

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

In the depths of a forest an evil old witch lived quite alone with her daughter, which latter was a good, gentle child to whom the proverb, 'The apple does not fall far from the tree' did not apply. The tree in question was inordinately gnarled, thorny, and ugly; whoever saw the old woman took care to stay out of her way, thinking: Danger is best kept at a distance. The old woman always wore a pair of green spectacles and, over her shaggy hair which hung down very low and uncombed, a ragged red cloth; and she liked to go around in short sleeves, so her scrawny sun-browned arms stuck far out from the garment which hung loosely around them. On her back she ordinarily carried a sack full of magic herbs she had gathered in the forest, and in her hand she bore a large pot in which she boiled these to bring about thunderstorms, sleet and hail, frost and rime, whenever she pleased.



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On her finger she wore a witch's ring of gold with a fiery red carbuncle, with which she could bewitch men and beasts. This ring gave the old woman the strength of a giant and enormous vitality, and it made her, whenever she so wished, completely invisible. Then she could go wherever she wanted and take whatever she wanted – and that is precisely what she did; and she sought out the hinds in the forest, and when the animals saw the ring and saw the stone glittering, they had to stand spellbound on the spot, and then the old woman walked up to the hinds and milked their milk into her pot and drank it with her daughter. This daughter was called Katie and did not have a good life with her wicked mother, yet she bore all her sorrow with patience. The thing that pained her most was her mother, many a time, bringing back children with whom Katie would gladly have played, but the old one always took the children's clothes from them, locked them up, and fed them with hind's milk to make them fat; and what she did with them next is gruesome to tell: it is like this – she turned them into fawns and sold these to hunters. The hunters shot dead the poor, transformed and transacted fawns and took them to town, where people love to eat young game. So evil and wicked was the ugly old woman; and because she did nothing all day but cast spells and devise evil intrigues, frequently muttering aloud to herself while she did so, her daughter Katie, observing without being observed, heard several magic spells, which she secretly committed to memory.

Then, one evening, the old woman came home leading two beautiful children, a boy and a girl, who one could tell were siblings and the children of rich people; the two of them had lost their way in the wood, and had been

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found by the old woman and brought back to her house, and she had told them she would take them back to their parents. The children found themselves horribly deceived when the old one pulled off their gorgeous clothes, dressed them in rags instead, and locked them up in a dark chamber. Yet they were given a whole potful of hind's milk to drink, which tasted good, and a piece of black bread with it, which tasted less good – but was also consumed, in the end.

The next morning, the old woman limped into the forest at an early hour and waved at the hinds. There was a family of deer which the old one knew particularly well and held in esteem, consisting of Mr. Stag, Mrs. Hind, and two young fawns, and they always stuck together faithfully in the forest; but they lived in constant fear of the wicked old woman who could make them all to stand still, and they had to let the evil witch take the mother's milk, preventing the fawns from drinking their fill and fattening up. If I could run my antlers through your scrawny body, just the once! the stag often thought, and the hind likewise had no friendly wishes for the old one – but their wishes availed them nought. While the old woman was in the forest, Katie crept to the dark chamber and saw, through a chink in the door, the poor, imprisoned children, who were sighing and weeping with heavy hearts. Then Katie asked, "Who are you, you poor children?" "We are the children of a King! O set us free, and my father will reward you!" said the Royal Prince. "And my mother also," said the little Princess, before adding: "You shall be our good sister too, and sleep beside me in a silken bed, and I'll give you the most beautiful golden clothes, help us, just help us!" - Then Katie said, "Just be patient, my dear royal children; I shall wait awhile and

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consider how I may set you free.”

At the crack of dawn the next day, good Katie cast a magic spell. She hurriedly left her bed, breathed on it, and said:

“Dearest bed, for me reply;

When I’m gone, you be my I!”

Just so did she breathe on her box-chest, on the stairs, and on the stove in the kitchen, speaking this spell each time. After that she went to the strongly secured room of the royal children, held some moonwort,¹ which the old one had left lying on a ledge, to the lock, and said:

“Bolt and pin, bolt and pin,

Open up, let out, let in!”

Then the lock and bolt instantly flew open and Katie quickly led the royal children out and into the forest.

When the old woman woke up, she called out, “Katie, get up and stoke the fire!” – And a voice cried from the bed:

“I’m up, as bright as day,

I’ll be down in the kitchen right away!”

The old woman stayed in bed, but as time passed and she still heard nothing, she called again: “Katie! Where are you, you lazy creature?” “In a minute!” came a voice from the box-chest.

“I’m sitting on my chest

And tying my garter – I’m almost dressed!”

Now as another while passed without anything stirring or shifting in

¹ The German word is “Springwurzeln,” which is Spurge, or Touch-Me-Not. It was believed to open all doors and locks for treasure-seekers. In England, Moonwort was believed to have a similar magical property.

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the house, the old woman lost her temper and shouted, "Katie! You brat! Wherever are you?" Then a voice rang down from the stairs:

"I'm coming, swift as a hare!

Already, I'm here in the flesh on the stair!"

The old woman calmed down once more – but not for long, because everything remaining in silence again, she started up and began to chide and curse. Then a voice called from the stove:

"Why curse me for a sloven?

I'm in the kitchen, standing at the oven!"

Nevertheless, the kitchen, and the entire house, remained as silent as the grave. Now the old woman's thread of patience completely snapped, and she leapt out of bed, flung on her clothes and grabbed a broomstick, intending to give Katie a merciless thrashing. But when she came out of her room, there was no Katie to be found, no sight of her, no sound of her; and the best thing about it, or the worst thing for the old one, was the royal



children being gone as well. You should have seen the witch's leaps the furious wicked old woman now made! Her ring showed her immediately the direction in which Kate had fled with the children, and she wildly tore after them. Now, on their way through the forest, the children had come across Mr. Red Deer and his spouse, son, and daughter, and they had told

this family in all haste about their misfortune and their flight; and the deer, their noble hearts profoundly stirred, professed themselves willing to provide the runaways with all possible help. The good Lady Hind offered

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the children her back on which to carry the three of them to the King's castle, which lay beyond the forest, and the noble husband ordered his children to withdraw into the thicket while he placed himself behind some thick shrubs by the side of the road, ready, when the old woman raced past and he could not see her ring, to send her head over heels.

In no time at all the old woman came bounding along; in her anger and passion she had completely forgotten to make herself invisible, and she did not hold up her finger with the ring; and so it happened that, all of a sudden, a large and magnificent head of antlers made a very entangling contact with her, which involved the point of one antler scraping against the old one's finger with such force that the magic ring came off and stuck on the point, and in two shakes of a lamb's tail the stag had forked up the old witch, who was now stiff and stock-still through the power of the ring, and bore her at full gallop down the trail the good hind, his wife, had left in the dewy grass. She had, in the meantime, arrived at the King's castle with the three children, and the lost children, along with good Katie, their saviour, had been received with delight by the King and the Queen – when they all suddenly saw, to their great amazement, the old woman sailing along carried on the antlers of the majestic hart. The stag did not tarry but sprang into the castle pond and ducked his head under. When he surfaced again, his antlers were free of their burden. And the magic ring also lay at the bottom of the water. The stag and hind returned to their forest and to their children, and were very glad that no one would ever take their milk from them again; while Katie stayed with the royal children and slept in a silken bed and wore golden clothes and was treated just like a Princess.