

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **Strong Gottlieb**



Once upon a time there was a rich lord of the manor who had a large body of farmhands, and one of them wanted to get married. Now when he asked his master for permission to wed, the latter said, “Marry away, in God’s name! I wish you a really strong son, and when you have such a one, I’ll willingly take him into my service for your sake.” So the farmhand married, and he became the father of a strapping son, to whom he gave the name *Gottlieb*. The father had not forgotten of his master’s promise, and he determined to take every care to make the boy as strong as an ox. To this end, the father thought it needful that his little one drink mother’s milk for as long as possible. So his mother first breast-fed him in her arms, then she let him sit on her lap, then little Gottlieb learned to walk; and when he wanted to drink, he brought along a footstool to step onto, for by this time he was too heavy for his mother’s lap, and he drank copiously, and drank mother’s milk for seven years, and grew big and strong. At the end of these seven years, the farmhand took his Gottlieb with him to the lord of the manor and said, “Behold, Sir, my capital boy! You would be surprised what he can do

for his age.” In the garden where the father and son had found the lord of the manor there was a sapling, and the lord said, “Pull up this tree, Gottlieb!”

The boy tried his strength on the tree, but he was not able to pull it up, so the lord said, “The little one is still too young and too weak. It would be asking too much of him to do heavy work at this time.”

So the farmhand went away with his Gottlieb and had him drink mother’s milk for seven more years, and when these seven years were up, the father took his son back to the lord of the manor, who now considered Gottlieb to be big and strong enough to enter his service; he had therefore to serve for one day, as a trial. Now Gottlieb had become fearfully strong, naturally and through his mother’s milk, and for a proof of his strength he easily pulled quite a thick tree out of the ground with his little finger, causing a shudder to run through everyone, and in particular the lady of the manor, and they all took an instant aversion to him. Then the work began, which was mere child’s play to Gottlieb. Mealtime arrived; the maid served up a bowl full of potatoes with buttermilk and went to call the other hands.

Gottlieb, who had finished his work first, was already there, and he began to eat alone in the meantime. He showed that he knew how to feed quite splendidly not only on mother’s milk but on buttermilk as well, and could fill up his stomach with potatoes. When the other farmhands arrived ready to eat, and grumbled that the food was not yet served, Gottlieb stepped forth from behind the stove, where he had been having a rest, and scratching behind his ears, he said: “There was some food here, but not much, I thought it was for me, and I ate it in the meantime.” – Then a feeling of dread at Gottlieb’s appetite crept over the other servants, and they cursed

the companion who had emptied the bowl on his own instead of sharing the meal with them.

After the meal it was time to do the threshing. As a new arrival, Gottlieb was given a new flail by the lord, which in Gottlieb's hands was as light as a feather; he threw it up in the air and caught it like little boys do with light sticks, and then he threw it far away, pulled up a tree and threshed away with it, very shortly making the grain into flour, and the straw as small as chaff, and beating everything into the ground. That was really beyond the pale for the lord of the manor – he was frightened of this dangerous servant and began to think of getting rid of him with a good grace. He therefore he asked Gottlieb what wages he would desire when he actually entered service? Gottlieb walked up close to the lord and whispered something in his ear. The lord reddened and said, "Very well, but don't breathe a word about it" – and he took Gottlieb into his service, which did not please the other servants in the slightest.

When the lord of the manor was alone with his wife, she demanded to know what wages Gottlieb had stipulated; the lord reddened again and would not say at first, which led to his wife pressing him all the more strongly to come out with it. The lord of the manor was very parsimonious and was only too willing to pay as paltry a wage as possible, and Gottlieb had taken that into consideration, for it was by no means to his liking that he had been obliged to grow so strong in order to work and slave away for others. So the lord now said to his wife, rather sheepishly:

"You see, my dearest, it's rather a unique case. I have never had so strong a labourer so cheap. Gottlieb wants *no wages* at all."

"No wages at all? That is not humanly possible!" the lady cried in

amazement. “There’s more to this than meets the eye! Husband, you’re lying to me!”

“Now just calm down, dear wife,” the lord said, mollifyingly, “he did ask for *something*, and I granted it him from the consideration that it will cost us nothing – but it must remain a secret between us.”

“Between us!” his wife replied. “Well then, *I* must know about it!”

“Gottlieb wants to give *me* something when his year is up,” the lord stammered.

“Give you? A likely story! What can a farmhand’s son give *you*?” the wife asked.

“He wants to give me,” her husband replied, “a sock.”¹

“A sock? Husband, you’re lying, or you’re away with the fairies!” his wife cried, losing her temper. “Why on earth would he give you *a sock*?”

“Oh,” the lord replied, “they are easily found, indeed now and then it rains them – Gottlieb means a sock on the ear.”

The lord came dangerously close to receiving such a gift that very moment, but stark horror paralysed the noblewoman’s hand and mouth for several minutes – until at last she shrieked, “Oh, you simpleton! You are your avarice! You’ll rather let yourself be dishonoured than pay a farmhand wages. Gottlieb will strike you dead, for from what I’ve seen, no grass grows where he has threshed! No, to enter into such an agreement is outrageous. However, just leave it to me, I’ll avert that disaster from you – he must go – I can’t stand him!”

“If *you* can send him packing, dear wife,” the lord timidly replied, “I have no objections.”

¹ The German has “Feige” which means “fig” and is also short for “Ohrfeige” (“box on the ear.”)

The lady of the manor made a little plan at once. On the estate there was a mill which was haunted by a terrible hobgoblin. Many people had had their neck wrung in that mill by the spirit. Ugh – she thought – it can wring Gottlieb’s neck too while it’s at it, and then we’ll be rid of him.

“Gottlieb! Today, you’re to take a hundredweight² of grain to the mill and grind it!”

“Very good, Madam!” Gottlieb replied, and fetching a large two hundredweight sack, he filled it with a hundredweight or four of grain, flung it over his shoulder, and set forth, whistling the song:

“High up on yonder mountain,
There stands a golden mill.”³

When he arrived at the mill, its doors were bolted shut. Gottlieb knocked politely, once, twice, three times. But still no one opened up, so he gave the door a gentle kick, whereupon it burst open and split in two. In the middle of the path to the mill-gearing there lay a pile of millstones; Gottlieb softly shunted them to the left and right with his feet and so reached the machinery. Before he put the grain into the hopper⁴ and started the mechanism, he kindled a little fire and boiled a breakfast soup, into which he threw a small ham to flavour it with fat. Then a big cat with fiery eyes appeared, opened her mouth wide, stared at Strong Gottlieb and screeched, “Meeow!” – “Scram, Kitty!” yelled Gottlieb, and he gave her a kick that made her about-turn pretty sharpish. Now he poured the grain into the

² “ein halbes Malter” – “half a *Malter*.” A *Malter* was a measure of four bushels of corn (with variations from region to region), or 100kg / 212lb.

³ A parody of the song “Müllers Abschied” (“Miller’s Parting”) which appeared in the 1806 collection of old songs and poems, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The second line reads, “Da steht ein goldnes Haus”; Bechstein changes the golden house to “ein Mühlenrad” (“mill-wheel”).

⁴ An inverted cone or pyramid (originally with a hopping motion) through which grain passes in a mill (Concise OED).

hopper, started the mechanism, and consumed his breakfast. Very soon the cat was back, hissing, and again screeching “Meeow!” “Scram, Kitty!” Gottlieb shouted, and he threw the bone of the ham at her head, sending her twirling round and round, and she disappeared. All at once a dreadful giant was standing before Strong Gottlieb, and he bellowed: “Mealworm! Who said you could grind corn here?”

Suddenly Gottlieb picked up a millstone, threw it at the giant’s forehead, and shouted: “Millworm, who said you could blow your own horn here?” – Then the giant crashed over on his back and gave a roar that shook all the machinery. As for Gottlieb, he put the flour into one sack and the bran into a second sack he had brought along, hoisted one sack over each shoulder, and went home.

“Heaven help us!” the lady of the manor grumbled, “The lout is still alive, and he’s coming back!” – And she soon began to devise new malicious ruses.

“The draw-well needs to be cleaned!” the lady ordered on the following day. “The water tastes foul and muddy. Gottlieb can climb down.” And she secretly said to the other servants, “When he’s down at the bottom – take care that no stone from the rim of the well accidentally falls – on the head of the guzzler who devours all your food!” – They took the wicked hint and read it in the lady’s scornful smile. And when Gottlieb was down at the bottom of the well, they bent over the edge and pushed the upper stones down. Gottlieb’s father was not among them, having died shortly before. The stones thudded and crashed down into the deep well and fell on Strong Gottlieb, who cried up: “Stop fooling around up there! Who’s throwing sand into this inkwell? Just wait – when I come up, I’ll give you a leathering!” –

Then the farmhands ran away from the rim of the well in terror and hid themselves, and Gottlieb climbed out like a sweep out of a chimney – not quite so dry, but with just as great a thirst.

Now the lady was at a loss to know how to manage Strong Gottlieb, or rather, how to manage things so that he left the manor. Then she remembered that there was a cursed castle nearby, which stood in ruins on the mountain which had the lord's new castle at its foot. This cursed castle – as the description indicates – was a truly eerie place: a spectre walked there, it was haunted by the ghost of an old giant who had lived there in ancient times and perpetrated no end of evil deeds, for which reason his spirit was cursed to be confined in the castle. One of the old giant's vile and villainous deeds had been cheating the ancestors of the present lord of the manor, to whom he sold the estate, out of a large sum of money; and that was one of the reasons why the giant had to haunt the old castle so horribly.

The noblewoman summoned Gottlieb, and dissembling so as to hide her aversion to the servant, she said to him, "Listen, my dear Gottlieb! Sometime soon, our lord will give you a quite special reward for being so diligent and doing so much work; furthermore, he trusts you, and you alone. In the old castle up there, you know, there lives the old lord of the manor, whom my husband bought the estate from; he is a niggardly dog, who still owes us a great deal of money, but he does not do the agreeable thing and pay off his debt. So just you go up there, Gottlieb, and have some disagreeable words with the old ghost, for you are strong and brave – all the others are afraid, the chickens and scaredy-cats. If you bring us the money, you shall have a good share of it, and a just reward will also come your way."

“I can manage that, Madam!” Gottlieb replied. “I’ll go straight away, and if there is money up there to be fetched, I’ll bring it to you, rest assured.”

Soon Gottlieb was up on the mountain summit, and he was astonished. He humphed a couple of times. “Down below they always said there was an old ruined castle on the peak, and so I never bothered to climb up here – but now I see a brand-new, beautiful building, far finer than the castle below. There’s sure to be plenty of money in there.”

Gottlieb came to the entrance of the splendid edifice, and there being no bell-pull, he knocked; but the door, like the one at the mill, stayed fast shut. – “Bother it!” grumbled Gottlieb. “Now I’ll have to be a locksmith again and make use of my picklock.” So he gave the gate a gentle push with his foot, but this shook the whole framework and the door burst open with a thunderous bang. However, when Gottlieb entered the interior, a legion of spirits instantly hovered around him, and at the forefront there stood the terrible giant at whose head Gottlieb had thrown a millstone in the mill.

“Ah-ha! An old acquaintance!” cried Gottlieb. “Are you by any chance Count Pinchpenny, who keeps other people’s money? Then cough it up! My lord needs it, and my lady, that is to say my lord’s lady, wants to have it!”

“Worm of a man!” roared the giant, grimacing horribly. “What do you dare to dare? Who is so impudent as to demand money from the owner of an old castle? What do I care about money? Take heed how I serve you out, you squirt!”

“Hilloa ho! Two can play at that game!” cried Gottlieb, and tearing off one half of the folding door, he hurled it at the giant’s forehead, where the

graze from the millstone was still visible, and then the other half – and at this point the old giant hurriedly beat a retreat, throwing a sack of money at Gottlieb, who instantly snatched it up and humped it onto his shoulder. So he came back to the castle down below, and if Gottlieb's arrival was not welcome to the noble lady, yet the arrival of the money was extremely welcome to the noble lord, and he praised Gottlieb with the words, "So intrepid a servant is rarely found." But he secretly wished Gottlieb to the Devil, for his strength made the unavoidable sock on the ear a terrifying prospect. Therefore he conferred with a shepherd and made an agreement with him that the shepherd would, in return for a good sum of money, receive the aforesaid blow; then he called all his farmhands together, except for Gottlieb, and told them he would send them into the forest the next day to fetch wood; they should take care that they came back in good time, for whoever heaved in last would be given the old heave-ho. And he would not be unhappy to see Gottlieb bringing up the rear. And so it happened – everyone hurried to fetch wood, but no one woke Gottlieb, and when he finally appeared, still rather drowsy, and rubbed his eyes, his master shouted at him, "Oy, you lazy lad! Everyone has gone for wood, and he who comes home last will leave my service."

"Ah!" Gottlieb cried, and he raised his arms up over his head, and stretched, and yawned, and said: "That's news to me."

"I thank you kindly for not devouring me when you open your trap so wide!" the lord of the manor scoffed. "News to you or not, that's how it is."

"Very well, time to go!" said Gottlieb, who took his axe and went towards the forest. His companions had already finished their work and he saw them in the distance walking towards him. Then he went to a large

reservoir nearby, where a footbridge led over its outflow, and the road from the forest to the estate passed only and solely over this bridge; he tore open the sluices so that all the water poured forth into the wide spillways, then stamped the bridge into pieces and let the flood carry the beams away. Then he leisurely strolled towards his fellow farmhands, who were roaring with laughter at him, happy at the thought of seeing him chased out of service that very day; but he cried, "Don't rush too much – wait a little while for me, I'll soon be back!" and went towards the forest – but the others hurried as fast as their legs would carry them to reach the castle, only to come upon the roaring flood, which surged ever by, with no path or bridge; and if they walked around the reservoir, it would take them hours. So they *had* to await the return of Gottlieb, who had quickly and easily completed his day's work in the course of a short hour. Now when he came, he brought with him a hay-pole which he fixed in the river like an athlete's pole and then vaulted over to the far bank. Then he threw the hay-pole back over the river and shouted to his comrades, "Do as I did!" – but it took two of them just to lift the hay-pole, and so they had to stay put until the reservoir had sent past all of its water, which took over a day. The desire of the lord and lady of the manor to be rid of Gottlieb the Strong became ever more ardent, and so the lord suggested to him that Gottlieb give him his wages; he had a substitute sock-on-the-ear-receiver who would accept the payment, and then Gottlieb might go anywhere he fancied, and stay wherever he wished.

Gottlieb said, "Let's put it to the proof; I was put to the proof myself."

Now the shepherd came forward as the substitute, and Gottlieb regarded him with sympathetic yet mocking eyes, and said, "You? Truly, I pity you!" – seized him, easily lifted him up off his feet, like a nutcracker, and gave him such a mighty sock to the face that the shepherd flew up into the air like a boy's ball, but he did not come back down at all. The lord and his lady crossed and blessed themselves, happy that *he* had not received this blow, and said, "Well, now you can go."



"How now!" said Gottlieb. "Go? Well – I can't do that. It wasn't the right person; I made the bargain with *you*, Master. I don't like chicory or mangel-wurzel instead of coffee, I'm no friend of surrogates. You said: I might go anywhere I fancy and stay wherever I wish. Did you not say so?"

"Yes, indeed, I said so –" the lord of the manor testily replied.

"Well –" rejoined Gottlieb, "then I'll go to my bed, and stay here on the estate."

Then the lord of the manor lost his temper and cried: "Then stay in the Devil's name, you goblin! Then *I'll* go! I won't live with you and end up, like the poor shepherd, travelling through the heavens as a balloon or a shooting star. Take it all, and may the Evil One help you to keep house and run the estate!"

"Well, if you really wish it no other way, Sir!" Gottlieb said very meekly, "then I thank you oh so very much and wish you and the gracious lady all possible happiness and all the best! You may take your things with

you, and I'll have you driven to the next town in *my* coach and by *my* horses."

"Drive yourself to Hell!" the former lord of the manor and his better half yelled, beside themselves with fury, and they hastened away. Gottlieb took the farmhands and maids into his service, and he had his old mother, who had suckled him for fourteen years, move into the castle, and gave her a golden bed with silken pillows and bedclothes, and the best wine to drink and all kinds of delicacies to eat every day.

A year later – the time for hay harvest had just arrived, and the farmhands and the maids were busy haymaking in the meadow – something came falling down from the sky; it was the shepherd, who had been twirling around on high all this time, and had flown over all the waters and all parts of the world. He was still alive, and he stayed alive, for he landed in a large haystack, which was very fortunate for him, for otherwise the old song would have been applicable to him – the one which begins:

"Cuckoo has fallen to his death."⁵

⁵ Another song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("Ablösung im Sommer" or "The Changing of the Summer Guard"), in which the cuckoo is presumed dead because he has fallen silent after heralding the summer.