for up till then she had ruled the household on her own and she now feared that she would lose power and standing at the castle. And she took a dislike to her daughter-in-law, and came to hate her,

and often exhorted her son not to hold her all too dear, and would only too willingly have encompassed strife and discord between them. But she could not bring this to pass, for her son would not listen to her words and grew indignant at her every time. Now when she perceived this, she affected to be very submissive and obliging, in all matters, towards her son and his young wife, but everything she said and did came from a false heart, in which she had particularly conceived feelings of cruel malice towards the young wife, even though she outwardly appeared to honour her very much. And then the time came when the young wife went into confinement and was delivered of six sons and a daughter who all bore golden rings around their necks. At once the wicked old woman, the mother of the young lord, came and took the seven little children while their mother was sleeping, carried them away, and placed seven young puppies who had been littered that night in their stead. Now this false and faithless woman had a trusted servant, and she placed the seven children in his hands, binding him on his faith and oath to take them into the wild forest and kill and bury them in the earth, or drown them in the water. The servant swore to do this, and taking the children into the forest, he laid them under a tree and prepared to throttle them. But then a horror of this murder crept over him, and recoiling from so faithless a deed, he let the children live and went and told the woman he had executed her command.

But the Creator of all beings, who directs all things for the best, took pity on the children and sent them a foster father, a wise old master who lived in the forest to cultivate wisdom; he took the children to his hermitage and fed them with the milk of hinds, which were accustomed to come to him,

for seven years.



When that wicked woman had taken the children away from their mother, she led her son to the young woman, showed him the puppies, and said: “Look, son, the children your wife has borne you – they are young dogs.” She did this to her son for revenge, because he loved his wife so much. When he saw this, he believed his mother, and there rose up in his breast a hatred for the wife he had previously loved so dearly, and he would not listen to a word of an excuse but had her buried up to the breast in the courtyard in front of his castle’s palace, and he had a wash-bowl full of water placed over her head, and he commanded all his servants to wash themselves over her head and dry their hands on her beautiful hair. Furthermore, she was to receive no other food than that given to the dogs.

And so the poor woman had to remain standing in the pit in terrible distress for seven whole years, and not a soul was allowed to take pity on her. As a result, her fair figure wasted away, her clothes mouldered, and nothing remained but the skin over her bones.

In the meantime, the young children in the forest learned to shoot game and birds and live on their meat, and then it so happened that the

knight, their father, went hunting in the forest once again. There he caught sight of the children as they ran around playing in the wood, and they were all wearing golden chains around their necks. And his heart was moved to take a liking to them; he would happily have seized one or the other, but they would not let themselves be caught, disappearing instead into the depths of the forest. At home he related to his mother and other lords and friends how he had seen little children with golden chains around their necks in the forest. Hearing this, the mother was secretly alarmed, and taking the servant to task, she asked him: "Did you kill the children at that time, or did you let them live?" Then the servant confessed that he had not been able to kill them with his own hand but had laid them down under a tree, where they must surely have perished soon afterwards. At this she commanded the servant to ride into the forest immediately, search for the children, who were certainly not dead, and take their golden chains away, or they would both be put to shame. The servant fearfully obeyed and sought the children in the forest for three days, but did not find them. Not until the fourth day did he come across them; they had taken off their chains and were now in the form of swans, and they played on the water. But the girl still had her human form, and she watched the swans as they played on the water. Then the servant stealthily crept up and took the six golden chains away; but the girl ran away from him and he could not catch her.

When the servant brought the chains to the old woman, she sent for a goldsmith and bid him fashion a goblet from them. Now when the goldsmith began to cast a goblet from these chains, he found that the gold was so precious and pure that it could neither be worked with a hammer nor

be made to flow by fire, except for one chain, which he shattered and made into a ring; the others he weighed on his scales, laid aside, and replaced with other gold of an equivalent weight, which he made into a goblet, and he gave this to the woman together with the ring; and she locked them both away in her cabinet.

As for those swans which could not now regain their human form, they were deeply distressed, and sang, in sweet, mournful voices, melancholy songs which sounded like the crying of small children. At length they beat their wings and rose up high to see whither they should turn. Then they descried a large, crystal-clear lake, and they alighted there. The lake surrounded a high mountain, with a big, hanging rock face on which there sat a handsome castle. The rock face was so sheer and the water lay so close to the mountain that, apart from a very steep and narrow track, there was no access whatsoever to the castle. And that just happened to be the castle of the young knight who was the father of those children, and because the windows of the castle's dining-hall faced the water, the lord soon perceived the swans, and he fell to wondering, for he had never seen such beautiful birds before. So he threw bread and other foods down to them and gave all his servants the command that no one was to chase or drive them away, but bread should always be thrown down to them, until such time as the swans felt quite at home there. This command was diligently executed, and the swans grew accustomed to being there and became so tame that they would unfailingly come to receive their food when it was time to eat.

Now the poor, abandoned girl, their sister, had retained her human form, to be sure, but she was helpless all the same, and she walked up to her father's castle begging for alms. There she was given the scraps from the table, and she shared these with the poor woman in the ditch, for whenever she saw her she could not help crying bitterly. Yet neither of them knew the other. The maiden also brought some leftover crumbs down to the lake under the castle and gave them to the swans, her brothers. Every time, when she approached, the swans would come up flying and flapping and giggling, and they ate their food out of the maiden's pinafore.



She caressed them fondly and often took them in her arms, and then towards evening she would go back up to the castle and sleep all through the night before the woman who stood in the ground, without knowing that this was her mother.

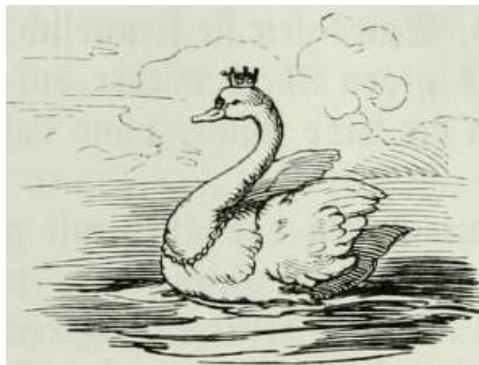
All the inmates of the castle saw this with great amazement, and saw that she cried whenever she was with the woman, and also that she looked very similar to her. And the knight's heart was moved as well, so he observed the maiden more closely and saw the similarity with his wife, and he also saw the golden chain around her neck. And he had the girl appear before him, when he asked: "My dear child, tell me – where are you from,

where do you come from? Who are your parents, and how have you tamed the swans so that they eat out of your lap?”

Then the poor child fetched a sigh from the very bottom of her heart and said, “Dear lord! The parents I had, I have never known. Nor do I know if I have seen them. But if you ask about the swans, they are my brothers, who fed with me on the milk of the hinds in the forest. At one time it happened that my brothers took off their golden chains because they wanted to bathe, and they were turned into swans; and because the chains were stolen, they could not regain their human form and had to stay as swans.”

These words were heard by the false, untrue woman and the servant, her accomplice, and they started violently, both turning pale from the consciousness of their guilt. The knight noticed this and reflected upon it while walking down the mountain. The old woman incited the servant to kill the maid, and taking a naked sword, he followed the girl when she went, as was her custom, down to the swans. But the lord espied him and approached him, and just when the servant was about to commit the misdemeanour he struck the sword from his hand. Then the servant fell to his knees and confessed everything. Thereupon the knight went to his mother and compelled her with threats to a confession; then she opened her cabinet and gave her son that goblet which was supposed to have been fashioned from the chains. The knight immediately sent for the goldsmith and made earnest enquiries of him about the goblet. As this man also now stood in fear of punishment, he confessed the truth, how he still had the chains in their entirety except for one, from which he had fashioned a ring.

The knight bid him bring the chains, and gave them to the girl; she placed them around the swans' necks, one for each. Then they all regained their human form except for one – he had to remain a swan. The numerous strange adventures this swan underwent can be found described in many a book. Now the knight had the poor woman taken out of the ground without delay, and he had her revived with fine perfumes and precious spices, so that she became a beautiful woman again. His false mother he had set in that very hole in which his innocent wife had languished and suffered for seven long years because of her malice. So it befell her according to the words of the Prophet: *Whoso diggeth a pit for others shall fall therein.*¹



¹ Proverbs 26:27.