

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Of a Hare and a Bird**



“‘I once had,’ said the raven,” – the wise adviser of the Raven-King narrated – “to the birds gathered around him, who were listening attentively, ‘a good friend, also a bird; his name is of no matter. When this friend left his nest, which was situated in the vicinity of mine in a rocky cleft, he would habitually stay away for a very long while, so that many was the time I thought he must have met with misfortune or died, or been caught, in foreign parts,

or had made himself a home elsewhere. Then it so happened that a hare found that cleft in the rock, and the soft, warm bird’s nest inside it, and made its bed there. I did not hold it to be wise to meddle in others’ affairs, and thought to myself: Why should you deny the hare the residence when, after all, the bird may not return? Suddenly I heard the sound of quarrelling under me, for the tree that bore my nest stood close by the cliff. My neighbour, the bird, had come back, and he was sitting before the hole in the rock, squawking: ‘That’s my nest! Clear off out of it at once!’ But the hare sat inside and cried, ‘I am in possession of this residence, and have been for some time. Anyone who took a fancy to it could come and say, Move out!’

‘You’re a shameless, wicked hare!’ screamed the bird. ‘You’re a robber! The nest is mine and you will vacate it!’

‘No – I will not vacate it!’ replied the hare. ‘You can curse and chatter as much as you like! If you believe you have right on your side, then bring a suit against me! I will justify myself to you before a judge – not here.’

Hereupon the hare secured his door and withdrew into the recesses of the cleft.

Some time afterwards, the bird returned and said to the hare: 'I know a pious, honest elder who shall dispense justice between you and me! Follow me to him.' – 'Who is it? What is his name?' asked the hare. – 'I have not yet spoken with him,' replied the bird. 'He has not lived in this region for long, he is a pious hermit who fasts and prays the whole day through and shows himself to be a thoroughly respectable character. It is said that he used to be a mouser, but he has long since renounced his feline nature, all of the world's luxuries, and all base devouring of mice. He sheds no blood, but lives on roots, grass, and herbs, and his drink is only clear water. He will certainly pronounce impartial judgement on our case.'

'A cat? An old mouser?' the hare asked suspiciously. 'I do not particularly trust him. The proverb says: The cat never leaves off mousing.'

But the bird did not cease urging the hare, and in the end it went along. I followed at a distance to see how things would turn out. The cat, actually a large, savage tom, was sitting in front of his residence, as I saw from afar, sunning himself, and he leisurely stretched, licked his paws, and stroked his beard; suddenly, on seeing the bird and the hare approaching, he darted into his chamber, and when the two companions entered his home, they found him wrapped in a penitent's hairshirt and lying on his knees in an attitude of prayer. Then the hare was reassured and rejoiced to make the acquaintance of so holy a soul, and now each vied with the other in apologizing for disturbing his devotions, and besought him to lend a sympathetic ear to their pressing case.

‘Dear friends!’ said the mouser in a quiet, hoarse voice, while he rolled his eyes in affected piety, ‘I am old, my eyesight is dull and dark, my hearing is in a very bad way – come over close to me and speak very loudly, so I can hear everything correctly.’

Now the bird and the hare related how they had fallen into dispute and discord with one another about the nest, left by the one and taken possession of by the other, but had both agreed to submit to his impartial judgement. When they had both fallen silent, the savage mouser spoke, again quite hoarsely: ‘I understand you well, dear children, understand you well. I will give you good counsel and show you the ways of justice. O, let the light of Heaven shine upon me, so I may pronounce a just and correct judgement in this so exceedingly important matter of yours, and find the truth in this difficult case! For it is better that a case be lost through illumination with the Torch of Truth than it be falsely won through lies and deceit and untruth. Oh – oh! What is it that we have here below? No permanent home! We take only the one thing with us when we pass into the future world, the works we have performed to the salvation or to the damnation of our souls. If only each one of us here below would wish his neighbour well! Do not hesitate to step closer, dear children, and rest yourselves, while I beseech, in prayer, enlightenment in your case.’

The hare and the bird trusted these hypocritical words of the false, insidious, savage tom, but I, who had flown up close and heard every word, now heard only the cat slamming his door shut and the pitiful screaming of the bird inside. The faithless beast had throttled the bird and the hare, and he ate them both up, and then he moved into that deserted residence which

was better situated and appointed than the mouser's miserable home – whereupon I emigrated from that place without delay.

You see here an example of how the blind trust that is placed in strangers, who, like the eagles, use their guile and malice to approach us, carries its own punishment with it. The eagle is among the birds precisely what the wolf is among the four-footed beasts. And I hold fast to my conviction, and repeat to you urgently and warningly – yes, warningly – never choose the eagle for your King!

“With raised voice,” the old raven Privy Counsellor continued his tale to the King, “did the skilful public speaker end his lecture, and what was the result? No bird would now have the eagle for King, the entire royal election came to nought, and the raven's gift for oratory celebrated a glorious victory; it needed but little for *him* to be proclaimed King.”

“And what did the eagle say to that?” asked the King.

“My gracious King and Master shall learn that this very instant,” replied the Privy Counsellor. “The eagle said to the raven, ‘Tell me, raven, what harm have I ever done you? For what reason do you heap so much ignominy on me? I have never been guilty of any wrong towards you, yet you, with your poisonous and slanderous words, have today robbed me of a magnificent crown, just when I could feel it floating right above my head! But in very truth, I swear to you, by all that is sacred and dear to me, you slanderous tatler: a tree which a man hews into with an axe grows together again, and a sword-wound through flesh and bone may heal again. But the wounds which the tongue inflicts, they do not heal, and the harm never reaches an end. Your words are a burning sword to me that will rage in my

flesh evermore. Fire may be extinguished with water, and the flames of discord with silence; the venomous bite of the snake is healed with theriac, and the wounds of sadness with hope. But the fire of enmity, onto which the tongue pours oil, that burns without end. Today have you, O wise orator Raven, planted a thornbush between your people and my people which shall endure and blossom from generation to generation, through our and our childrens' and our last descendants' lifetimes, and it shall bring forth for you the bitter fruit of hate! I swear this to you by Jove's thunderbolt!

When the birds heard the eagle's furious words they were frightened, and they raised their wings and flew away to the four winds, and the eagle also flew away, and no one said another word; and the raven sat forlorn and forsaken on the stone which had served him as a pulpit, and he became very thoughtful and said to himself: 'Now I have had my say. It would have been wiser had I held my tongue. The sages of old said: Speech is silver, silence is golden. I have now, through my warning, called the everlasting hatred of the lords of the skies down on me and my race. The eagle shattered me with forcible words, and not one of the other birds so much as opened its beak to speak support of me, in spite of their earlier wild jubilation. They were clever, they discovered the gold that is silence; they did not feel inclined to burn their tongues as I did, old fool and stupid chatterer that I am. They were thinking of the future; I had my eye only on the present. Let no wise man rely upon his wisdom, and no strong man on his strength, and let him not burden himself with enmity in his efforts to be of use to others, or he is the fool who partakes of poison to afterwards thwart its effects with theriac; such an action can easily miscarry. From

today on and for evermore, I must hold myself to be the least wise and by far the most stupid of all birds. Why could I not have borne in mind what the sages of old said: The most injurious loss is the one incurred through one's words – before I and my stupid beak kindled the everlasting enmity of the eagles against my people!'

Thus did the raven lament, and he took his unwise words so much to heart that he soon afterwards fell ill and died.

You see, my King," the Privy Counsellor ended his communication, "that is the cause of the eagles' hatred for us."

"Alas!" sighed the King. "I would to Heaven that that unwise raven had never crept out of the egg, instead of bringing this misery on our heads. Now our teeth will be set on edge by the sour grapes our fathers have eaten. But now speak on – what shall it be, what should we do?"

Next: *Of a Hermit and Three Scoundrels*