

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Elisabeth Dauthendey (1854-1943)

1. The Seven Candlesticks

2. The Sacred Fire

The Seven Candlesticks

They were mostly seen together in packs.

For there were seven of them.

And because they were all – ridiculously enough – beautiful and well-proportioned, they gave the impression, when they appeared all together, that there were at least ten or twelve of them.

At least this was the case in the earliest days, when they suddenly – nobody knew whence they had come – got out of the coach in front of the secluded house with the big garden one fine summer day – seven sisters, each prettier than the other – and disappeared inside.

Both their parents had succumbed to an epidemic very recently, and this house had devolved upon them from a relative a long time previously. But only now had the horror of life cast them up before this property.

When these seven black figures with their flapping mourning-veils set out for church on Sunday, or came through the little town from a lonely path through the fields with large, colourful bunches of flowers in their hands in the evening calm, the neighbours stood, curious, at their windows, and counted again and again if there really were only seven of them, and argued about how young the eldest and how old the youngest of them might be.

That the one was already twenty-four and the other already fourteen, they would never have guessed for the sisters all looked so remarkably fresh and virginal and florally young.

Gradually, once they had settled down in the small town, they were also seen coming out of the house singly or in pairs. Their delicate feet walked shyly and proudly over the bumpy pavement, and their shining eyes looked vacantly past people, as if they saw something wonderful coming towards them from a far distance.

In the house, every one of them had her little duty. And every one had her special pleasure.

One of them provided the house with flowers. Another drew and painted, and many a fine little picture of hers hung on the walls. One fashioned with her slender fingers all the fine, fragrant things which look like trifles and yet mean so much for the delicate, flowing beauty of very young women.

The garden was their world. There they were seen fluttering around like butterflies in cheerful play. They all had a strange, springy gait, the rhythm of rapid movement. And even their names, which were heard from the garden, had the bouncing sound of a rapid ball-game – Otti – Della – Lulu – Lissi –

In winter, they sat like saints in their seven rooms and read and chatted and yearned, without themselves rightly knowing what for. But in winter and summer, on the round, redly-shimmering mahogany table in the wide anteroom, there stood seven silver candlesticks in their subdued, white, maidenly gleam with white and silent candles on them.

And when the church bell struck the tenth hour, the seven maidens stood in a circle around the table, and seven white, delicate hands set the reddish flames on the silent, white candles.

Strange sparks leapt from the flames into the restless young eyes, and glistening lights flashed over the bronze-brown and corn-bright hair. On the red young lips there lay a soft gleam as on blooming flowers. And in their red young blood there throbbed the blissful anticipation of the next new day.

For a moment, something like a blazing bonfire glided between them from eye to eye.

Then the seven slender hands each reached for a lamp, and the impatient young feet flitted lightly and danced up the stairs to the chaste dreams of their bedchambers.

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Ten years passed by. Nothing had happened.

Fate went past the doors of the Seven.

They waited for it with pain and pleasure.

But they did not know how to open the door to it.

By now, the youngest had reached the number of years which the eldest had lived when they moved in.

And the latter had quickly lost all her youthful bloom. Her figure had become womanly, and with her quiet, kind manner she really did seem to be the mother of this strange group, which now floated, taciturnly and timidly, back and forth between church and home with pale lips and crazed eyes.

In summer all was now silent in the garden. And only rarely were the sisters seen walking in pairs in the arbours. They all came together now only for meals, then they scattered again, as if every one were struggling under the weight of a secret which made her cold and shy before everyone else, yet which each one so bitterly yearned to confide to the others.

But at night, by the seven candlesticks, they met as always. And the pale hands quickly and sharply set the reddish fire on the silent candles. Their eyes gazed fixedly at the soft, trembling light, and when their glances met, they collided with hostility and fled each other swiftly and confusedly. And their weary feet crept slowly, without dancing, to the bitter loneliness of their maidenly bedchambers.

And again, a further ten years crept into the past. – And again nothing had happened.

The seven sisters waited for fate no longer. They looked at their four walls with vacant eyes and with dead hearts.

But a year later, an event came to them.

The youngest of them died.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, as if extinguished, she had disappeared one day.

She was brought into the house dead. Wet from the dark water of the swampy forest-pond. Her blonde hair green from the weeds floating in the water.

Before her bed, a foreign book was found which none of them knew. And a cut lock of her hair lay as a marker at the lines:

Elle est morte et n'a point vécu,
Elle faisait sembler de vivre.
De ses mains est tombé le livre,
Dans lequel elle n'a rien lu. - - -¹

They all understood them. But none of them let it show in front of the others. For a long time, they remained petrified with terror. They had experienced horror without having seen joy. They had seen death without knowing life.

But the seventh candlestick still stood amidst the others as before. And when the withered hands slowly lit the pale candles in the evening, the eyes of the six looked gloomily and sorrowfully over at the lonely flameless light. Around their narrow lips, which were tightly pressed together, they all had the soft, pained expression of bitter envy, because that one needed to light her candle no longer. And the seventh candlestick remained for them the symbol of the unsolved riddle of life.

¹ The poem 'Sur une morte' [On a Dead Woman] by Alfred de Musset (1810-1857), which appeared in his *Poésies Nouvelles* (1836-51). The lines mean: She is dead and she never lived at all, / She only pretended to live. / From her hands has fallen the book / In which she read nothing.