

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Goldcrest**

Once upon a time there lived an old man in a little house in the forest, and he had, apart from several children, a goldcrest, which is the smallest of European birds and belongs to the kinglet family. The old man was very fond of this dear bird, and the children were no less fond of it; and when the old one was on his deathbed, he told his children: "See that you do not sell the goldcrest, for it is a lucky bird." But after the old man had died, poverty and want visited the house of children. Now every week the goldcrest laid an egg the size of a pea and of a pea-yellow colour. The father had always taken these eggs away and returned with money and provisions. Now that their food had run out, the eldest son decided to take the eggs which had recently been laid and offer them for sale. But everywhere he offered the goldcrest eggs he was laughed at, until in the end a man who felt sorry for the poor, starving boy gave him a few pennies for them out of pity. When these had been consumed, and hunger had become stronger than ever, then the boy set out once more; this time, he had only one single egg, and he was more fortunate. He found the man to whom his father had always sold the eggs, and who was well aware of their value, for they were of pure gold. But when the man realised that the youth knew nothing of the secret, he said: "What good is the egg to me? Sell me the bird, and I'll pay you very well for it." And he went with the boy to the little house in the forest right away. The other children wept and wailed when the oldest brother sold the goldcrest to the man, who placed some shiny silver coins on the table in payment. The bird flapped restlessly to and fro in its cage, and it seemed to the children to be squawking: "Don't sell me, don't sell me!" But it was sold nonetheless.

And when the bird was gone and away, away went good fortune from the little house in the forest; unable to maintain it, the children had to go begging and they ended up far apart from one another.

Around this time it so happened that the king of the land died, and when the period of mourning was over, his fair young widow let it be proclaimed that she would give her hand to, and share the throne with, the man who could carry a suspended crown away with his lance while blindfolded. At that time the goldcrest sang without ceasing: "Who eats me will be King! Who eats me will be King!" This pleased the man who had bought it, and although he would have to relinquish the golden eggs if he ate up the bird, he killed it nevertheless, had it plucked and marked with coloured silk so he could recognize it after it had been fried, and gave the cook strict orders to take the most particular care with it. He had invited many friends to a celebratory meal, that he might receive their homage when he had eaten the bird and on the instant become King.

Now while all the preparations that could be made for the feast were being made, the youth who had sold the goldcrest came to the house door as a poor, idle beggar and asked the cook for alms or a piece of bread. She said, "You shall have something, but you must work for it!", and he was perfectly willing. He fetched water, chopped wood for the fire in the hearth, turned the roasting jack, and kept an eye on the birds which were frying in the pan, among which was the goldcrest. Quite by chance, he bumped the pan with a piece of wood and the goldcrest fell out into the red-hot coals.

"Shame about the bird!" the youth thought, although he was quite alarmed; and he shoved it into his mouth and ate it up, even though he burnt himself badly. He did not know that this bird had formerly been his

goldcrest. When the cook entered the kitchen, she counted the birds, saw that one was missing, and chased out the new and perfidious kitchen-lad with much railing and reviling; then she quickly marked another little bird and served up the dish to her master. He ate the marked bird, and he is still sitting there today waiting to become King; and he is annoyed that he treated his friends for nothing.

Having been driven away, the youth crept miserably through the streets and begged at a miller's door. This man was looking for a donkey driver, and he bestowed the position on the poor lad; he would have to sleep with the donkeys in the stable. And behold – on the next morning the miller, while strewing new straw and clearing away the old, found golden eggs in the straw on which his donkey-driver had slept. This was pleasing to him, and he thought: you must keep this lad here as long as you can; he's a golden hen, while the one before him was a dunghill cock.

Now the appointed day arrived for the Crown-Tilt, and the donkey driver thought that if anyone could try his luck at the tilt then he might as well have a go too, and he asked the miller for a lance and a horse. The miller roared with laughter, but thinking that this would be capital sport, he gave him an old, lame, spindly jade, and an old lance, and sent him to tilt for the King's crown.

Everyone laughed when the strange Knight of the Doleful Countenance came trotting along, and the Queen looked indignant that so wretched a lad should thrust himself into the Crown-Tilt, which so many distinguished knights and lords were attending; however, as she had opened the tournament to all and sundry, so she could not now exclude him.



The tournament began with Counts and Knights, one after the other, tilting blindfolded at the crown, which none of them were able to attain; and it ended with the donkey-driver having the good fortune to catch the crown and bring it down. This made the Queen sorely vexed, but she had to

become the donkey-driver's spouse, for she had sworn an oath; and so he became King, and the miller, his master, found thereafter no more golden eggs in the straw of his stable, but only those eggs donkeys are wont to lay.

Now, the Queen not loving her husband on account of his humble origins, she passed her days and nights thinking of a way to rid herself of him. To that end, she very soon had recourse to an old, powerful enchantress, who gave her a herb with the power to change a human form into an animal one. The evil Queen mixed this herb in with her lord and master's food, and behold – when the King had partaken of the food, he began to metamorphose, and he became a donkey in the flesh, he who had previously been a very handsome young man. Thus he was driven from Court in disgrace and dishonour, and another was chosen to be King, whose choice was wisely not entrusted to Fortune and blind Chance; for people were afraid of seeing yet another ass attain the highest position.

The poor former donkey-driver, now a donkey himself, had to experience all the arduous circumstances of his new station. He had made his way to the mill where he had at one time contentedly driven the donkeys and slept on straw. The miller, seeing him approach, was unable to tell him apart from the other donkeys, although there was something human in his eyes. And then he was placed with the other donkeys in the mill, where he had to carry sacks of grain and flour year in, year out, and he was not a whit better nor worse off than the others.

Now this poor donkey, in the time when he was yet a man, had had a sister who had gone her separate way in search of alms; and after she had



begged for bread in a convent she had been taken on as a maid, for she was a vigorous young lass. Being devoted and diligent, she eventually became a nun herself, and she was entrusted with the office of portress. Now this convent's grain was ground at the very mill where this particular donkey was to be found, and when he approached the convent gate with his sacks for the first time, he immediately recognised the portress as his sister, for he still had human thoughts and human memories. Then he gave a loud bray to make manifest his joy, and the portress also felt a certain sympathy with this donkey swelling in her breast; the voice of Nature was speaking. Now the portress was knowledgeable about all kinds of herbs, and she herself cultivated the best and most potent herbs in the convent garden. So she went there, picked a magic herb which had the power to change an animal form conferred by magic back into a human one, and gave it to the donkey to eat. And he became a man again, the same as before, and he expressed his gratitude to his good sister with many kisses and tears. However, he had borne enough sacks and blows over seven years to have no wish to return to human society. In the vicinity of the convent where he had found his good, devout sister again, he built for himself a hut made from tree branches and became a devout hermit and pilgrim. There he lived on roots and herbs and took delight in the charming song of the woodland birds, and he fed and tended them, with the exception of goldcrests, which he could not stand; he cursed them, for one of them had brought him nothing but misfortune, and he caught them and killed them whenever he could lay his hands on one.