

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **All Hell's Let Loose**



Once upon a time two sovereigns had a border dispute; on both sides there were witnesses who asserted their lord's right, and among these were two who had learned the Black Arts from the Devil in exchange for signing away their souls.

One night, each one of these two intended to place false boundary stones, to mark the border line that he claimed; and they were going to use black magic to make the stones look as if they had been standing there for many, many years. So they both went up, as Fire-Spirits, to the summit of the mountain. And when one of them reaches the top, the other is already there. But neither knew anything of the other's having had the same thought as him.

So one asked the other: "What are you doing here?"

"What's that to you? First tell me what you're here for."

"I'm going to place boundary stones, making the border line as it really should be."

"I've already done that myself, and there are the stones, and that's how the border line runs."

"That's not right, and the border line runs like this. My master has told me that I'm right and I should not yield."

"And who is your master? A fine *monsieur*, no doubt!"

"The Devil is my master! Do you have respect now?"

"That's not true, he is *my* master, and my master has told me that I'm right and I should not yield. Clear off this instant, or it'll be the worse for you!"

And so the two of them went after each other, and in the end one

Fire-Spirit gave the other such a slap on the chops that his head flew off and rolled all the way down the mountain. And the Fire-Spirit without a head ran after his fiery head, wanting to catch it and put it back on his neck. But he could not catch up with it before he was down in a ditch at the very bottom.

Now that one man had given the other a slap on the chops, and the other had run after his head, there suddenly appeared a third Fire-Spirit, and he asked the man who remained on the summit: "What have you just done?" "What does it have to do with you, and who are you to give orders to me? Clear off out of here this instant, or I'll do to you precisely what I did to the other one."

"Scoundrel! Have you no respect for me any more? Don't you know that I am your master, the Devil?"

"And if you were the Devil himself ten times over, I really couldn't care less; as far as I'm concerned, you can go to Hell!"

"I'll do you that favour, but you're coming with me."

And then the Devil began to beat him to hell, so that the flaming demons flew around all over the mountain crest.

But while he was beating him to hell, our Fire-Spirit saw the opportune moment, reached out and caught the Devil by the scruff of the neck, kept a firm grip, and said to him:

"Now you're in my power; now you shall see that you're in the hands of a man! All your life, you've twisted the necks of plenty of poor people, now you yourself shall find out how it feels to have your neck wrung!"

And he began to wring the Devil's neck. When the Devil saw that the

Fire-Spirit was in earnest, he resorted to pleading and gave him the best words under the heavens, adding that he should really let him go and should not twist his neck; he would do anything that he demanded of him. Then the man said to him: "Because you are wailing so miserably, I will let you go; but first you must return to me my bond in which I signed my soul away to you; and you must also promise me, no, in fact you must swear to me by your grandmother, that you will never have any part of me, and also that you will never, as long as you live, make another person sign his soul away to you."

Whether the Devil liked it or not, he was in a jam, and if he wanted to get free and did not want to have his neck twisted, he would have to swallow the bitter pill, so he gave the man his bond back and promised him, swearing by his grandmother, that he would never want any part of him, and he would never again, as long as he lived, make any person sign away his soul to him. When he had done all this, the man let him go.

But once the Devil was free again, he sprang back, so the man could not catch him unawares this time, and stood up straight, and said: "Well, now I'm free again; and even if I have given you your bond back, you jackanapes, and have promised and sworn to you never to have any part of you, yet I did not promise not to wring your neck once I became free again. And you shall die right here, right now, for having taken me by the throat and tried to wring my neck!"

And with these words the Devil rushed at the man, hell-bent on settling his hash for good, but he scampered off and into the forest, with the Devil ever in pursuit. Finally the man cast his eyes about him and came to

an old beech tree that was hollow and had a hole at its bottom. He crawled swiftly inside, to hide himself from the Devil. But he had not crawled in far enough and his toes were still sticking out. And because he was on fire all over, his toes shone through the night, and the Devil descried where the man had hidden himself, and he came up there, ready to catch him by the toes.

But the man in the tree heard the Devil come lolloping up to reach out and grab him, so he pulled all of himself in and made his way further up the tree. Then the Devil crawled inside too, and the man kept climbing up the inside of the tree, with the Devil coming ever after him. At last, the man came up to a broad knothole at the top of the tree and crawled out. And when he was outside, he took something and wedged the knothole he had climbed out of shut, then he climbed rapidly down the tree and wedged shut the hole at the bottom, and he used black magic to make the stoppages so tight that the Devil himself, with his grandmother and the whole of Hell, could not get them open again. This done, he went on his way.

And so there was the Devil stuck in the old beech tree, and he could not get out, and there was no help for it but he had to stay stuck there. And he was in there for a long time, and it often happened during that time, when people took the road over that mountain, that they heard him bleating and grunting in his beech tree. But finally, when tree-felling reached this mountain, the beech was chopped down. At last he came out and was free again, the Devil. Now that he was released, he set out homewards for Hell to see how it was looking. But everything there was empty, like a church on a weekday, and there was neither sight nor sound of a soul. Since the time

that the Devil had gone away and failed to return, with no one knowing what had become of him, not a single soul had arrived in Hell. And his grandmother had died of heartache, and once she was dead all the poor souls who lived in Hell in those days packed up and started and cleared out, going all together into Heaven. So there he stood, all on his tod, in Hell, not knowing for the life of him how to set about getting new souls, for he was no longer allowed to do this, and he had had to swear by his grandmother that he would not make any more people sign their soul away to him – and at that time, he did not get people into Hell in any other way. So there he stood, seeing no end to his anguish and ready to tear his horns from his head from sheer mortification and misery. – Then all of a sudden he had an idea.

When he had been inside the old beech tree, unable to escape, time had eventually come to hang heavy on his hands, so he had mused over all sorts of things, and had conceived and created spirits. This came to him right now in the midst of his misery, and he thought that it would surely be an artful restorative for bringing poor souls to Hell once again. And he packed up on the spot and left Hell to itself, and went to Nordhausen and became a distiller and made spirits round the clock, and gave them to the world. And he showed all the people of Nordhausen at once how schnaps is made, and promised them great wealth and worldly goods if they learned the trade and distilled spirits. And the people of Nordhausen did not need to be told twice, and they all became distillers and made spirits and gave them to the world. From that time derives the huge quantity of spirits that is distilled in Nordhausen, more than in any other place in the whole wide world, up to this very day.



And as the Devil had thought, so did it come to pass. Once people had a drop of strong spirit in their stomachs, they began to curse and to swear, and they cursed and swore their souls to the Devil, so he got them after they died, and he did not need to serve them for this as he had formerly had to do whenever he had wanted to possess a poor soul. And once they had guzzled their fill of spirits and were drunk out of their minds, then they started to squabble, and came to blows, and broke their necks, so the Devil did not even need to take the trouble to wring them. And whereas the Devil had formerly been able to get, with great toil and travail, only one poor soul into Hell every week, now they came in by the dozen and by the three score every day, and before a year was out Hell had become too small and the Devil was no longer able to accommodate all the souls, and he had to have a brand new extension built for Hell.

And in short, since the Devil got out of the old beech tree, since that time have spirits come into use; and since spirits are in the world, it really, truly can be said that: "All Hell's let loose!"

