

THE KING OF THE CROWS

A fairytale from Gascony

Retold and adapted by Sophie Masson

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THERE WAS once a wandering sorcerer who loved nothing better than to do evil deeds. He roamed the world, circling the earth with dark magic, destroying lives and transforming people with his wicked spells.

He came one day to a high and lonely kingdom, where the people lived in proud fierceness. Because their manners did not please him, he turned them all into crows. Flapping around the high and lonely country they went, uttering harsh cries of sorrow and anger, and their king was the glossiest, saddest and angriest of them all. He flew around the world hunting ceaselessly for a way to break the spell, his heart becoming harder and darker with despair as time went by.

Now it so happened that some distance from the crow-country, in a rambling house in a peaceful village at the edge of a wood lived a green man with one eye in the middle of his forehead. This man, despite his strange appearance, was a kind and gentle soul who had brought up his three daughters on his own after his wife had died. The three daughters were not green-skinned and one-eyed like their father, for they took after their mother's side, and they were all good and lively girls as well as beautiful. The eldest daughter was tall as a tree, red-haired as fire; the second daughter was sweet as the wind, blond as the sun; and the third daughter had glossy hair black as a crow's wing and dark eyes deep as the pools of knowledge.

One day, when the girls were out at market, in through the open window flew the king of the crows and spoke to the green man. 'I want to marry one of your daughters,' he said, 'and I won't take no for an answer. ' He was a big crow, with pitiless yellow eyes, sharp beak and claws, and the green man was afraid. He had heard the story of the crow people and was sorry for them but not so sorry he wanted to marry any of his beloved daughters to their king, so he only said, 'I will ask them when they return.'

‘Make sure you do, and make sure one of them says yes, or it will be the worse for you,’ said the king of the crows. ‘I will return tomorrow at midday to take my bride to my kingdom.’ And he was gone, flapping away with harsh cruel cries.

When the girls returned, the green man told them what had happened. ‘I cannot marry him,’ the eldest daughter said, ‘for as you know I am engaged to be married to an important man of this land.’

‘Oh, I know, I know,’ said the green man, ‘and even if you weren’t, I would never consent to your marrying the king of the crows.’

‘I cannot marry him,’ said the second daughter, ‘because I have this day met the man I want to spend my life with.’

‘That is good and happy news,’ said the green man, ‘but even if you had not, I would never ask you to be the bride of the king of the crows.’

‘I hope to travel the world,’ said the youngest daughter, ‘but if it will help you, Father, I will marry the king of the crows.’

‘No, no,’ said the green man, ‘there is no need for that. When he returns tomorrow, I will tell him he cannot marry any of my daughters.’

The next day came. The girls wanted to stay with their father, but he would not allow them. ‘I do not know what the crow king might do,’ he said. ‘Better you stay away.’

At midday, in through the window flew the king of the crows. He fixed the green man with a yellow glare and said, ‘Which of your daughters shall be my bride?’

‘None,’ said the green man, standing as tall and proud as he could. ‘My daughters are as precious to me as my eye and I will never consent to give any of them up.’

‘Then pay the price,’ said the king of the crows, and before the green man realised what was happening, the crow had flown right at him and with his cruel beak and cruel claws, put out the green man’s one eye. ‘You have one more chance,’ said the king of the crows, as the green man reeled in agony. ‘Tomorrow, I will return. One of your daughters must agree to marry me or next time you will lose your life and not just your sight. But if one agrees, then your sight will be restored. It is up to them.’ And he was gone.

When the girls saw what had happened to their father, they were horrified. They made soothing potions and bandages for his poor eye and heard his story with

many tears. They all said they wanted to help him. But when they knew what the price for his sight was, they fell silent.

After a time, the first daughter said, 'Father, you must know that if I could, I would. But I am engaged to an important man and I cannot marry the king of the crows.'

'I understand, of course,' the green man said, sadly.

'Father,' said the second daughter, 'I wish I could bring myself to do it, but I am in love. I cannot marry the king of the crows.'

'I understand, of course,' said the green man, even more sadly.

Then the third daughter said, 'I am not in love or engaged. I am free to marry the king of crows.'

'Oh no, my daughter, I cannot ask you to do that,' cried the green man.

'You do not ask me. I choose to do it,' said his daughter. 'I am not afraid of the king of the crows and I promise you he will not get the better of me.'

In truth, she was not at all sure, but her heart was set on her task.

The next day, the king of the crows came back. 'So,' he said to the green man, 'what is your answer?'

'It is *my* answer,' said the third daughter, stepping forward with head held high. 'I will marry you, but only if you promise that my father's sight is restored at once, and that you never trouble my family again.'

The crow king stared at her with glittering yellow eyes. 'Very well,' was all he said, then he flew down and brushed one of his wings against the green man's blind eye. Instantly the man cried out with joy, for his sight was restored, indeed, was better than ever. With his other wing, the bird touched the girl on the forehead, and at once she vanished from the family's sight, as did the king of the crows.

When the girl came to herself, she found she was in quite a different place, in a dark room in a cold castle, in a high, lonely, country, the country of the king of the crows. She could hear the sound of hundreds, no, thousands of crows, outside, and for a moment her heart failed her for despite her brave words she did not know what to do now.

Then a voice spoke to her in the darkness, the voice of the king of the crows, much softer than before. He told her about the spell of the sorcerer, and the sad fate of his people. 'Don't be afraid,' he said, 'for I will never hurt you. Already, because you came with me, at night I and all my people can regain our true forms.'

By day I must hunt in the sky, black-winged, with sorrow in my heart. But during the day, you can go wherever you want, anywhere in my kingdom, and you will always be safe. At night I will always return to be with you. But there is a part of the spell still to break, and that I cannot do without you.'

'What is that?' she asked, quietly.

'You cannot ever try to see what I look like, as a man,' he answered, 'no matter how curious you might be. Not for seven years must you ever try to shed light on my sleeping form, or I will be forever bound by the spell of the sorcerer. If you are content with this, then after seven years the spell will be completely broken and we will all be free. If however, when I am sleeping, you bring a lantern to see my face then the sorcerer who turned me into a crow will bind me for ever in a distant place where none can ever find me, and my people will forever be crows here in this land.'

The girl promised to do as he asked. They were married the next night, in the darkness, and she never saw her husband's face, only heard his voice, and the human voices of all his people as they sang songs of praise and gratitude to her. Time went on, and the king and queen grew to love each other, and to look forward to the night. For a year and a day, the queen was happy in the darkness, hearing his warm deep voice and feeling his loving touch, and in the day she would get up early to watch him wheel away in his bird-form into the sky, knowing he would be back when darkness fell. During the day, she roamed around the kingdom, exploring its many corners, and grew attached to its high and lonely beauty. But as the second year wore on, day by day, night by night her curiosity grew, her desire to see her husband's face in the light became more and more intense, until one night she could stand it no longer. Bringing a tall candle, she crept quietly towards his sleeping form on the bed. The soft glow of the candle showed her a handsome face, just for a fleeting instant, and then all was dark again, and in the darkness she heard her husband's sad crow-voice, 'All is now lost! All is now lost!' For in that instant he'd been transported by the sorcerer's spell to the top of a distant mountain where he was bound with iron chains to a rock and guarded night and day by two fierce wolves, one white, one black.

All around then, in the high and lonely kingdom, came the harsh keening of the crow-people as they mourned their lost lord. As to the queen, she was beside herself with grief but she was a brave and determined woman as she had been a brave and determined girl. 'I will set out at once to find him,' she told the people,

‘and I will not come back till I have discovered another way to free him from the spell.’

Dressing in simple clothes and stout boots, she left the high and lonely kingdom and journeyed till she came to a river, where she met an old washerwoman, who was struggling with heavy laundry. The queen stopped to help her, and after that the washer-woman said to her, ‘Daughter, you are travelling far, through day and through night, and you will need such help as I can give.’

By this, the queen knew that the old woman must be a fairy, so she replied, ‘Mother, I do not know where I must go, so if you will help me, I will be forever grateful.’

The old woman smiled and gave her two precious things: a pair of iron shoes and a slim golden knife. And she said, ‘Here are shoes that will never wear out, and here is a knife to defend yourself with, and to cut the blue grass, the blue grass that sings, the blue grass that breaks iron. You will know you have got there when your iron shoes break, and then you will deliver the king of the crows from the spell that binds him.’

Wondering, the queen took the gifts. ‘Mother, she said, ‘oh, tell me, where is the blue grass, the blue grass that sings, the blue grass that breaks iron?’

But the washerwoman replied, ‘You must find it for yourself, with your own true heart, for no-one else can show you the way to the blue grass, the blue grass that sings, the blue grass that is stronger than iron.’ And she disappeared.

Shod in her iron shoes, holding her golden knife, the queen walked for weeks, then for months, then for years. The golden knife defended her from wolves on four feet and wolves on two, and the iron shoes never wore out. She passed through the place where the sun always shone, she travelled through the country where the moon always beamed. In each she found blue grass, grass blue as sky, grass silver-blue as moonlight, but not the blue grass that sings, the blue grass that breaks iron. She passed through the place where the wind makes sweet music and travelled in the country where the trees speak to each other, and in each she found singing grass, grass that sighed like wind, grass that rustled like leaves in the trees. But it was not the blue grass, the blue grass that sings, the blue grass stronger than iron. Still she kept travelling, and at last she came to a place where there is no moon and no sun, but where it is always night. And in the darkness there she heard a song, and the

words of the song were, 'I am the blue grass that sings, the blue grass which breaks iron, at the edge of the world.'

The queen ran forward towards the sound of the song, and as she did, her iron shoes broke. She knew then that she had found the blue grass, the grass that sings, the grass that breaks iron, and in the darkness she cut a bundle of the grass with her golden knife. Into the darkness then came a ray of light, and in the light the queen could see a tall mountain, and at its summit, her husband, the king of the crows, chained and bound, guarded by two fierce wolves, one white, one black. She set off up the mountain, holding up the blue grass, and it sang a sweet, gentle lullaby all the way. So sweet and gentle was it that the two fierce wolves grew sleepy and tired, their eyes closing, their minds full of dreams.

When she reached the summit, the wolves were fast asleep. The queen threw the blue grass, the grass that sings, the grass that breaks iron, onto the chains that bound her husband to the rock. As soon as the grass touched the king's chains, they broke and he got up, free. No longer was he a crow, sad of voice, heavy of wing; now he was a man, and a man she could see, tall and handsome still though he had suffered much over the years. The spell had broken forever. She went to him and he went to her and together they went back down the mountain, never to be apart again.

Together they went back to the high and lonely kingdom, where their people had returned to their own human forms, and the only crows to be seen from then on were real birds that had hatched from eggs. The people were overjoyed to see their lord and lady again, and there were celebrations for a long time, to which the queen's family all came.

As to the sorcerer, it is said that the breaking of the spell was the breaking of all his evil powers. Maybe that is true, and maybe it is not: but what is certain is that he was never seen or heard from again.

Afterword:

Gascony is a large area of south-western France which although its precise limits are hard to define, corresponds to the ancient Roman province of Aquitania. The mighty Garonne River and its many tributaries winds its way through Gascony, and the Atlantic Ocean and the Pyrenees are on its boundaries. The cities and towns of Gascony include Bordeaux, Toulouse, Agen, Auch, Dax and Lourdes, but this is also a very rural land, with many small market towns, villages and farms set in superb

countryside. A beautiful and ancient province which once had its own language which is partly related to Basque, it is rich in history, folklore and stories. The Gascons have traditionally had the reputation in France generally of being a passionate, proud, impulsive, brave and generous people, with a gift for stories, songs, fighting, fantastic food and wine-- and boasting! One of France's greatest kings, Henri IV, was a Gascon, and two other famous Gascons you may have heard of are d'Artagnan and Cyrano de Bergerac, who are both memorable characters in famous books, but were also real people whose exploits inspired writers.

I have a great love of Gascony not only because part of my family, on my father's side, is from there, but because it's here where many of my childhood memories are. It was where I spent my early childhood, living in Toulouse with my grandmother and two aunts till I was nearly five, and later in 'La Nouvelle Terrebonne', the gorgeous old house in the village of Empeaux, a small village in the Haute-Garonne 35 kilometres from Toulouse, which my parents had bought the year I was born. Throughout my childhood and adolescence this magical house was the focal point of our family on our frequent returns to France from Australia. We explored its many nooks and crannies, roamed its huge garden, and explored on our bikes the glorious surrounding countryside set in rolling low hills, with its farms, villages, castles, forests and streams. Although my parents sold the house many years ago, I still visit it and the village every time I go back to France, even more so now that my mother as well as my father's mother and his two sisters, who I spent my early years with, are buried in the village churchyard. Despite selling the house, my mother told me once it was the only one she ever saw in dreams, which is why she chose to be laid at rest there—and my grandmother and aunts also loved it. As for me, I think of it as a kind of 'good-fairy' house for it is embedded deep in my writing DNA, and inspired and nurtured my imagination from a young age. Here, in this enchanted place, magic seemed at my fingertips, there were stories everywhere, and I would not have been at all surprised to meet one of the characters from beloved fairytales, legends and ghost stories in the haunted yet sunny red room, flitting through our garden with its enormous old trees, leading us astray in a local wood, or hanging about at the gates of the local castle. I've written several books whose setting is directly based on that place of first enchantment, including *Winter in France* (1994) and *Three Wishes* (2009) written under the pen-name of Isabelle Merlin. That beloved corner of Gascony has also inspired me at various times over the years to translate

and retell Gascon fairytales and folk tales, and *The King of the Crows* is one of my favourites.

I first came across the original story many years ago in a collection that had been gathered by the great 19th century Gascon folklorist, historian and writer Jean-François Marie Zéphyrin Bladé (1827-1900) who was born in the Gers, the *département* next door to our home one of the Haute-Garonne (the French administrative regions known as *départements*, nearly always carry the name of local rivers). Going around Gascony collecting traditional stories from peasants, servants, carpenters, gardeners, villagers and so on (most of whose names are recorded) he gathered them in three large volumes (published 1886). The volumes were divided in themes and sub-themes, ranging from fairies, elves and dwarves, ghosts, witches and the dead, to animals, stones, fools and perilous adventures. I was immediately struck by *The King of the Crows*, which despite its occasionally sketchy shortness in the original, is distinguished by an extraordinary imaginative and poetic quality which is a mix of dark and light, the beautiful and the disturbing; by its intrepid but not infallible heroine who comes from a strange but loving family, by its cursed hero and the haunting repetition of phrases such as ‘the blue grass, the grass that sings, the grass that breaks iron.’ The image of the crow-king and his people was also a powerful one, reminding me of the flocks of crows you’d sometimes see in the garden of La Nouvelle Terrebonne, seeming like emissaries from another, darker world, with their harsh, questing cries, a mix of sorrow and foreboding.

Although *The King of the Crows* is quite well-known in France, and there have been many retellings and adaptations of it published there, as well as, recently, a popular play based on it, the story had never been translated into English before my first retelling, which was published in *The School Magazine* in 1993. I wrote that version based on the original but with my own slant on it. This new retelling has expanded on my original version, by both going back to the original source and building on the frame of my own retelling to create a story told in my own words yet which pays homage to the original, highlighting the rich, distinctive quality of a wonderful fairytale from this beautiful part of France.