

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Scrub the Muzzle**



In a large German city there was once a princely wedding which was celebrated in splendid style; there were parades and festivities of every description and immense numbers of travelling entertainers and tumblers and beggars. Among the last-named was a beggar who asked for alms as one pursuing a regular profession; nevertheless, on this day of the festival he had no particular luck, for everyone was preoccupied; people ran, people rushed, people pushed and were pushed, pressed and were pressed, looked and gawped, and had no time to pull out their purse; and this movement was not at all recommended, for if a forward hand were to snatch the purse away, that would be the end of it. It rankled exceedingly with the beggar that on this very day when he had expected a large yield of alms to hail down into his hat, he had received nothing at all, and he indignantly grumbled to himself: "Has the whole city then become like Meagre Manor? Hell's Bells, the Devil must be in it! Oh, I'd rather ask the Devil for alms than you pinchpennies and starvelings! How many prayers have I said today alone, how many litanies spluttered out, and I've not even had the opportunity to say: 'I kiss Your Grace's hand, God bless you!'"

While the beggar grumbled in this wise, a small man with a limp and dressed in a short coat of green velvet walked past him. He was wearing a black Spanish hat with a red feather on top, and he half looked round

towards the beggar, thereby opening to view a keenly flashing eye and a very imposing, sharply hooked Roman nose. The beggar instantly forgot his resolution not to address another soul that day and strode after Little Greencoat, pressed up close to him, held his slouch-hat out before him, and began his begging sermon in the form of an ejaculatory prayer. Greencoat made a furious face and shouted at the beggar in a hoarse voice: "Shut your mouth this instant, you rogue! You'll gain nothing from me using such expressions. You don't know *whom* you are asking for alms, even though this is what you promised to do a short while ago!"

With these words Greencoat walked into a street corner, where there was room to breathe, for the throng of people surged past down the street unceasingly, and the beggar followed him, because seeing the Green Man reach into his pocket, he speculated it might be to take out a little something for him. And the man did indeed do this, taking out a small iron rasp with a short wooden handle, and he said: "This little tool can and will put a permanent end to your want, if you care to follow my advice. You need only stroke it once over your lips and say, 'Scrub the muzzle,' and a gold coin will fall from your mouth. However, nothing comes for free in this world except death, according to the proverb – a proverb, by the way, that is a lie, for death costs life – so you will find it only fair that I also crave something from you."

"Whatever Your Grace may command! At your service!" cried the beggar, trembling with joy, and he looked steadfastly at the new iron rasp.

"First of all, you must not say any more prayers, must henceforth on no account either pray or beg, must not enter a church, must not wed, and after seven years your soul must be *mine*. If anyone directs insults at you, if

a judge passes an unfavourable sentence on you, if someone says something to you that displeases you, just pull this rasp out from your pocket and say, without raising it to your lips, ‘Scrub the muzzle,’ and it will give the mouth of your ill-wisher and such a working over as a local magistrate who is always in the right gives to a poor farmer, and they will then assuredly keep said mouth shut.”

Although the beggar now realised who this particular Greencoat was, and the knowledge gave him gooseflesh all over, yet the offer did not after all seem so bad to him, for he valued money above all else and had never especially concerned himself about his soul. Avoiding prayer and churchgoing was also no hardship to him, for he had never meant anything by the prayers he mechanically recited while begging, and his place in church had always been *outside, before* the church doors. He therefore accepted, and Greencoat said he would come to him and bring the note of hand along for his signature the next morning – one never knows when one will die – for he *must* have something red on white, and if the beggar did not scrupulously stick to the pact, then his soul would instantly be forfeited to the Green Man. “The trick with ‘Scrub the muzzle’ to obtain money,” the Green Man added, “can be practised only once a day, and that only in the morning, before you break your fast.”

Greencoat limped away and was soon lost in the teeming crowd, while the beggar kept his hand constantly on his left trouser-pocket, in which the former had put the rasp, so that the likes of a pickpocket would not swipe it; contrary to habit, he did not go to an inn that evening, and he could not get a wink of sleep all night for expectation. He had wrapped the rasp in a handkerchief and bound it round his neck, so as not to lose it.

He was up at the crack of dawn, when he fetched a bowl, took out the rasp, passed it over his wide mouth and said, “Scrub the muzzle!” – Clang! a brand spanking new Kremnitz ducat fell clinking into the bowl – however, some skin fell from his lip at the same time. But the rascal paid no heed to the pain; he worked at his mouth like a locksmith with his file, “Scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle!” The rasp went at a brisk pace, and there really did fall a golden shower, as in the fable of the heathen gods when Zeus paid his respects to Danaë – only, scholars are not, unfortunately, able to say with any certainty if it rained Kremnitz ducats at that time also, or if it was perhaps a rainbow cup.¹

Now the rasp-master’s mouth was bleeding quite badly when Greencoat arrived with a roll of parchment and a quill that was freshly-cut – but cut the wrong way – which he dipped into his man’s bleeding lips as into a red inkpot, and the other had to sign his name on the parchment – whereupon the Green Man suddenly disappeared, taking the pact with him, but leaving behind a tin of lip-pomade, which smelt of sulphur rather than attar of roses, to heal the small wounds; and he added the warning not to make too very frequent use of the rasp, or the rasper would always have a bad mouth, and this alone was enough to make someone suspicious in the eyes of the police and put him in their bad books.

On the following day, Kremnitz Goldmouth had a horrible scab on his lips, but he did not, in his opinion, have nearly enough ducats, so he began to scrub his muzzle anew, till coins fairly rattled into the bowl; he suffered abominable pains, admittedly, and his lips swelled up like two brown

¹ Celtic gold or silver coins found in a ploughed field after heavy rain and popularly believed to have been left by a rainbow.

sausages which had partly burst in the frying, but he did gain a great deal of gold. He could not go out without a bandage on his mouth, but he went to a tavern that evening all the same and released some of his little golden birds, carousing and living it up with his former brothers-in-alms. Yet they ridiculed him for his boar's snout, saying he must have kissed the Devil's grandmother! – and because this vexed him, he took out the rasp and said, softly and secretly, "Scrub the muzzle," and in a trice the rasp was dancing invisibly all over the lips of the compotator who had cracked the joke, but without any gold falling down, making him yell out in pain; after which the rasper withdrew, swearing to himself to henceforth avoid such low company. He now had the rasp work busily around his mouth, as much as he could possibly bear, and began the construction of a new house, which he prosecuted ardently. He had the words, "At the Scrubbed Muzzle" written above the door, and he adopted the noble name *Chrysostomus*, which is *Goldmouth* in English.

Lord Chrysostomus at the Scrubbed Muzzle became ever richer and richer – it was just a shame that he always went around with his mouth bandaged, which caused the tale to spread among the people that his mouth was not a mouth but a small pig's snout, yet made of gold, which he was continually abrading, and that was the source of his wealth. Now, because he did not give anything to the poor, there was born the expression, which afterwards spread throughout the whole German Empire, by which every miserly rich man was called a *skinflint*.

Lord Chrysostomus at the Scrubbed Muzzle lived a life of luxury and ease; if anyone did or spoke anything against him, he had the rasp give them a thorough working over, with the result that they all held their tongue

then and there; and even the police, the first time they tried to fall upon him because of his loose tongue, were so well and truly rasped that they never again ventured to lay hands on Lord Chrysostomus at the Scrubbed Muzzle.

So the seven years went by and Greencoat returned, intending to receive the lapsed soul. The doorkeeper of His Excellency the Count Chrysostomus of and at the Scrubbed Muzzle did not want to admit the Green Man to his master because he held him to be some itinerant hunter, but Little Greencoat tripped the big doorkeeper up, who fell down with a thud like a sack of nuts.

His Lordship the Count reposed² on the sofa, perusing the newspaper, with several bottles of Hungarian wine lined up beside him, and smoking Turkish tobacco, when the Greencoat stepped into the magnificently decorated mirrored room.

“What is it? What’s all this about?” the Count enquired, in an evil temper at someone daring to enter unannounced. “Apply to the valet!”

“I have to talk with *you*, worthy sir!” replied the Greencoat. “Your time is up! Here is the pact. Up, quick march! Instead of shaving off, it’s time to shove off!”

His Lordship the Count of and at the Scrubbed Muzzle whisked a square lorgnette, which was appended to a ribbon, up to his right eye, and squinted through it at Greencoat, then His Excellency executed a yawn and said, “What? Time? Pact? Quick march? Scrub the muzzle – Idiocy!”

No sooner had His Lordship the Count articulated the words, “Scrub the muzzle” than the rasp flew at Greencoat’s mouth and rasped it until he

² Bechstein playfully uses the plural form of the verb with a singular subject, a practice reserved for reigning princes (and other dignitaries when they are addressed). The attempt has been made to approximate this effect in English by the use of more formal verbs.

well-nigh lost his senses. The stupid Devil – Greencoat was none other – had forgotten to give this muzzle-scrubber a property that could not be exercised on everyone – the Count drummed a Highland reel in two-four time on the table with the fingers of his left hand, humming along:

“Scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle! Ha-ha-ha!

Scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle, scrub the muzzle! Tra-la-la!”

and the Devil became sick and sore from this dance; he screamed so loud that the whole house At the Scrubbed Muzzle shuddered, and at last he dropped to his knees and implored His Illustrious Grace the Count for mercy and an end of it.

His Lordship the Count exhaled a cloud of Turkish tobacco-smoke into the Devil’s face and outstretched his hand, without altering his recumbent posture, pronouncing only these two words: “My pact!” whereupon the Devil handed it over. The Count dispelled his doubts that it was the right one and not, perhaps, a supposititious document, then His Excellency very leisurely tore the parchment with its red signature in sunder and enounced, “Let that be the end of it! Be so good as to wipe your mouth and find the exit. As for the rasp, you will leave it to me as a keepsake, our exemplary police will feel –” – “Shut your mouth, you stupid fool!” the Devil interrupted, “you needed to say that earlier. The pact is torn up, and the rasp is mine again.

“With such an invaluable tool as this, I shall receive souls entirely different from yours, you rogue! O that I could get my hands on you! But just you wait, and woe betide you if you do come to me in the end – then, in that place of wailing and gnashing of teeth,³ I too shall say, ‘Scrub the muzzle.’”

³ Matthew 13:42.

A translation of Bechstein's source text is given below: 'Schab' den Rüssel' in Emil (Joseph Franz Emil Trimmel, 1786-1867), Romantisch historische Skizzen aus Österreichs Vorwelt. Wien; Fr. Beck's Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1837, LXXV, pp. 240-242.

The double-wedding referred to in this tale took place in Vienna on 22nd July 151. Maria, the 9-year-old granddaughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, married King Louis II of Hungary, who was the same age. Maximilian acted as proxy for one of his two grandsons to marry Anne Jagiellonica, daughter of King Vladislaus II of Bohemia and Hungary. In the following year, his grandson Ferdinand (the future Emperor Ferdinand I) was chosen to be the groom, and he married Anne in Linz in 1521. She was not the only Habsburg princess to bear many children (15 in her case) and then die in childbirth.

In the Rosenlucke, Brunnlucke, Schaufellucke and Ofenlucke,⁴ the former name of several insignificant suburbs in Vienna which now form respectable city-streets, there could be seen every day, at a fixed time, a beggar who laid claims on the liberality of people of large means.

After the manner of those people who make mendicity their trade, he too was humble and grovelling when he begged, and rude when he received nothing.

On the day of the arrival of the two Kings, of Poland and Hungary, who were approaching with large retinues to celebrate a double-wedding in Vienna with Emperor Maximilian's grandchildren, the beggar hoped to make

⁴ "Lucke" is an old word for alley in Vienna. These alleys were in partly developed areas outside the city walls. In Emil's time, "Lucke" had been replaced by "Gasse." The Ofenlochgasse became the Kleeblattgasse in 1862.

a pretty penny. Fifteen hundred old and young citizens of Vienna, all dressed in red, with six aldermen in armour at their head, had already gone in procession to meet the Princes, and the people surged towards the Giant's Door⁵ of St. Stephen's Cathedral, where the clergy were assembled, and towards the city-gate, where the guilds, the students, and the schoolboys were lined up with their flags.

As the curious crowd paid little heed to the beggar, and the number of those hurrying past became ever smaller, so was his vexation provoked to the point where he requested alms of a little man with a somewhat crooked back in a tone than had more of command than entreaty. Without growing indignant thereat, the latter drew forth a small rasp, and handed it to him with the direction that, whenever he wished for anything, he need only rub his muzzle (mouth) with it, to see his wish – insomuch as it was a reasonable one – became a reality.

The beggar, no little taken-aback at the content of this instruction, silently pocketed the rasp; and that evening, when he was in a hedge-tavern where several members of his profession came together and spoke of the rich harvest that had been apportioned them, and of the splendour of the Polish and Hungarian horsemen and how superbly the King of Poland and the Hungarian Prince and bridegroom of the Archduchess Maria rode their mounts, accompanying the sedan-chairs in which Emperor Maximilian and the King of Hungary were borne, while the Hungarian Princess, as bride of the Archduke Ferdinand, glorified the procession in a state-carriage; then he could restrain his ill-humour no longer, and after inveighing against the worthless standing-place that had fallen to his share, he related his

⁵ The main entrance to the cathedral.

adventure with the little man who had given him a rasp.

“From that description,” said one of the beggars, “you have received the gift from Master Scrub the Muzzle, who, as is well known, is one of the richest burghers of this city; and how knows what satanic arts helped him to attain such wealth. If I had been presented with that gift, I would sink it in the Danube forthwith.” The other beggars were of the same opinion. But the possessor of the rasp was of a different mind.

The next morning saw him standing at his usual place once again, but with a bandaged mouth. The little man came again, tripping along, and enquired if he had made use of his gift.

“Yes, more’s the pity!” replied the beggar, who felt an uncommon kind of fear of the rich man. “It appears that you did not acquaint me with the proper manner of use, for when I wished for a sack of money at home, and began to rub my muzzle, just look at how I have disfigured myself.”

“Just so shall you fare every time you make an immodest wish,” the man replied with a roguish smile. “The iron made me rich. You see, every time I resolved to make use of it, I reflected whether my wish were a modest one. That which I could acquire through industry and effort, I did not want to ever owe to blind Chance, and so have I – Thanks be to God! – never yet, to this hour, made use of the rasp. Do as I have done, and you will certainly never regret it!”

The beggar thought to give it a try; but his propensity to idleness meant that he never quite got round to it.