

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Rupert Sloth-Bear**



Once upon a time there was a stockily-built lad who looked on the world with defiant eyes and was of a temper to start an argument with all and sundry; and so he became a soldier and battled bravely and valiantly with the enemy until peace was concluded and the soldiers were discharged, so they could return to the place they had come from or go wherever else they wished. Then Rupert thought: I'll go to my brothers – for he no longer had parents – and he intended to stay with them until war came again. But his brothers said, "That's just what we need, someone waiting for war – well, you can wait! We want nothing to do with war or with soldiers, we want to have peace! If you've made it through war, you can make it through peacetime as well; the world outside this door is *your* oyster, just so you

know!” – Then soldier Rupert, without giving his brothers a single kind word, took his shooter and went out into the world again, and coming to a large forest, he said to himself, “It’s disgraceful, sending a brave lad and warrior away like that in the middle of peacetime, which the likes of us on God’s earth don’t know what to do with. I must have war! If only someone came whom I could pick a quarrel with, and were it the Devil himself!” – and while Rupert had these thoughts he loaded his gun, putting in a powerful shot with a double charge and two bullets. Then a big man came through the forest towards Rupert, wearing a floppy black hat with a red cock’s plume on top; he had a crooked hawk’s nose and a beard as fiery-red as a fox, and had on a green hunter’s coat, and he asked, “Where to, companion?” – “What’s it got to do with you?” Rupert rudely retorted, for he badly wanted to start something with the first person he met, be they the best or the worst person he met. – “Oho! Now, don’t be so snappish!” cried the green man with the floppy hat and the red cock’s plume. “If there’s anything you lack, I can help you!”

“What I lack the most – well – it’s money!” replied Rupert. – “If you had courage, you could have wealth in abundance!” – “Courage? Odsbodikins nomdedieu! Mister, who told you I have no courage? I a soldier – and no courage? The courage of the Devil!” – “Look around you!” said the green man – and when Rupert looked around, there behind him was a bear, almost as big as a rhinoceros, and it opened its jaws wide and roared, and came walking on its hind legs up to Rupert – who took his rifle, took aim, and said, “Do you want a pinch of snuff? Here’s a pinch for you!” – and he shot both barrels into the bear’s nose, a bullet in each nostril penetrating into the brain – and the bear gave a mighty bound and a loud

roar, fell down, and gave up the ghost. – “Look at that, look at that; you have courage, I can see!” said the green man in the floppy hat with the red cock’s plume. “And so you shall have money from me, as much as you could possibly want, but with *one* condition!”

“I’d like to hear it!” said Rupert, who had long since realised whom he was dealing with, for the shoemaker had, it seemed, taken a most singular measurement for one of the man’s boots, just as if he had made it for a horse. – “If it should be salvation – no, thank you very much!” Rupert continued.

“Idiot!” retorted the forest-hunter. “What do I get out of your salvation? You can keep that for yourself, I couldn’t care less about it. No, *this* is my condition, that over the next seven years you do not wash yourself, or comb your hair, or shave your beard, or cut your nails, or sleep in a bed, or say the Lord’s Prayer – which is not the stuff of soldering anyway. I’ll give you your coat and cloak, which you must wear only and solely in these seven years. If you die within this time, then you are mine; if you remain alive, then I have no share of you, while you will have money as before and you can do with it what you want, and I will scrub you clean again, even should I have to use my tongue.”

“Oh – and you call all of that *one* condition?” asked Rupert. “It seems to me there was a good dozen of them – however, let it be so, I’ll give it a try, the proof of the pudding is in the eating!” – “Done!” said the Devil, and taking off his green coat he very quickly stripped the skin off the dead bear then continued: “Here is your coat, here is your cloak and your quilt. You have only to reach inside the coat-pocket and you’ll find money; and the bearskin you cover yourself with, barefaced idler that you are, is the finest

shirker's shirt that anyone could possibly wish for who has pockets stuffed with money and so no need to shift his bones."

When Rupert had put on the green coat, he first and foremost reached into the pocket to see if it was true about the money, for he did not trust the Devil, who is after all named the Father of Lies. But as the pocket proved to be a never-empty Fortunatus's Purse, so Rupert slung his bearskin over his shoulders and walked away from the Devil without an adieu, the latter having vanished in the meantime.

Now Rupert lived for the day, going to seed and going to hell in a handbasket; he let his beard grow imposingly, making himself appear perfectly electable to any German or Polish parliament, for our strength resides in our hair, as the story of Samson has taught us; and he brought it so far that, as early as the second year, he looked like a Great-Horned Owl and a hobgoblin, particularly so as his fingernails had extraordinarily, aristocratically, genteely grown even beyond the Chinese measure. People avoided him when they saw or smelt him from afar, for his smoking no tobacco notwithstanding, he smelt even at a distance far worse than a hoopoe – which, by the by, is unjustly denounced as a "Stinkhen," for the hoopoe itself does not stink at all, it is only its uncleanness and the company it keeps that bring it into such bad repute.

Now Sloth-Bear kept giving lots of money to the poor for them to pray that he survive the seven years; and the poor readily took the money and promised to pray right fervently. Whether they did this or not, I don't know. Innkeepers also gave him a warm welcome, for he spent a great deal, and it is an unshakable fact: if a man but have money and spend it freely, he may, without fear, be the most stinking sluggard, yet he will always find

acolytes, acknowledgement, and acclaim – but once and for all, it takes *money*.

Now the slothbeardom had entered its fourth year, and Sloth-Bear had had his fill of it, for he was no longer pleasing to himself, let alone to others; on his face he lugged around a primeval forest of hair-moss teeming with life, his fingers had grown into pitchforks, and he found no particular enjoyment in anything, in spite of all his money. In the inns he was always given the hindmost and highest rooms, three, four, five flights of stairs high, and always close by the latrines. One day he was sitting in his room, the picture of moroseness, pondering his fate, and ardently wishing for his time to be up, so he could appear as a new man and discard the hedgehog-beard together with the gallows-nails on his fingers – when he heard a moaning and groaning from someone next door that would have melted a heart of stone. At once he went over to succour his neighbour, for Sloth-Bear had been born with a gentle and good heart. An old man was sitting there wailing and lamenting, and when Sloth-Bear came, he thought it was the Evil One come to fetch him, for Sloth-Bear resembled the Devil far more closely than any other of God's creatures; yet he was eventually pacified and moved to pour out his distress. Now this need of his was precisely the same as Sloth-Bear's need had been, namely the *need for money*. The good old man had three daughters and many debts, and was just about to make off and lead a very secluded life, for he was unable to settle the account his host had made up. Sloth-Bear laughed at this; well might he laugh, of course, as might anyone who has a spring of gold welling in his pocket. He paid the old man's debts to the last farthing, and the man invited him to come with him and see his daughters, who had no little

beauty; and one of them should marry him from gratitude. That was fine by Sloth-Bear, for he had much time to spare, and in his bearskin the days often seemed long, and he went forth to make conquests, as a brave soldier always should do; it was just a shame that he was not allowed to make himself nice and neat – no trimmed beard or goatee waxed black, and no coiffed curls or slender flanks or smooth nails and no Eau de Cologne and no first-class Havana cigars. He could not do any of that but rather had to stay all over bearskin and go there and attempt a storming just as he was, as he lived and breathed, as he walked and smelt. The two



eldest daughters of the saved man were horrified by the monster, who wore his wig with its various plaits over his face instead of on the back of his head, who tendered a hand like a griffin's, who had been wearing his linen for four years now, the same having become quite isabelline, and who smelt like an empty old vinegar bottle in a vaulted cellar – anything but appetising. Only the youngest daughter, who was also the fairest, stood firm and did not run away. She bore in mind that this Sloth-Bear had saved

her father, and thereby herself, from insult and infamy; she possessed the beautiful virtue of gratitude, which so many people do not possess. Now when Sloth-Bear perceived that this lovely girl did not draw back trembling from his ugly and repellent figure – indeed, that she was willing to fulfil her father’s promise to him – then he offered her a beautiful ring, yet only the half of it, as a pledge of his engagement to her, and he asked her to pray most fervently that he remain alive for three more years and, if possible, somewhat longer; and he took his leave of her for three years in order to debearskinat during this time, after the expiry of which he would return as a spruce gentleman. And it is not everyone who can perform this feat; many a lad leaves his parental home as a reasonably good and tame young man then comes back, looking like a satyr, as the biggest Sloth Bear in creation. The girlish beauty and beautiful girl who had become betrothed to Sloth-Bear dressed in black and had to put up with a great deal from her sisters about her shaggy bridegroom. These mocked, now the one, now the other: “Take care when you hold out your hand to him that he doesn’t bite it off, for he thinks you’re scrumptious!” – “Be careful, my sweet child, that he doesn’t lick you up – bears love honey!” – “Be sure to do his will in everything, or he’ll roar at you, your Shaggy Bear-to-be!” – “Well, what a merry wedding it’ll be, when they strike up the ‘Bear Dance!’” – But the young bride held her peace in the face of these remarks and let her elder sisters mock and quip to their hearts’ content; in the meantime, her fiancé went on living without doing too much good or bad. He lived safely through the last of the seven years, and on the last day he went back to the spot where the Devil had appeared to him seven years before. The latter duly turned up as appointed, but with some disgruntlement, for he noticed that

Sloth-Bear was long since weary of Slothbeardom and wished to break with him; he therefore tried to handle the matter cleverly and exchange coats back, but Sloth-Bears said, “Not so fast – first you lick me and wash me clean as you promised, so I can once again look like a handsome human being and not like a hobgoblin or you, you unclean spirit!” So the Devil had to nicely renovate Sloth-Bear, combing his hair with his fingers and with his tongue, which scratched like a rasp, licking his skin clean, and cutting his nails; and he had to wash him and make him smart and spruce again.



He did this through gritted teeth, and it was a hard piece of work, for the world has shown us what a capital effort is required for one-year-old Sloth-Bears, let alone for someone who has remained in Slothbeardom for seven years. Then the Devil received from the erstwhile Sloth-Bear, the current Mr. Rupert, a hefty kick in valediction, and the latter dressed himself very handsomely and travelled by post-chaise, full steam ahead, to his fiancée's place of residence, where he was not recognised. He comported himself as a rich suitor and gave to understand that he wished to marry one of the three fair maidens, one of whom was already his betrothed. The youngest paid absolutely no attention to him, but her sisters liked him so very much, and preened themselves like peacocks, and quarrelled over which of them was to have him. But Rupert requested a goblet of wine of

his betrothed, drank from it, and asked her to pledge him; when she did so, she espied a half of her engagement-ring in the goblet, and she was quite overcome with astonishment and sweet delight. Rupert embraced and kissed her; then her sisters came in all groomed and dressed to the nines, and their faces turned green and yellow with envy and vexation at their sister's good fortune – and they ran out. One, full of rage and resentment, hurled herself into the well, while the other, full of virulence and venom, hanged herself in the loft; and suddenly there was the Devil at hand, and snapping up both souls, he said, "I was to have one soul – and now I have two. All the best for your wedding!" With that, he departed, and when the period of mourning was over, Rupert married his charming and fair young bride, and he never became a Sloth-Bear ever again.