

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Godfather Death**

There once lived a very poor man called Klaus, whom God had blessed with an abundance of riches which gave him grievous care – to wit, twelve children; and then, a little later on, there came another little one, being the thirteenth child. The poor man was at his wits' end with worry as to where he could find a godfather, for his whole kith and kin had already stood sponsor to his children, and he dared not hope to find a compassionate soul who would sponsor his newborn babe among his friends. So he resolved to turn to the first complete stranger who came along, a resolution made all the more easily as many of his acquaintances had previously, in similar circumstances, refused him most hardheartedly.

Now the poor father walked down the highway, willing to offer the godfatherhood of his little child to the first oncomer. And behold! Soon he encountered a very amiable man, of imposing appearance, well-proportioned, neither old nor young, with a gentle and kind countenance; and it seemed to the poor man that the trees and flowers and all the grasses and cornstalks bowed before this figure. Then Klaus was persuaded that He was the Good Lord, and he doffed his shabby cap, folded his hands together and said the Lord's Prayer. And it was indeed the Good Lord, who knew what Klaus wanted before he had asked, and said: "You seek a godfather for your child! Well now, I shall sponsor him, I, the Good Lord". "You are all too gracious, Dear Lord!" Klaus answered, despondent. "But I thank you; you give estates to the haves and children to the have-nots, so that both often lack what they most need, and the rich man feasts while the poor man starves!" Upon these words the Lord turned round and was seen no more. Klaus walked on, and when he had gone a

fair way, there came towards him a fellow who not only looked like the Devil but really was him, and he asked Klaus whom he sought. – He was seeking a godfather for his little child. “Oh then, take me – I’ll make him rich!” – “Who are you!” asked Klaus. “I am the Devil!” “The Devil, indeed!” cried Klaus, and he took the measure of the man, from his horns to his cloven hoof. Then he said, “With all due respect, go back to your home and your grandmother. I do not want you for godfather, you are the worst of all evils! God be with us!”



Then the Devil turned around, making an atrocious grimace at Klaus; and filling the air with a stench of sulphur, he flew away. Hereupon the father met yet another man, as spindly as a rake, like a hop pole, so thin that he rattled; he also asked, “Whom do you seek?” and offered to stand godfather to the child. “Who are you?” asked Klaus. “I am Death!” said the other in a husky croak. -Then Klaus was frightened to death, but he plucked up courage and thought: my thirteenth son would be best in his keeping, and he said, “You’re the man for me! Poor or rich, you level all. It’s a deal!

You shall be godfather to my son. Just present yourself on time; the christening is to be on Sunday.”

And on Sunday Death came in due order and became a proper gaffer – that is, godfather – to the little one, and the boy grew and prospered happily enough. Now when he had reached that age at which a man must learn a trade, that he may in future earn his daily bread – at that time his godfather came and bid the boy walk with him into a dark forest. There were all kinds of herbs there, and Death spoke: “Now, my godson, you shall receive your christening gift from me. You shall become the best of all doctors with the help of the one true medicinal herb which I now place in your hands. But heed my words. Every time you are summoned to a patient’s bedside, you will see my figure.

“If I stand at the invalid’s head, you may affirm that you will make him well, and give him to eat of the herb; if, however, he must bite the dust, I shall stand at his feet; then simply say, “No doctor in the world may help here, not even I.” And *do not* use the medicinal herb against my mighty will, or it shall fare badly with you!”

With those words, Death departed and the young man started on his journey; and in no time at all the reputation and the fame of being the greatest doctor on Earth, for he could tell at a glance whether an invalid would live or die, went before him. And so it was indeed. When this doctor beheld Death at the patient’s feet, he sighed, and said a prayer for the soul of the one departing this life; but if he beheld the figure of Death at the bedhead, then he gave a few drops he had squeezed from the medicinal herb, and the invalid recovered. And so his fame increased from day to day.

Now it so happened that the marvellous doctor came to a land whose King lay grievously ill, and the court physicians had abandoned hope of his recovery. But because Kings like to die the least, the old King hoped to experience a miracle in the form of the wonder-working doctor restoring him to health, so he had him summoned and promised him the greatest reward. This King had a daughter who was as beautiful and good as an angel.



When the doctor entered the King's chamber, he saw two figures standing by his bed: at his head, the beautiful Princess, weeping; and at his feet, cold Death. And the Princess implored him so piteously to save her beloved father, but the figure of his dark godfather stood still and unyielding. Then the doctor devised a ruse. He had nimble servants swiftly turn the bed round, and he quickly gave the King a drop of the medicinal herb, so that Death was cheated and the King saved. Death retreated, incensed, menacingly wagging a long bony finger at his godson.

This youth was passionately in love with the charming princess, and she bestowed her love on him from heartfelt gratitude. But soon afterwards she fell gravely and severely ill, and the King, who loved her above all else, had it proclaimed that the doctor who could heal her would have her to wife and afterwards be King. Then high hopes blazed in the youth's heart, and he hastened to the invalid – but Death stood at her feet. In vain did the doctor throw imploring glances at his godfather to change his place and step a little further up, to be at the patient's head if possible. Death did not budge an inch, and the invalid, who seemed on the point of passing away, looked at the youth with eyes pleading for her life. Then Death's godson had recourse to his ruse once again, having the Princess's bed swiftly turned around and hurriedly giving her some drops of the medicinal herb, so that she soon revived and gave her lover a grateful smile. But Death conceived a mortal hatred for the youth, and seizing him with iron ice-cold hands he took him from that place and into a wide underground cavern. In this cavern there were burning many thousands of candles, tall ones, medium-sized ones, small ones, and tiny ones; many were going out and others were kindling; and Death spoke to his godson, "Behold, here burns the candle of every human life; the tall ones are those of children, the medium-sized ones those of people in their prime, and the small ones those of the old and the hoary; yet even children and the young have oft but a small flame of life that soon burns out."

"Show me mine!" the doctor asked Death, and the latter pointed to a very little stump, which threatened to go out at any moment. "Ah, my dearest godfather!" said the youth, "Might you renew it for me, that I may

wed my beautiful bride, the Princess, and become her husband and the King?" "That cannot be," Death retorted coldly. "A candle must first burn down to the wick before a new one is set in place and lighted." "Then don't delay but place a new candle on the old one!" cried the doctor – and Death said, "I shall do so!" He took a long candle, shaped as if to set it in place, but purposely missed his mark, knocking the stump over so that it went out. At the very same moment, the doctor sank to the ground and was dead. No herb that grows on earth can counter death.