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| **The Twelve Brothers**  **Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm**  Once upon a time there were a king and a queen. They lived happily together and had twelve children, all boys. One day the king said to his wife, "If our thirteenth child, which you are soon going to bring into the world, is a girl, then the twelve others shall die, so that her wealth may be great, and so that she alone may inherit the kingdom."  Indeed, he had twelve coffins made. They were filled with wood shavings and each was fitted with a coffin pillow. He had them put in a locked room, and gave the key to the queen, ordering her to tell no one about them.  The mother sat and mourned the entire day, until the youngest son -- who was always with her, and who was named Benjamin after the Bible -- said to her, "Dear mother, why are you so sad?"  "Dearest child," she answered, "I cannot tell you."  However, he would not leave her in peace, until she unlocked the room and showed him the coffins, already filled with wood shavings.  Then she said, "My dearest Benjamin, your father had these coffins made for you and your eleven brothers. If I bring a girl into the world, you are all to be killed and buried in them."  As she spoke and cried, her son comforted her, saying, "Don't cry, dear mother. We will take care of ourselves and run away."  Then she said, "Go out into the woods with your eleven brothers. One of you should climb the highest tree that you can find. Keep watch there and look toward the castle tower. If I give birth to a little son, I will raise a white flag. If I give birth to a little daughter, I will raise a red flag, and then you should escape as fast as you can, and may God protect you. I will get up every night and pray for you, in the winter that you may warm yourselves near a fire, and in the summer that you may not suffer from the heat."  After she had blessed her children, they went out into the woods. One after the other of them kept watch, sitting atop the highest oak tree and looking toward the tower. After eleven days had passed, and it was Benjamin's turn, he saw that a flag had been raised. It was not the white one, but instead the red blood-flag, decreeing that they all were to die.  When the boys heard this they became angry and cried out, "Are we to suffer death for the sake of a girl! We swear that we will take revenge. Wherever we find a girl, her red blood shall flow."  Then they went deeper into the woods, and in its middle, where it was darkest, they found a little bewitched house that was empty.  They said, "We will live here. You, Benjamin, you are the youngest and weakest. You shall stay at home and keep house. We others will go and get things to eat."  Thus they went into the woods and shot rabbits, wild deer, birds, and doves, and whatever they could eat. These they brought to Benjamin, and he had to prepare them to satisfy their hunger. They lived together in this little house for ten years, but the time passed quickly for them.  The little daughter that their mother, the queen, had given birth to was now grown up. She had a good heart, a beautiful face, and a golden star on her forehead.  Once on a large washday she saw twelve men's shirts in the laundry and asked her mother, "Whose are these twelve shirts? They are much too small for father."  The queen answered with a heavy heart, "Dear child, they belong to your twelve brothers."  The girl said, "Where are my twelve brothers? I have never even heard of them."  She answered, "Only God knows where they are. They are wandering about in the world."  Then she took the girl, unlocked the room for her, and showed her the twelve coffins with the wood shavings and the coffin pillows.  "These coffins," she said, "were intended for your brothers, but they secretly ran away before you were born," and she told her how everything had happened.  Then the girl said, "Dear mother, don't cry. I will go and look for my brothers."  Then she took the twelve shirts and went forth into the great woods. She walked the entire day, in the evening coming to the bewitched little house.  She went inside and found a young lad, who asked, "Where do you come from, and where are you going?"  He was astounded that she was so beautiful, that she was wearing royal clothing, and that she had a star on her forehead.  "I am a princess and am looking for my twelve brothers. I will walk on as long as the sky is blue, until I find them." She also showed him the twelve shirts that belonged to them.  Benjamin saw that it was his sister, and said, "I am Benjamin, your youngest brother."  She began to cry for joy, and Benjamin did so as well. They kissed and embraced one another with great love.  Then he said, "Dear sister, I must warn you that we have agreed that every girl whom we meet must die."  She said, "I will gladly die, if I can thus redeem my twelve brothers."  "No," he answered, "you shall not die. Sit under this tub until our eleven brothers come, and I will make it right with them."  She did this, and when night fell they came home from the hunt. As they sat at the table eating, they asked, "What is new?"  Benjamin said, "Don't you know anything?"  "No," they answered.  He continued speaking, "You have been in the woods while I stayed at home, but I know more than you do."  "Then tell us," they shouted.  He answered, "If you will promise me that the next girl we meet shall not be killed."  "Yes," they all shouted. "We will show her mercy. Just tell us."  Then he said, "Our sister is here," and lifted up the tub. The princess came forth in her royal clothing and with the golden star on her forehead, so beautiful, delicate, and fine.  They all rejoiced, falling around her neck and kissing her, and they loved her with all their hearts.  Now she stayed at home with Benjamin and helped him with the work. The eleven went into the woods and captured wild game, deer, birds, and doves, so they would have something to eat. Their sister and Benjamin prepared it all. They gathered wood for cooking, herbs for the stew, and put the pot onto the fire so a meal was always ready when the eleven came home. She also kept the house in order, and made up the beds white and clean. The brothers were always satisfied, and they lived happily with her.  One time the two of them had prepared a good meal at home, and so they sat together and ate and drank and were ever so happy. Now there was a little garden next to the bewitched house, and in it there were twelve lilies, the kind that are called "students." Wanting to bring some pleasure to her brothers, she picked the twelve flowers, intending to give one to each of them when they were eating. But in the same instant that she picked the flowers, the twelve brothers were transformed into twelve ravens, and they flew away above the woods. The house and the garden disappeared as well.  Now the poor girl was alone in the wild woods. Looking around, she saw an old women standing next to her.  The old woman said, "My child, what have you done?" Why did you not leave the twelve white flowers standing? Those were your brothers, and now they have been transformed into ravens forever."  The girl said, crying, "Is there no way to redeem them?"  "No," said the old woman, "There is only one way in the world, and it is so difficult that you will never redeem them. You must remain silent for seven whole years, neither speaking nor laughing. If you speak a single word, even if all but one hour of the seven years has passed, then it will all be for nothing, and your brothers will be killed by that one word."  Then the girl said in her heart, "I know for sure that I will redeem my brothers."  She went and found a tall tree and climbed to its top, where she sat and span, without speaking and without laughing.  Now it came to pass that a king was hunting in these woods. He had a large greyhound that ran to the tree where the girl was sitting. It jumped about, yelping and barking up the tree. The king came, saw the beautiful princess with the golden star on her forehead, and was so enchanted by her beauty that he shouted up to her, asking her to become his wife. She gave him no answer, but nodded with her head. Then he himself climbed the tree, carried her down, set her on his horse, and took her home with him.  Their wedding was celebrated with great pomp and joy, but the bride neither spoke nor laughed.  After they had lived a few years happily together, the king's mother, who was a wicked woman, began to slander the young queen, saying to the king, "You have brought home a common beggar woman for yourself. Who knows what kind of godless things she is secretly doing. Even if she is a mute and cannot speak, she could at least laugh. Anyone who does not laugh has an evil conscience."  At first the king did not want to believe this, but the old woman kept it up so long, accusing her of so many wicked things, that the king finally let himself be convinced, and he sentenced her to death.  A great fire was lit in the courtyard, where she was to be burned to death. The king stood upstairs at his window, looking on with crying eyes, for he still loved her dearly. She had already been bound to the stake, and the fire was licking at her clothing with its red tongues, when the last moment of the seven years passed.  A whirring sound was heard in the air, and twelve ravens approached, landing together. As they touched the earth, it was her twelve brothers, whom she had redeemed. They ripped the fire apart, put out the flames, and freed their sister, kissing and embracing her.  Now that she could open her mouth and speak, she told the king why she had remained silent and had never laughed.  The king rejoiced to hear that she was innocent, and they all lived happily together until they died. The wicked stepmother was brought before the court and placed in a barrel filled with boiling oil and poisonous snakes, and she died an evil death.   * Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Die zwölf Brüder," [*Kinder- und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*](http://books.google.com/books?id=y9tLAAAAIAAJ&printsec=titlepage#v=onepage&q&f=false) [Children's and Household Tales -- Grimms' Fairy Tales], 7th ed., vol. 1 (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterischen Buchhandlung, 1857), [no. 9, pp. 48-53](http://books.google.com/books?id=y9tLAAAAIAAJ&lr&pg=PA48#v=onepage&q&f=false). * Translated by [D. L. Ashliman](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/ashliman.html). © 2001-2012. * The Grimms' source: Julia R. Ramus (1792-1862) and Charlotte R. Ramus (1793-1858). * This tale was included in the first edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812). It was substantially rewritten for the second edition (1819). Only small stylistic changes were introduced in succeeding editions. * Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 451, *The Brothers Who Were Turned into Birds.* Tales of this type are found throughout Europe. * The young queen's alleged "godless" and "wicked" acts are specified in less inhibited versions of this episode. They include, in some instances, cannibalizing her own newborn children, and in others, giving birth to animals. * Take note of the following inconsistency: The heroine's jealous mother-in-law is identified at first as "the king's mother." However, after she has been found guilty of slander, she is referred to as "the wicked stepmother."   **Related links**   * The Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* include two additional tales of type 451: [The Seven Ravens](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm025.html) (no. 25) and [The Six Swans](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm049.html) (no. 49). Their collection *Deutsche Sagen* (German Legends) also contains of tale of this type: The Swan Knight (no. 540). * The Grimm Brothers' [Children's and Household Tales](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimmtales.html) (Grimms' Fairy Tales). * The [Grimm Brothers' Home Page](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm.html). * D. L. Ashliman's [**folktexts**](https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html), a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.   Revised February 7, 2012. |  |