

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Dwarves' Caps**

Once upon a time there was a miller who had three sons and a daughter. He loved his daughter dearly but simply could not stand his sons; he was always dissatisfied with them and made their lives a misery, for they could never do anything right for him. This greatly distressed the brothers, and they wished they were far away from their paternal home, and often sat together lamenting and sighing, and did not know what they should do.

One day, when the three brothers were sitting sorrowfully together, one of them sighed:

“Oh, if only we had a *dwarf's cap*, that would be a boon to all of us!”

“What's that?” asked one of the two other brothers.

“The dwarves who live in the green mountains,” explained the brother, “have caps, which are also called Caps of Darkness, and you can make yourself invisible with them if you put one on your head. That's a fine thing indeed, dear brothers; you can keep out of the way of people who could not care less about you and from whom you never receive a kind word. You can go wherever you want, take whatever you want, and no one will see you, so long as you are wearing the dwarf's cap.”

“But how does one obtain so rare a cap?” asked the third and youngest of the brothers.

“The dwarves,” replied the eldest, “are a droll little people who like to play. So they take great pleasure in throwing their caps up into the air every now and then. Presto! and they're visible; Presto! and they catch the cap,



put it on, and are invisible once more. Now all you have to do is watch out for a dwarf throwing his cap into the air, then you swiftly grab him and quickly catch the cap yourself. Then the dwarf has to remain visible, and you become master of the whole tribe of dwarves. Now you can either keep the cap and use it to make yourself invisible or demand so much from the dwarves that you have enough for the rest of your life, for they have power over all the metals in the earth, they know all the secrets and miraculous powers of nature; they can also, through their teaching, make the stupid clever, the laziest student an erudite professor, a barber a doctor, and a notary a minister.”

“Well, how about that!” cried one of the brothers. “Then be so good as to go and obtain those caps for you and us, or at least one for yourself, and then help up to get away from here!”

“I’ll do that,” said the elder brother, and soon he was on his way to the green mountains. It was rather a long way, so it was around evening by the time the good youth reached the dwarves’ mountains. There he lay himself down on the green grass at a place where the squiggly tracks of the dwarves’ dances could be seen in the grass in the moonlight; and after a while he saw several dwarves tumbling over one another, throwing caps, and amusing themselves with sundry quaint diversions very close to him. Soon, one of these caps fell down beside him, he snatched at it – but the dwarf whom the cap belonged to was much quicker than he was; it caught its cap itself and screamed, “Thief! Thief!” At this cry the whole host of dwarves threw themselves on the poor lad, and it was like an army of ants crawling around a beetle; he could not fend off the horde, and he was unable to prevent himself being taken prisoner by the dwarves, and being

taken by them deep down into their subterranean dwellings, from which they are called and named Subterraneans.



Now when the eldest brother did not return, the two younger brothers were sorely worried and saddened, and the daughter felt sorry too, for she was gentle and good, and it often distressed her that their father was so harsh and curmudgeonly to her brothers and favoured her alone. But the old miller grumbled: "The gallows-bird of a boy may have gone to

the Devil – what do I care? That’s one useless boarder and greedy guts less in the house. He’ll come back, you’ll see – he’s used to his bread! Ill weeds grow apace.”

But day after day passed and the boy did *not* come back, and the father became ever surlier and harsher to the two boys left behind. So both brothers often lamented together, and the middle one said: “Do you know what, brother? I shall now start out myself for the green mountains, perhaps I can obtain a dwarf’s cap. To my mind, the matter can only be as follows: our brother obtained one of these caps and went out into the wide world to make his fortune, and in so doing he has forgotten us. I will certainly come back if I am successful; but if I do not return, then I have not been successful, and if that should be the case, farewell for ever.”

The brothers took a sorrowful leave of one another, and the middle one wandered off to the green mountains. There he fared, in every particular, precisely as his brother had fared. He saw the dwarves, snatched at a cap, but the dwarf was faster than he was and screamed, “Thief! Thief!” and the whole horde of Subterraneans pounced on and all over the boy, bound him all over with cords so that he could not move a muscle, and took him deep down to their subterranean dwellings.

At home in the mill, the youngest brother waited for his brother’s return with the most eager impatience, but in vain; and then he became very sad, for now he knew for certain that his middle brother had not been successful, and his sister also became sad; but the father remained indifferent, saying only: “What’s done is done. If anyone is unhappy at home, may he travel. The world is large and wide. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out. When the donkey is too well-off, he walks onto ice, dances, and

breaks a leg. Let the dandy run around in the world, why should you grieve over the devil? I'm happy he's out of my sight. Out of sight, out of mind!"

Up to this time, the youngest brother had borne shared sorrow, and so found the consolation that such sharing affords, but now that both his elder brothers were gone, he found his situation quite unbearable and said to his sister: "Dear sister, now I too will go away, and I am hardly likely to return if I fare like our brothers. Father simply does not love me, and I can't do anything about that. The invectives which previously fell on the three of us now fall on me alone, and I really think it is too heavy a burden for me to bear. Farewell, and may fortune smile on you!"

At first, the sister did not want to let her youngest brother go, for he was the one she held dearest of all; but he left the mill nonetheless, in secret, and on the way he very carefully considered how he would go about procuring himself a dwarves' cap. When he arrived at the Green Mountains, he soon recognized the place of the dwarves' nocturnal dances, and their area for sport and play, from the green circles in the grass; and he lay down at dusk and waited for the dwarves to come, play, dance, and throw caps.

One of these came up very close to him and threw his cap, but the clever lad did not reach for it. I've plenty of time, he thought. Before that, I need to make the little men feel perfectly secure and make them tractable. The dwarf picked up its cap, which had fallen right beside the lad. In no time at all, a second cap fell beside him – Well, thought the lad, it's raining caps – but he did not reach for it, until finally a third one landed on his very hand: presto! he held it tight and swiftly sprang to his feet. "Thief! Thief! Thief!" screamed the dwarf to whom the cap belonged in a high, shrill voice that went through bone and marrow, and then the whole tribe of dwarves

swarmed over, but the boy disappeared from their sight, for he had the cap, and they could not hurt so much as a hair on his head. And in a body, they raised a lamentable whining and wailing about the cap – he should hand it back over at any price.



“At any price?” the clever boy asked the dwarves. “That would be fine by me! A deal could certainly be done. But first I want to see and hear what your ‘any’ consists of. For the time being I’ll ask this: Where are my two brothers?”

“They are down there, in the bowels of the Green Mountain!” replied the dwarf to whom the cap had belonged. – “And what do they do there?” – “They serve.”

“Indeed? They serve – and now you serve me. Up! Let us go down to my brothers! Their service is over, and yours is beginning!”

The Subterreaneans were obliged to follow the orders of the earthly man because he had gained power over them through the cap. The power that resides in and under many hats and caps is quite indescribable.

The dismayed and distressed dwarves now led their master to a place where there was a crack in the Green Mountain; it opened with a clang and they went quickly in and down. Down in the depths there were magnificent and immeasurably spacious rooms, and large halls and little rooms and chambers, according to the dwarf-folk's requirements; and now the lad asked again, before he looked round at anything else, for his brothers. They were brought to him, and the youngest saw that they were dressed in servants' garb; and they cried to him despondently, "Oh, have you come here too, dear, good brother, our youngest! So the three of us are together again, but in the power of these Subterraneans, and never again shall we see the heavenly light, the green wood, and the golden fields!"

"Dear brothers," replied the youngest, "Just wait; I think the tables are about to be turned."

"Lordly clothes and stately garments for my brothers and me!" he imperiously ordered the dwarves; but he very wisely kept a firm grip on the valuable cap while the changing of clothes took place, his command being instantly obeyed. Now the master of the dwarves gave the order for a table with select dishes and choice wines, then song and the music of strings with ballets and pantomimes as well, in which arts the dwarves give the greatest performance you will ever see, then luxurious beds to rest in, then the illumination of the entire underground realm, then a glass coach drawn by majestic horses to drive all over the Green Mountains and have a close look at everything worth seeing. Then the three brothers drove through all the jewelled grottoes and saw the most marvellous mechanical fountains; they saw metallic flowers blooming, silver lilies, golden sunflowers, copper roses, and everything radiated brilliance and splendour and magnificence.



Then the master began negotiations with the dwarves about the return of the cap, and he laid down hard terms. *First of all*, a potion distilled from the finest healing herbs, the dwarves being only too well acquainted with them and their curative powers, for his father's sick heart, that he change his ways and come to love his three sons. *Secondly*, a bridal treasure, as rich as a Princess's, for his beloved sister. *Thirdly*, a coach filled with jewels and artistic devices, such as only the dwarves know how to manufacture, a coach filled with minted money, for the proverb says, "Ready money is a ready remedy," and the brothers were very keen to be cured, and finally,

one more coach for the three brothers, fitted out for the utmost comfort, with glass windows, and all the essentials for these three coaches – coachmen, horses, harness and straps.

The dwarves twisted and squirmed at these demands and behaved so piteously that they would have moved a stone to pity, *if* a stone had a human heart; but all their whining availed them nought.

“If you will not agree,” said the master, “then that is fine by me, we shall stay here; indeed, it is very pleasant here with you; I shall take your caps from every one of you; then see what becomes of *you* when people see *you* – you’ll be beaten to death wherever a single one of you shows himself. There’s more! I’ll travel to the upper world and collect toads, then I’ll give them to you, one each, before you go to sleep, to share your bed with.”

When the master uttered the word *toads*, all the dwarves fell on their knees and cried: “Mercy! Mercy! Not *that*! Anything in the world – but not *that*!” for toads are abhorrent, and deadly, to dwarves.

“You fools!” the master scolded. “I am by no means asking for ‘anything in the world’, I have placed the most modest of demands before you; I could, you know, ask for infinitely more, but I am an extremely kind lad. Why, I could take everything from you, and hold the cap and dominion over you in perpetuity; for, as long as I had the cap, I would not die, as you well know. So, you agree to grant my three little conditions? Don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, noble Lord and Master!” the dwarves sighed, and they set to work to produce all that was desired and to carry out every command.

Up above, the mill of the horrid old miller was not a good place to be. When the youngest brother had also left, the miller grouched: “Well – he’s

gone, too – run out on me, like the water in the conduit-pipes – that’s the way it goes – that’s your reward for raising children – they turn their backs on you. Now only the girl remains here, the apple of my eye, my favourite.”

The favourite sat there and began to weep.

“You’re weeping *again*?” the old man grumbled. “Am I to believe, do you think, that you’re weeping over your brothers? You’re weeping over the gawk - your lover, who wants to wed you. He’s as empty and floppy as a flour-sack – *he* has nothing, *you* have nothing, I have nothing, all three of us have nothing. Can you hear a clacking? I hear nothing. The mill stands still; the worst thing that can befall a mill is for it to fall still. I can’t grind, you can’t get married, or it’s a Beggarman’s Wedding we’ll be celebrating. Well?”

Such speeches did the daughter have to listen to every day, and she almost died from silent sorrow.

Then, one fine morning, coaches came driving up – one, two, three – and stopped before the mill, driven by small coachmen; small lackeys leapt down from the footboards and opened the door of the first coach, and three handsome young gentlemen got out, dressed as elegantly as Princes.

Servants swarmed around the other coaches, unloading, unwrapping, unfastening, chests, crates, caskets, closets, heavy coffers, and they carried everything into the mill. The miller and his daughter stood dumbstruck and astounded.

“Good morning, father! Good morning, sister! We’ve come back!” cried the three brothers. Father and sister stared at them in amazement.

“Drink a cup to welcome us back, dear father!” the eldest cried, and taking a bottle from a servant’s hand, he handed over a golden cup, worked with extraordinary artistry, that was full of a noble draught, and bid his father

drink. He drank and passed on the cup, and everyone drank. Warmth streamed into the old man's cold heart, and the warmth became fire, the fire of love. He wept and fell into his sons' arms and kissed them and blessed them. And then the daughter's beloved came too, and he was allowed to drink with them and to kiss as well.

At this, the mill wheels, which had been standing still for so long, began to turn rapidly for joy, round and round, round and round.

