

Multiple Births in Legend and Folklore

translated and edited by



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Multiple births have not always been considered to be a blessing. Indeed, as the following legends show, in times past they were sometimes seen to be a sign of the mother's infidelity or other sin, with potentially fatal consequences for the children.

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The Birth of Aistulf

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

The following legend is told about King Aistulf, who ruled the Langobards in the middle of the eighth century: It is said that his mother brought five children to the world in one hour's time. The king only wanted to let one child

live, and he said, "The child that takes hold of my spear shall live. The other four shall be set out!" One child reached out for the spear. The king named him Aistulf and allowed him to live.

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- Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Aistulfs Geburt," [*Deutsche Sagen*](#), vol. 2 (Berlin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1818), [no. 406, p. 379](#). In later editions, this legend is number 411.
 - The German word *aussetzen*, literally "to set out," carried with it the meaning of abandoning a child so he or she would die of exposure.
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As Many Children as There Are Days in the Year

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Loosduynen (Leusden) is a small village one mile from The Hague. In the church there they still point out two baptismal fonts with the inscription, "In deze twee beekens zyn alle deze kinderen ghedoopt [All the children were baptized in these two fonts]." A plaque hanging nearby, inscribed with Latin and Dutch verses, commemorates the event described in the following popular legend:

Many years ago there lived in the village a Countess Margaretha (according to others her name was Mathilde), wife of Count Hermann of Henneberg. Sometimes she is referred to simply as the Countess of Holland. One day a poor woman carrying twins in her arms approached her and asked for charity. The countess scolded her, saying, "Get away, you shameless beggar! It is impossible for a woman to have two children at once from just one father!"

The poor woman replied, "Then may God let you have as many children as there are days in the year!" Some time later the countess became pregnant and on one day gave birth to 365 children. This happened in the year 1270 (1276), in the countess's forty-third year. These children were all baptized alive by Guido, the Bishop of Utrecht, in two bronze fonts. All the boys were named Johannes and the girls Elizabeth. However, within one day they all died, together with their mother, and all lie buried in one grave in the village church.

It is said that there is also a monument to this event in the church at Delft.

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- Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "So viel Kinder, als Tag' im Jahr," [*Deutsche Sagen*](#), vol. 2 (Berlin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1818), [no. 578, pp. 374-75](#). In later editions this legend is number 584.
 - Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale type 762.
 - Additional folktales of this type (both in the German language):
 1. Karoly Gaál, "Die Bestrafung der geizigen Königin," *Die Volksmärchen der Magyaren im südlichen Burgenland* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1970), Nr. 34.
 2. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "So viele Kinder als Monate," *Märchen aus dem Nachlaß* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1979), Nr. 28.
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The Woman with Three Hundred and Sixty-Six Children

Netherlands

Long, long ago, before the oldest stork was young and big deer and little fawns were very many in the Dutch forests, there was a pond, famous for its fish, which lay in the very heart of Holland, with woods nearby. Hunters came with their bows and arrows to hunt the stags. Or, out of the bright waters, boys and men in the sunshine drew out the fish with shining scales, or lured the trout, with fly-bait, from their hiding places. In those days the fish-pond was called the Vijver, and the woods where the deer ran, Rensselaer, or the Deer's Lair.

So, because the forests of oak, and beech, and alder trees were so fine, and game on land and in water so plentiful, the lord of the country came here and built his castle. He made a hedge around his estate, so that the people called the place the Count's Hedge; or, as we say, The Hague.

Even today, within the beautiful city, the forests, with their grand old trees, still remain, and the fish-pond, called the Vijver, is there yet, with its swans. On the little island, the fluffy, downy cygnets are born and grow to be big birds, with long necks, bent like an arch. In another part of the town, also, with their trees for nesting, and their pond for wading, are children of the same storks, whose fathers and mothers lived there before America was discovered.

By and by, many people of rank and fortune came to The Hague, for its society. They built their grand houses at the slope of the hill, not far away from the Vijver, and in time a city grew up.

It was a fine sight to see the lords and ladies riding out from the castle into the country. The cavalcade was very splendid, when they went hawking. There were pretty women on horseback, and gentlemen in velvet clothes, with feathers in their hats, and the horses seemed proud to bear them. The falconers followed on foot, with the hunting birds perched on a hoop, which the man inside the circle carried round him. Each falcon had on a little cap or hood, which was fastened over its head. When this was taken off, it flew high up into the air, on its hunt for the big and little birds, which it brought down for its masters. There were also men with dogs, to beat the reeds and bushes, and drive the smaller birds from shelter. The huntsmen were armed with spears, lest a wild boar, or bear, should rush out and attack them. It was always a merry day, when a hawking party, in their fine clothes and gay trappings, started out.

There were huts, as well as palaces, and poor people, also, at The Hague. Among these, was a widow, whose twin babies were left without anything to eat -- for her husband and their father had been killed in the war. Having no money to buy a cradle, and her babies being too young to be left alone, she put the pair of little folks on her back and went out to beg.

Now there was a fine lady, a Countess, who lived with her husband, the Count, near the Vijver. She was childless and very jealous of other women who were mothers and had children playing around them. On this day, when the beggar woman, with her two babies on her back, came along, the grand lady was in an unusually bad temper. For all her pretty clothes, she was not a person of fine manners. Indeed, she often acted more like a snarling dog, ready to snap at any one who should speak to her. Although she had cradles and nurses and lovely baby clothes all ready, there was no baby. This spoiled her disposition, so that her husband and the servants could hardly live with her.

One day, after dinner, when there had been everything good to eat and drink on her table, and plenty of it, the Countess went out to walk in front of her house. It was the third day of January, but the weather was mild. The beggar woman, with her two babies on her back and their arms round her neck, crying with hunger, came trudging along. She went into the garden and asked the Countess for food or an alms. She expected surely, at least a slice of bread, a cup of milk, or a small coin.

But the Countess was rude to her and denied her both food and money. She even burst into a bad temper, and reviled the woman for having two children, instead of one.

"Where did you get those brats? They are not yours. You just brought them here to play on my feelings and excite my jealousy. Be gone!"

But the poor woman kept her temper. She begged piteously and said: "For the love of Heaven, feed my babies, even if you will not feed me."

"No! they are not yours. You're a cheat," said the fine lady, nursing her rage.

"Indeed, Madame, they are both my children and born on one day. They have one father, but he is dead. He was killed in the war, while serving his grace, your husband."

"Don't tell me such a story," snapped back the Countess, now in a fury. "I don't believe that any one, man or woman, could have two children at once. Away with you," and she seized a stick to drive off the poor woman.

Now, it was the turn of the beggar to answer back. Both had lost their temper, and the two angry women seemed more like she-bears robbed of their whelps.

"Heaven punish you, you wicked, cruel, cold-hearted woman," cried the mother. Her two babies were almost choking her in their eagerness for food. Yet their cries never moved the rich lady, who had bread and good things to spare, while their poor parent had not a drop of milk to give them. The Countess now called her men-servants to drive the beggar away. This they did, most brutally. They pushed the poor woman outside the garden gate and closed it behind her. As she turned away, the poor mother, taking each of her children by its back, one in each hand, held them up before the grand lady and cried out loudly, so that all heard her:

"May you have as many children as there are days in the year."

Now with all her wrath burning in her breast, what the beggar woman really meant was this: It was the third of January, and so there were but three days in the year, so far. She intended to say that, instead of having to care for two children, the Countess might have the trouble of rearing three, and all born on the same day.

But the fine lady, in her mansion, cared nothing for the beggar woman's words. Why should she? She had her lordly husband, who was a count, and he owned thousands of acres. Besides, she possessed vast riches. In her great house, were ten men-servants and thirty-one maid-servants, together with her rich furniture, and fine clothes and jewels. The lofty brick church, to which she went on Sundays, was hung with the coats of arms of her famous ancestors. The stone floor, with its great slabs, was so grandly carved with the crests and heraldry of her family, that to walk over these was like climbing a mountain, or tramping across a ploughed field. Common folks had to be careful, lest they should stumble over the bosses and knobs of the carved tombs. A long train of her servants, and tenants on the farms followed her, when she went to worship. Inside the church, the lord and lady sat, in high seats, on velvet cushions and under a canopy.

By the time summer had come, according to the fashion in all good Dutch families, all sorts of pretty baby clothes were made ready. There were soft, warm, swaddling bands, tiny socks, and long white linen dresses. A baptismal blanket, covered with silk, was made for the christening, and daintily embroidered. Plenty of lace, and pink and blue ribbons -- pink for a girl and blue for a boy -- were kept at hand. And, because there might be twins, a double set of garments was provided, besides baby bathtubs and all sorts of nice things for the little stranger or strangers -- whether one or two -- to come. Even the names were chosen -- one for a boy and the other for a girl. Would it be Wilhelm or Wilhelmina?

It was real fun to think over the names, but it was hard to choose out of so many. At last, the Countess crossed off all but forty-six; or the following; nearly every girl's name ending in *je*, as in our "Polly," "Sallie."

Girls		Boys	
Magtel	Catharyna	Gerrit	Gysbert
Nelletj	Alida	Cornelis	Jausze
Zelia	Annatje	Volkert	Myndert

Jannetje	Christina	Kilian	Adrian
Zara	Katrina	Johannes	Joachim
Marytje	Bethje	Petrus	Arendt
Willemetje	Eva	Barent	Dirck
Geertruy	Dirkje	Wessel	Nikolaas
Petronella	Mayken	Hendrik	Staats
Margrieta	Hilleke	Teunis	Gozen
Josina	Bethy	Wouter	Evert
Willemetje		Japik	

But before the sun set on the expected day, it was neither one boy nor one girl, nor both; nor were all the forty-six names chosen sufficient; for the beggar woman's wish had come true, in a way not expected. There were as many as, and no fewer children than, there were days in the year; and, since this was leap year, there were three hundred and sixty-six little folks in the house; so that other names, besides the forty-six, had to be used.

Yet none of these wee creatures was bigger than a mouse. Beginning at daylight, one after another appeared -- first a girl and then a boy; so that after the forty-eighth, the nurse was at her wit's end, to give them names. It was not possible to keep the little babies apart. The thirty-one servant maids of the mansion were all called in to help in sorting out the girls from the boys; but soon it seemed hopeless to try to pick out Peter from Henry, or Catalina from Annetje. After an hour or two spent at the task, and others coming along, the women found that it was useless to try any longer. It was found that little Piet, Jan and Klaas, Hank, Douw and Japik, among the boys; and Molly, Mayka, Lena, Elsje, Annatje and Marie were getting all mixed up. So they gave up the attempt in despair. Besides, the supply of pink and blue ribbons had given out long before, after the first dozen or so were born. As for the, baby clothes made ready, they were of no use, for all the garments were too big. In one of the long dresses, tied up like a bag, one might possibly, with stuffing, have put the whole family of three hundred and sixty-six brothers and sisters.

It was not likely such small fry of human beings could live long. So, the good Bishop Guy, of Utrecht, when he heard that the beggar woman's curse had come true, in so unexpected a manner, ordered that the babies should be all baptized at once. The Count, who was strict in his ideas of both custom and church law, insisted on it too.

So nothing would do but to carry the tiny infants to church. How to get them there, was a question. The whole house had been rummaged to provide things to carry the little folks in: but the supply of trays, and mince pie dishes, and crocks, was exhausted at the three hundred and sixtieth baby. So there was left only a Turk's Head, or round glazed earthen dish, fluted and curved, which looked like the turban of a Turk. Hence its name. Into this, the last batch of babies, or extra six girls, were stowed. Curiously enough, number 366 was an inch taller than the others. To thirty house maids was given a tray, for each was to carry twelve manikins, and one the last six, in the Turk's Head. Instead of rich silk blankets a wooden tray, and no clothes on, must suffice.

In the Groote Kerk, or Great Church, the Bishop was waiting, with his assistants, holding brass basins full of holy water, for the christening. All the town, including the dogs, were out to see what was going on. Many boys and girls climbed up on the roofs of the one-story houses, or in the trees to get a better view of the curious procession -- the like of which had never been seen in The Hague before. Neither has anything like it ever been seen since.

So the parade began. First went the Count, with his captains and the trumpeters, blowing their trumpets. These were followed by the men-servants, all dressed in their best Sunday clothes, who had the crest and arms of their master, the Count, on their backs and breasts. Then came on the company of thirty-one maids, each one carrying a tray, on which were twelve manikins, or minikins. Twenty of these trays were round and made of wood, lined with velvet, smooth and soft; but ten were of earthenware, oblong in shape, like a manger. In these, every year, were baked the Christmas pies.

At first, all went on finely, for the outdoor air seemed to put the babies asleep and there was no crying. But no sooner were they inside the church, than about two hundred of the brats began wailing and whimpering. Pretty

soon, they set up such a squall that the Count felt ashamed of his progeny and the Bishop looked very unhappy.

To make matters worse, one of the maids, although warned of the danger, stumbled over the helmet of an old crusader, carved in stone, that rose some six inches or so above the floor. In a moment, she fell and lay sprawling, spilling out at least a dozen babies. "Heilige Mayke" (Holy Mary!), she cried, as she rolled over. "Have I killed them?"

Happily the wee ones were thrown against the long-trained gown of an old lady walking directly in front of her, so that they were unhurt. They were easily picked up and laid on the tray again, and once more the line started.

Happily the Bishop had been notified that he would not have to call out the names of all the infants, that is, three hundred and sixty-six; for this would have kept him at the solemn business all day long. It had been arranged that, instead of any on the list of the chosen forty-six, to be so named, all the boys should be called John, and all the girls Elizabeth; or, in Dutch, Jan and Lisbet, or Lizbethje. Yet even to say "John" one hundred and eighty times, and "Lisbet" one hundred and eighty-six times, nearly tired the old gentleman to death, for he was fat and slow.

So, after the first six trays full of wee folks had been sprinkled, one at a time, the Bishop decided to "asperse" them, that is, shake, from a mop or brush, the holy water, on a tray full of babies at one time. So he called for the "aspersorium." Then, clipping this in the basin of holy water, he scattered the drops over the wee folk, until all, even the six extra girl babies in the Turk's Head, were sprinkled. Probably, because the Bishop thought a Turk was next door to a heathen, he dropped more water than usual on these last six, until the young ones squealed lustily with the cold. It was noted, on the contrary, that the little folks in the mince pie dishes were gently handled, as if the good man had visions of Christmas coming and the good things on the table.

Yet it was evident that such tiny people could not bear what healthy babies of full size would think nothing of. Whether it was because of the damp weather, or the cold air in the brick church, or too much excitement, or because there were not three hundred and sixty-six nurses, or milk bottles ready, it came to pass that every one of the wee creatures died when the sun went down.

Just where they were buried is not told, but, for hundreds of years, there was, in one of The Hague churches, a monument in honor of these little folks, who lived but a day. It was graven with portraits in stone of the Count and Countess and told of their children, as many as the days of the year. Nearby, were hung up the two basins, in which the holy water, used by the Bishop, in sprinkling the babies, was held. The year, month and day of the wonderful event were also engraved. Many and many people from various lands came to visit the tomb. The guide books spoke of it, and tender women wept, as they thought how three hundred and sixty-six little cradles, in the Count's castle, would have looked, had each baby lived.

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- Source: William Elliot Griffis, [*Dutch Fairy Tales for Young Folks*](#) (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1918), pp. 92-104.
 - Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale type 762.
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The Boy in the Fishpond

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

In the times of Agelmund, the King of the Langobards, it happened that a woman of this tribe gave birth to seven baby boys at one time. Being more brutal than wild animals, she threw them all into a fishpond to escape the

shame. Just then the king rode past the pond, and he saw the miserable children floating there. Stopping his horse, he turned them from one side to the other with the spear he held in his hand. One of the children grasped the royal spear firmly with his little hand. The king recognized in this event a sign that this child was to become a special man. He ordered that he be pulled from the fishpond and turned him over to a wet nurse for care.

Because he had pulled him from a fishpond, which in their language was called a *lama*, he named the child Lamissio. He grew up and became a valiant hero. Following the death of Agelmund he became King of the Langobards.

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- Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Der Knabe im Fischteich," [Deutsche Sagen](#), vol. 2 (Berlin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1818), [no. 392, p. 30](#). In later editions this legend is number 393.
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The Origin of the Welfs

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Warin was a count of Altorf and Ravensburg in Swabia. His son's name was Isenbart, and the son's wife's name was Irmentrut. It happened that not far from Altorf a poor woman brought three children to the world at the same time. When Countess Irmentrut heard this, she exclaimed, "It is impossible that this woman had three children from one husband without committing adultery." She said this publicly in the presence of her husband Count Isenbart and court officials, adding that this adulteress deserved nothing more than to be sewn into a sack and drowned.

The next year the countess herself became pregnant and, during the count's absence, gave birth to twelve babies, all boys.

Shaking and trembling that she, according to her own words, would be accused of adultery, she ordered a servant woman to take eleven of the babies (for she kept one) to the nearest brook and to drown them.

The old woman put the eleven innocent boys into a large tub to carry them to the brook, named Scherz Brook. But as God willed it, Isenbart himself came by and asked the old woman what she was carrying. She answered that she had some whelps or young puppies.

"Let me see if some of them can be used later for breeding," said the count.

"Oh, you have dogs enough," said the old woman, backing away. "It would give you the creeps to see this messy tangle of dogs."

But the count did give in and forced her to uncover the children and show them to him.

Seeing the eleven babies, small but still of noble form and manner, he asked her immediately and sternly whose children they were. The old woman told him everything, how his wife had had the babies and why they were to be killed. The count then ordered that these "whelps" [welfs] be brought to a rich miller who lived in the vicinity and who would raise them. He further ordered the old woman to return to her mistress without fear or embarrassment and to tell her nothing except that her errand had been carried out.

Six years later the count brought the eleven boys, nobly dressed and groomed, to his castle (where the convent vineyard now stands). He invited all his friends and was making merry. When the meal was nearly over he had the eleven children brought in, all dressed in red. They all had the same complexion, build, size, and form as the

twelfth child that the countess had kept. Everyone could see that they had all been produced by the same father and been carried beneath the heart of the same mother.

Then the count stood up and ceremoniously asked his friends what sort of death a woman deserved who would attempt to kill eleven such magnificent boys. Hearing these words, the countess fell to the floor powerless and unconscious, for her heart told her that this was her flesh and blood. After she had been brought back to consciousness, she fell crying at the count's feet, and begged him pitifully for mercy. The friends too intervened on her behalf, and so the count forgave her of the simplicity and childlike naiveté that had led to the crime. Thank God that the children lived.

As an eternal reminder of this miraculous event the count decreed, in the presence of his friends, that his progeny should no longer be known as the Counts of Altorf, but instead as the Welfs, and that his entire lineage should be known as the Welfs.

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- Source: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Ursprung der Welfen," *Deutsche Sagen*, vol. 2 (Berlin: In der Nicolaischen Buchhandlung, 1818), [no. 515](#), [pp. 233-36](#). In later editions this legend is number 521.
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Wölpe

A. Kuhn and W. Schwartz

The present day district (and formerly castle) of Wölpe lies near Nienburg on the Weser River. In olden times a Count Erich (others say he was a court official) lived there.

His wife gave birth to twelve boys at one time, and was so cruel that she ordered her servant girl to set one aside and to drown the remaining eleven in a brook that flowed past the castle. The servant girl, intending to carry out this order, put the little ones into a basket and went outside. However, as she walked up onto the earthwork, she was met by Count Erich who asked her what she had in the basket. To escape detection, she said it was young wolves, which at that time were still plentiful in that area.

The count insisted upon seeing the animals and discovered the eleven little boys, each one identical to the others. He then commanded the servant girl to follow him and to tell no one what he was about to do. With that he found various foster homes in the vicinity for the children, and they stayed there until their confirmation.

After their confirmation he had the eleven boys dress up exactly like the twelfth, took them to the countess, and asked her to select her own son from among them, but she was not able to do this.

Now earlier he had once asked her what should happen to a mother who killed her own children. She had answered that such a woman should be thrown into boiling oil or something similar.

The count now reminded her of what she had said and told her that these were the twelve children that she had given birth to, and that he had rescued eleven of them and had had them raised. But he did not carry out the judgment that she had spoken against herself, allowing her instead to live, so that she could rejoice over her children.

And that is what happened. He lived with her and their twelve children a long time, and the place, because of this unusual occurrence, has since then been called Wölpe.

- Source: A. Kuhn and W. Schwarz, "Wölpe," [*Norddeutsche Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg, Pommern, der Mark, Sachsen, Thüringen, Braunschweig, Hannover, Oldenburg und Westfalen, aus dem Munde des Volkes gesammelt*](#) (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1848), [no. 289, pp. 257-258](#).
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Donkey Meadow and the Nine Brunos

A. Kuhn and W. Schwartz

Many long years ago a Count Bruno lived in the castle at Querfurt. He was a great converter of the heathens, and made many trips to them. Now he had a wife who once scolded a beggar woman for having so many children while not knowing how to feed them. The beggar woman cursed her, and the next time she gave birth, she had nine boys at the same time.

Count Bruno had just set forth on a trip to the heathens, but when he came to a meadow just outside the town gate, his donkey stood still and refused to proceed. Try as he might, he could not get the donkey to move. Then he perceived that this was a sign from God that he should not undertake the trip, and he turned around.

In the meantime, the countess, fearing that her husband would think ill of her when he learned that she had given birth to nine children at one time, ordered the midwife to put eight of them into a kettle and to drown them. The latter was carrying the kettle toward the spring near the castle -- which to this day is called Bruno's Spring -- when she was met by Count Bruno, who was just returning to the castle. Hearing one of the baby boys crying, he asked her what she had in the kettle. She could not keep it a secret, and told him everything that had happened. He commanded her to keep secret what he was going to do, and told her to tell his wife that she had drowned the children.

He took the children to different people who lived in the same street -- the street is still called Bruno Street -- and had them raised there.

One day after they had grown, he had the eight boys dress up exactly like the ninth one. He then asked the countess what a mother would deserve who drowned her own children, saying that such a case had come before him, and he did not know the right punishment. She said that such a woman should be forced to stand in red hot shoes. Scarcely had she said this when her nine children -- which the count had kept hidden until now -- stepped before her. He asked her to identify her own child from among them. She could not do this, and he subjected her to the judgment that she herself had spoken.

To commemorate the fact that a donkey had prevented him from continuing on his journey, he had a chapel built in meadow where this happened, and the meadow is still called Donkey Meadow. Every year during the Easter week a fair was held and a great dispensation was granted there.

The fair still takes place every year, and in the castle they still have the kettle and the iron shoes in which the countess suffered her punishment.

- Source: A. Kuhn and W. Schwarz, "Die Eselswiese und die neun Bruno's," [*Norddeutsche Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Meklenburg, Pommern, der Mark, Sachsen, Thüringen, Braunschweig, Hannover, Oldenburg und Westfalen, aus dem Munde des Volkes gesammelt*](#) (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1848), [no. 234, pp. 208-209](#).
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Nine Children at One Time

Ludwig Bechstein

A count by the name of Gebhard resided at Querfurt. His brother was Saint Bruno, who along with Saint Adalbert was an apostle to the heathen Prussians. Count Gebhard was a strict and serious lord with a stubborn mind and a quick response. Once, when he had been away from his realm for some time, his wife, a noblewoman from Saxony, gave birth at the Querfurt residence to nine babies at one time.

She and her attendants were terrified at this overly rich blessing, and they feared the worst from their count and lord, for he was temperamental and had often spoken unfavorably about women who had given birth to more than one child -- say two or three at one time -- and here there were fully three times three. He could well think that this was altogether too many and hence react in an unpleasant manner.

Thus they took council with one another and decided to keep but one of the babies, the first and strongest, and to do away with the remaining eight. One of the servant women was ordered to carry the eight babies away in a kettle. She was to load the kettle with stones and sink it in the nearby castle pond.

This woman met Saint Bruno, who was living in Querfurt at the time. That early morning he was walking back and forth near a beautiful spring saying his prayers. Hearing a baby cry, he asked the woman what she was carrying.

Terrified, the woman said, "Young whelps," and attempted to hurry on her way. However, Bruno made her take the cover off the kettle, saw the eight babies, and forced the woman to tell to whom they belonged. She told him the whole truth.

Bruno swore her to secrecy, even with regards to the mother. At the spring he baptized the children in the copper kettle in which they were lying, naming each one Bruno after himself. He then gave them to good and loyal people for care and upbringing. This all he kept a deep secret until the time came for him to return to Prussia.

The ninth boy, the one that was kept, was named Burkhart, and with time he became the grandfather of Emperor Lothar.

Because Bruno was about to go abroad, he revealed the secret to his brother, making him promise to not hold this sinful act against his wife, who believed that the children were dead. In the intervening years she had felt the deepest regret and the most painful sorrow.

He then had the eight boys, all dressed alike, brought to the castle and introduced to their parents, who recognized from their appearance and gestures that they were the true brothers of the ninth boy. Sorrow and joy ruled at the same time.

However, Count Gebhard did not allow his wife to go entirely unpunished. He had a new pair of shoes made for her, not from leather but from iron. He had the iron heated until it glowed. The countess had to put on these red-hot shoes for a time for having agreed to the advise to murder the children.

These same shoes and the baptismal kettle are still on display in the church at Querfurt. To this day the spring is called "Bruno's Spring," and the pond where the whelps were to have been drowned is still called "Wolf Pond."

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- Source: Ludwig Bechstein, "Neun Kinder auf einmal," [*Deutsches Sagenbuch*](#) (Leipzig: Verlag von Georg Wigand, 1853), [no. 417](#), [pp. 352-53](#).
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The Entombed Noblewoman

Johann Adolf Heyl

Approximately a quarter hour west of the parsonage of Enneberg stands Asch, the knightly ancestral home of the Lords of Prack. The Cadorinis are said to have set it afire during their military attack in the year 1487. It still stands as it was rebuilt afterward.

Adjacent to the castle is a garden, surrounded by a wall that is overgrown with elderberry and currant bushes. Not far from this seat of nobility flows the brook *Rii Fortiang* toward St. Vigiler's Brook. The following legend deals with this place.

A Knight Prack went to war, leaving his expectant wife at home.

One day a beggar woman came to Castle Asch and asked for alms. The noblewoman was hardhearted and had the old woman turned away. The woman left angrily, shouting up to the windows, "As punishment you shall bring twelve children into the world at one time."

And thus it happened. The woman brought twelve boys into the world at one time, but she kept only one of them, the one who pleased her most. She ordered a maidservant to drown the others in a nearby brook.

At the same time the knight returned home from the field. He met the maidservant with the eleven children in her apron. He asked her what she was carrying away, and the maidservant told him everything.

The knight had the eleven boys raised by strangers. At home he acted as if he knew nothing about the event. He caressed the boy that his wife had kept and attended to his knightly upbringing.

When the sons had grown up he sponsored a splendid feast and told his wife that he had invited eleven magnificent knights. The woman considered herself fortunate to be able to host such distinguished guests. She did everything to prepare a distinguished meal.

The eleven knights finally made their entry, and the feast began. As they ate, the knight entertained his guests with stories of his war deeds. Finally he turned the conversation to a discussion of various kinds of misdeeds.

Soon thereafter the knight began telling a story, "Once there was a raven-mother who brought twelve boys into the world. She wanted to kill eleven of them and to keep and raise only one. However, without her knowledge, she was hindered in her criminal intentions. The eleven boys were rescued and brought up away from home. What punishment would such a woman deserve?"

The wife, who had no idea that anyone knew anything about her secret except for the maidservant, and who thought that her eleven boys had long been dead, replied with indignation, "Such a raven-mother should be entombed alive."

With that the knight turned to her and said calmly, "You yourself are this raven-mother, and my eleven knightly guests are our sons whom you wanted to drown. God decreed otherwise, and fortunately they are still alive. Your own judgment will now be carried out on you."

The wife confessed her dastardly intentions, embraced and kissed her twelve sons, and was led away without resistance.

Her husband allowed her to select the place where she would be entombed. She chose the garden wall of their castle, and asked that she be allowed to put into her mouth a hollowed-out elderberry branch, such as grew on the garden wall, so that she could breathe. If the branch were to grow into an independent elderberry bush, then she was saved. If, however, it were to wither, then she was condemned to the torments of hell. Then she was entombed.

"Thank God," added hard-of-hearing old Frau Agreiter, who told me this story, "as you can see, the elderberry twig has grown into a splendid bush. The poor woman has done her penance and is now in heaven, for that was a long time ago."

Nonetheless, it can be spooky from time to time at Castle Asch, especially in the subterranean chambers. It is said that the great treasure of the Bracuns, an immeasurable amount of gold, is buried there, and also Saint George's saddle, upon which he sat when he killed the dragon. When the Pracks rode in that saddle they were said to be invincible.

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- Source: Johann Adolf Heyl, "Die eingemauerte Burgfrau," [*Volkssagen, Bräuche und Meinungen aus Tirol*](#) (Brixen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Kath.-polit. Pressvereins, 1897), [pp. 576-77](#).
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The Dogs

Karl Lyncker

In the vicinity of Niedenstein there lived in ancient times a wealthy nobleman, who occupied himself hunting. At home he had a beautiful but proud wife.

One morning when the noblewoman was home alone a poor woman knocked at her door. She was holding one child by the hand, carrying one on her arm, and had yet another one beneath her heart. She asked for alms.

"Get out of here!" cried out the hard-hearted noblewoman. "Why must you poor people have so many children, if you can't afford to feed them?"

The woman turned away, saying as she left, "May one day you be given seven at one time!"

Not long afterward the noblewoman did indeed give birth to seven boys at one time. In her fear, she commanded her servant girl to put six of the boys into a basket and to carry them away and throw them into the water before her husband returned home. "If on your way anyone questions you," she said, "just tell them that you have some young dogs to be drowned; but on your life, do not open the lid."

The servant girl did as she had been ordered, but as fate would have it, the first person she met was the nobleman, who was just returning home.

"What do you have in the basket?" he asked.

The servant girl answered uneasily, "Young dogs. My mistress ordered me to throw them into the water."

"Let me see the dogs," said the nobleman.

Whatever excuses the servant girl made, and however she tried to refuse, it was all to no avail, and in the end she had to open the basket.

Instead of dogs, the nobleman was startled to see six healthy boys. They reached out their arms toward him and look up at him imploringly with their large blue eyes. He forced the servant girl to tell her secret and made her swear that she would report back at home that she had carried out her errand. He then took the basket and went to the pastor in the next village.

"Would you baptize six young dogs for me?" he asked the pious man, who was outraged at such disrespect and sent the nobleman away. The same thing happened at a second pastor. However, the third pastor he sought out said that he was willing to baptize the dogs.

Each of the boys was given the name "Dog." The nobleman made a donation to the pastor at Metz which even today is at the parsonage and is called the "dog-tithe."

The nobleman found a different foster home for each of the boys, but he always made sure that each one was dressed in the same way that the boy was dressed who had been kept by his wife.

After they had grown up he summoned them all to his castle. The proud wife was startled to see them, but even more when her husband asked her what a mother would deserve who tried to drown six such splendid boys.

She composed herself quickly and responded with impudence, "She would deserve to be placed in a barrel studded with nails, and then rolled down a mountain."

"You have spoken your own judgment," said the nobleman, "for these are your children who were rescued for me by a fortunate coincidence from the death that you prepared for them."

And he had the judgment carried out.

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- Source: Karl Lyncker, "Die Hunde," *Deutsche Sagen und Sitten in hessischen Gauen* (Cassel: Verlag von Oswald Bertram, 1854), [no. 208](#), pp. 138-40.
 - Related to Aarne-Thompson-Uther folktale type 762.
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The Nine Children

Karl Lyncker

In the old convent church at Möllenbeck on the Weser River in the district of Schaumburg there is a wooden statue of a female saint carrying a church on her arm. The legend states:

Once Count Uffo was returning to his homeland following a long absence in foreign lands. While en route he dreamed that his wife Hildburg had given birth to nine children in his absence. Startled, he quickened his pace.

Hildburg met him with joy and with the words, "I believed you were dead. But I have not been alone. I have given birth to nine daughters, and they are all dedicated to God."

Uffo answered, "Your children are also my children. I will care for them."

But they were nine churches, including the convent at Möllenbeck, which the pious woman had built and endowed.

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- Source: Karl Lyncker, "Die neun Kinder," *Deutsche Sagen und Sitten in hessischen Gauen* (Cassel [Kassel]: Verlag von Oswald Bertram, 1854), [no. 272](#), p. 196.
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Twelve Children Born at One Time

Scandinavia

A woman did not get married until she was fifty years old, because she did not want to have any children, but she did not avoid her fate. Soon after marrying, she had twelve children all at once, the number she would have had if she had married at the right time. The twelve tiny babies all appeared to be dead, but someone laid them in a warm oven, and one of them came to life. It is said that he grew up to be a fine man.

- Source: Retold from various sources.
 - Compare, for example: "Twelve Children on a Platter," Jacqueline Simpson, *Scandinavian Folktales*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988) p. 72.
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Links to related sites

Links open in new windows.

1. [Desperate Father or Murderous Fool? The Genesis of One Migratory Legend of Poverty, Fecundity and Multiple Birth](#), an article by Sarah J. Davies, University of the West of England (published in *Folk Life: Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 2016, pp. 1-17).
 2. [The Singing Bones \(French Louisiana\)](#). This terrifying story's cast of characters includes a murderous mother, a naive husband, and twenty-five offspring.
 3. "The Twin Brothers" (Nigeria). This tale takes place in Africa at a time when "it was the universal custom to destroy twins immediately at birth." Source: M. I. Ogumefu, *Yoruba Legends* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1929), no. 18, pp. 33-36. [Reprint: London: Abela Publishing, 2010, pp. 41-43](#).
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Return to:

- D. L. Ashliman's [folktexs](#), a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.
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