

The Twelve Brothers

The castle ruins were silhouetted against the evening sky. In the grounds a match was struck and the tiny spark found the paper and kindling inside the campfire. Flames crept up, caught and blazed. The six campers in Group Evergreen gathered round, huddled in blankets, cups for cocoa held ready. As the last of the light faded from the sky and the shadows on faces and behind backs grew darker and more distorted, the time for storytelling arrived.

"I'll start," said Martin, "then I'll pass the story stick and the next person will add a bit. Everyone must include something scarier than the last. That's the rule for Camp Castle." Everyone nodded. Some glanced into the darkness but no one protested. They knew. Scary stories were what you told at Camp Castle Campfire.

(1st Storyteller)

Once upon a time there lived a king in a castle – maybe it was this one. All his life he had got whatever he wanted. When he was twenty-five, he decided he wanted a queen, so he found a girl he liked and married her. Then he decided he wanted a family.

"A boy and a girl," he said. "That's what we will have."

He was delighted when his son was born. "Well done, my dear," he said to his wife and he paraded up and down, showing everyone his firstborn son until the boy cried, whereupon the King lost interest.

He was less delighted when a second and then a third son arrived. "A boy and a girl," he reminded his wife. He couldn't believe she wasn't giving him what he wanted. As a fourth and a fifth and a sixth son came along, he stomped and stormed. He was obsessed with having a daughter.

Year followed year, most bringing another son. When the count got to twelve, the King brought his hand down hard on the bedstead and shouted, "That's it! No more sons! Next time we shall have a daughter."

His wife - gazing at her youngest, who she called Benjamin after the youngest son of Jacob in the Bible - whispered calming words to her much loved baby.

Her husband strode up and down, finding something new to worry about. "When our daughter is born, she will need many things and a fine dowry when she marries. How can I provide for her when I have all these sons cluttering up the place?" He was really quite out of his mind by this time.

The King went and spoke to the castle carpenter. "Make me twelve coffins," he said. Then he went and told his wife, "When our daughter is born, we will get rid of our sons so we can provide for her. Here is the key to the coffin room." And - with nary a glance at the baby - he stomped out of the room, a mad glint in his eye.

Martin handed the story stick to his neighbour.

(2nd Storyteller)

For six years the Queen had no more children. The King got angrier and angrier. Eventually the Queen was pregnant again but of course it brought her no joy. As the birth of her child grew near, she got sadder and sadder and more and more scared.



One day Benjamin found her crying. He asked her what the matter was. She didn't want to tell him but eventually she said, "Come with me." Taking the key from her dresser, she led him to the coffin room. "If the new baby is a girl, these coffins are for you and your brothers," she told him. "Oh, what are we to do?"

Benjamin was only six but he wasn't silly. He told his brothers and they conferred together with their mother and made a plan. The brothers would hide in the forest. Their mother would signal them once the baby was born. If she put up a white flag, it would mean she'd had another boy and they could come home. If she put up a red flag, she'd had a girl and they must flee, never to return.

The boys all hugged their mother and set off into the forest. They took it in turns to watch the castle from the top of the tallest tree. On the eleventh day Benjamin cried out, "There's someone up the tower. I can see Mother by the flagpole. There's a ... red flag. We must flee, never to return."



Climbing down the tree, he found his brothers stamping around like their father.

"Death to girls!" one exclaimed.

"Why should we lose our inheritance because of a scrawny girl baby!" said another. And they agreed that whoever came across a girl first would kill her in vengeance for what had happened.

The story stick passed.

(3rd Storyteller)

The boys travelled deep into the forest, where they found a hut. It had a sound roof and enough room for them all to sit at the table and sleep at night, so they decided to stay there. They didn't know the hut was bewitched.

The older boys made Benjamin stay at home and do the cooking and cleaning. They said he was too little for hunting. They may have been right but twelve boys made a lot of work for one six year old.

Back at the castle – which may have been this one – the Queen and the King gazed at their new baby girl. She was a beautiful baby and grew to be a beautiful and kind girl with, of all things, a star on her forehead. They called her Madeleine. The King lost interest now he had got what he wanted and went off to obsess about a new project.

One day when Madeleine was ten years old, the Queen decided it was time to clear out the boys' rooms. She loved her daughter very much but a mother's heart does not forget her other children because of a new one and she had never been able to face this task before. She packed away their toys and belongings and put their nightshirts out for washing. Seeing twelve boys' nightshirts on the washing line, Maddy (as she got called) asked where they had come from.

The Queen, who was tired of carrying her secret alone, showed the Princess the coffin room and told her of her twelve brothers now wandering the world.

"Don't be sad, Mother," said the girl. "I will go and find them."

And, being a young person of resource and enterprise, she did.

Her mother sat alone in the castle turret room, bereft of all her children. Some say that on moonlit nights you can hear her ghost crying even now, a sound to break your heart.

More than one head turned to peer up at the castle ruin and higher to where the moon was showing itself between the clouds. Again the story stick passed.

(4th Storyteller)

After a long day's walk through the forest, Maddy came across the hut. Ben, who'd never been sure about the 'death to girls' thing (especially now he was sixteen and would have liked to meet some), asked her where she was going.

"To find my twelve brothers," she declared. "I will travel as far as the sky is blue to find them. Look, I have their shirts in my bag." Ben was very excited to tell her that she had found her brothers already.

When it was time for the older brothers to arrive home, he hid his sister under a tub, in case they remembered about 'death to girls'.

The older brothers liked to pretend they knew everything and were stronger and better than Ben. They seemed to forget that he was quite old enough to go hunting himself now. Ben got his own back a little this time. "Well, brothers," he said, "you might have been out and about in the world but I know something that you don't."

Of course the brothers wanted to know what it was but Ben would tell them only if they promised that the first girl they met would be safe after all. Then he lifted the tub and introduced them to their sister. They were all delighted to meet her and she stayed on with them, helping Ben to look after their brothers. Ben was very pleased to have some help and company.

*"This isn't very scary," complained Ryan.
"Sh! I haven't finished yet."*

The enchantment on the hut had made Maddy forget her mother, so she didn't think of going back to let her know her sons were alive and well.

One day a few years later Maddy set the table for supper and wandered out into the garden to gather some flowers. In the border there was a row of twelve flowers. "Just the thing," she said. "One each – it must be meant." As the young men pushed open the gate, she picked the twelve flowers. With each snip one young man after the other rose up from the garden, arms turning to great black wings, noses to beaks, legs to claws – a great flock of ravens. They flew into the air, wheeled round and disappeared over the forest. That was not all that disappeared either. When the ravens had flown away, the girl brought her horrified gaze back to earth. She found she was standing in a darkening forest glade with not a sign of the hut or the garden or the supper she had just been cooking.



Being a person of resource and enterprise, she ate some nuts and berries she recognised from nearby trees. Then she climbed up a tree and strapped herself into its branches. The night was dark. The trees swished in the wind. Down below something stepped on a stick. Crack! Maddy listened with stretched eyes.

The story stick moved on round the circle.

(5th Storyteller)

All night she listened to the unfamiliar noises. Every time she dozed off something woke her. Next morning Maddy yawned and rubbed her gritty eyes. She said to herself that she had found her brothers once and she would just have to do it again. "I will travel as far as the sky is blue," she said.

"Travel to find what?" asked an old woman, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

"To find my brothers," said Maddy, not as surprised as she would have been the day before. "I was picking flowers yesterday and suddenly – they were ravens! They have flown away and I must find them."

"Travel is not the task for this enchantment," said the old woman. "It's something much harder. I doubt you can do it."

"Of course I can do it. Just tell me what I must do," declared the young person of resource and enterprise.

"It's what you *mustn't* do," said the old woman. "You must spend seven years without talking and without laughing. No one will blame you, if it's too hard."

"I must do it," declared Maddy and she climbed back into her tree and started. It was indeed a very hard task but staying out in the woods made it a little easier. If she was amused by the antics of the animals, she didn't show it and, of course, they didn't speak to her, so she didn't have to reply. The animals helped her to find food and keep warm. And so four years passed.

One day a young king rode through the forest. He had been travelling the world and was ready to go home to a nearby kingdom. As he approached the tree, he saw the girl, who was now a lovely young woman. He declared himself captivated by her beauty and lively expression and asked if she would care to accompany him. Maddy waved good-bye to her animal friends and climbed on a spare horse to ride away. Along the way she and the King fell in love and he asked her to marry him. She nodded her head, overjoyed but unable to do more than smile.

Back at the palace the King's mother was not pleased to see Maddy. She'd had her eye on the daughter of a friend of hers for a daughter-in-law. She held her tongue for a while but after a couple of years she started to make trouble. It irritated her very much that Maddy never talked and never laughed. She put it in the King's head that there must be some wickedness behind it.

"Normal people talk and laugh," she said. "She's hiding something. Maybe she's a spy. Or worse - maybe she's a witch."

The King didn't listen to her ideas at first but he did wonder why his beautiful, friendly queen never spoke and never laughed. With his mother's evil talk dripping in his ear, he eventually decided he would have to get rid of his wife, if she would give no account of herself. He begged her to tell him why she would not speak or laugh. Maddy just gave him a sad smile and shook her head. The king loved her very much but his country had had so much trouble with witches, he thought he couldn't risk having one for its queen.

He watched, heart-broken, as Maddy was led away to her death.

The story stick was passed to the last person in the circle.

"Happy ever after ending?" Janet pleaded.

"No, don't be a wuss!" came the stern reply. "It's Camp Castle Campfire."

"Some happy and some gruesome then," she replied defiantly.

(6th and final Storyteller)

Just as Maddy was being tied up, expecting to be dead at any minute, there was a great whirring in the air and the day turned dark. Everyone looked up to see a great flock of ravens filling the sky. Twelve of the enormous birds alighted beside Maddy. As their clawed feet touched the ground, the ravens turned into strong young men, dressed as befitted princes. The seven years were over! Her brothers surrounded Maddy and set her free from her bonds and turned to face the King. He paled at the look on their faces. His guards stood at the ready in case of trouble but Maddy ran forward to her husband and said, "My love, I am neither witch nor spy. These are my brothers, the Princes of Evergreen, fresh out of an enchantment. I could neither speak to you, nor laugh, for fear that their enchantment would never end. Please do understand I had promised seven years of silence before ever I met you."

The King looked at his beautiful wife, hardly able to believe his luck that she was a forgiving, loyal woman and a princess to boot.

"And I hope you - and your brothers - will understand that I had to put the interests of my kingdom ahead of my own wishes. But I am so pleased that my mother has been proved wrong and we can be happy together," the King said and he called for a fine feast to be prepared to celebrate a day that was turning from disaster to joy.

He found time to look around for his mother though. He was not prepared to let her cause any more trouble in his court. She, anticipating the displeasure of the King and everyone she knew, had slipped away and was even now leaving the castle. She had been unable to persuade even her lady's maid to accompany her, so she fled into the forest all alone, where - before much longer - she met a messy end as a bear's dinner.

When he found out, the King would be sad that he wasn't sadder to lose his mother but truth to tell he'd felt like boiling her in oil, so the bear was perhaps a better answer all round.

For now, he sent a guard to search for her. Then, glancing round the courtyard before returning to the feast, he pulled a stick from the pile round the witch's stake. It was slightly charred at one end. It would remind him not to listen to nasty rumours from jealous people. It would remind him of the bravery of his wife and the loyalty she and her siblings showed. And it would remind him to steer clear of enchantments, where at all possible.

He didn't notice the bent figure of an old, old woman slip through the castle gates and slink into the shadow of the wall because he was already climbing the steps to the great hall.

The castle cat saw her though. She streaked past the King, fur on end and ears flattened.

It was a pity the King didn't understand the ways of cats.

And Janet, who had a greater talent for scaring people than they'd given her credit for, laid down the slightly charred story stick and stared off into the woods with such a look of fear that they all gazed too, until first one then another was sure that he could see a bent figure watching them from the darkness.

Janet smiled to herself.

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