

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Black Count**

Once a knight was passing through a forest, his squire following him; night fell, yet the knight knew no fear. Disreputable was the region; avoided, the track through the wild wood that the knight rode with his squire. This track led the two riders past the castle of a knight, a friend, whose daughter chanced to be celebrating her wedding, and the travelling knight passed a short while there as a guest. His friends wanted to keep him longer – he and his squire should overnight in the bridal house – but haste drove the knight, and he declined all cordial invitations to stay. He was warned: he was told that in the forest he still had to journey through there lived the “Black Count,” a spectral knight who caused unspeakable terror in all whose paths he crossed. Even the bride wasted her entreaties on her father’s friend; she reminded him of the adage, “Night is friend to no man.” The guest pleaded unpostponable business and rode away. The way and the wood were very dark. For three hours had the knight and his squire been riding, and nothing had befallen them yet. The knight rode, steeled against attack from hostile subterranean powers by his valour and clear conscience; against an enemy onset of an earthly kind, he was shielded by his iron armour, his strong fist, and his naked sword.

Now the squire suddenly pushed his steed forward beside his lord’s and whispered anxiously, “Lord! Someone is riding behind us – the hoofbeats of his steed ring hollow – and look round, Lord – see the fiery foam dripping from its teeth, see the sparks flying from its nostrils.”

Very soon the black rider, who had been following them, was beside them both. “Hullo! Companions! Doughty fellows!” cried a deep, hollow voice.

“God be with you!” the knight replied, and the stranger’s black horse reared up high, snorting streams of fire from its nostrils – and the iron armour of the black knight glowed red in their light. “Devil thank you for such a greeting – the Hell I will!” the gigantic night-time companion furiously retorted, lashing savagely at his rearing horse. “But know this – you have lost your way! Come with me to my castle, it is no distance at all, why, you can see over there the gleam from the windows.”

“No thank you, I’ve no time to put up anywhere!” the knight answered – but the other cried in a voice of command: “Time will be found!” and he laughed in peals that rang far through the forest. A long black wall, in which was a half-dilapidated gate, stretched across the road – the road led straight in, and inside the encircling wall there stood the castle, a massive, many-towered building. Up in the tangle of towers and turrets, owls screeched. At the house door big-bellied stone dragons, their thin necks stretched far forward, twined themselves around the pillars. Only a few windows were illuminated – all the rest of the building loomed blackly upwards to the dark sky.

The Black Count leapt down from his horse – and it sank into the ground behind him.

“Follow me in!” shouted the Black Count to his forced guests.

“Not in there! In the name of God, not in there!” the loyal squire whispered into his lord’s ear.

“Be silent, knave!” the Black Count imperiously cried to him. “It is not the name of God which holds sway here, but *my* name! Be bound in illusion!”

Then the castle disappeared from the squire's eyes, he was standing on a bleak and lonely heath, beside old, ruined walls, from which three towers rose up – it was no longer the Black Count's castle, it was the house of another.

Full of courage, the knight followed his guide up the steps of a spiral staircase. From time to time a griffin's claw stretched forth from the wall holding a burning candle, and the candles were black and white. The walls were black as coal. The Black Count's armour was also entirely black, and entirely of an ancient kind, a coat of chain-mail covering him completely – only that on his head he wore a helmet of a strange form; the crest of this helmet was neither cast nor forged, it was alive, and was in the form of a small dragon, similar to a salamander, who kept the helmet tightly clamped in his claws, turned his head every now and then, and had glittering black eyes which flashed like the points of diamonds. The dragon's tail hung down a long way from the helmet to the nape of the neck and swung now back, now forth. Up at the top of the flight of steps stood the Black Count, and he turned towards his guest. Pale was his countenance, pale and emaciated; his eyes lay deep in their sockets and there was murder in their look, they were without eyelashes, and over them curved no brows. The Black Count panted heavily and his breath glowed like the breath of the African desert, fiery-hot.

"Now follow me, and behold what I did and how I suffer!" the Black Count told the knight. "To everyone who rides my road at midnight must I show my misdeed. You do not need to pray for me, man! No repentance, no intercession, no prayer, can expiate my deed."

The doors to a hall, decorated with fantastical sculptures, burst thunderously open – cold, icy breath, as from a glacier, blew from the hall towards them. The large and wide hall was also completely black and was completely empty – only in the middle – there was something, illuminated by a dull, dim lamp which hung down over it from the ceiling. And what was there, it was a coffin, and in the coffin lay a corpse, the corpse of a little old woman, dressed all in white, her hands placed against each other as if in prayer, but above her hands, from her breast, there rose the black handle of a dagger.



“Here – my *mother!*” cried the Black Count. “Here – her murderer!” he cried again, and a spine-chilling echo rang though the hall, and he sank to his knees before the coffin. Then all of a sudden, the corpse in the coffin rose up, and grew and grew, so gigantic – so monstrous, a terrible ghost, and it enveloped the Black Count and filled more and more of the room, and the knight shrank back until the wall checked him – the appalling figure became ever more atrocious, ever taller – her white countenance was by now as large as the full moon rising, and her gown billowed like mist – her hands burrowed into the Black Count’s breast and scooped out his heart.

The Knight’s head swam, as if in the swirling fog of a swoon. He drew his sword and shouted, “Fiend! Begone in the name of Christ on the Cross!” Then a dreadful scream shrilled through the air, the timbers

creaked, the building shook, the coffin and walls sank, the Count and Countess sank, and the floor, together with the knight, sank deep, deep down into impenetrable night. Then the knight came to from his stupor. He was still holding his trusty sword in his hand. Black night was all around him, his feet stepped on marshy soil, his hands caught hold of masonry and moist grass, and night air fanned him, cooling him and making him shiver.

What was that? And where am I? the knight wondered, and his heart, usually so courageous, beat uneasily. In a loud voice he called out his squire's name. Hark! An answering cry, but from the far distance. The knight called again – the squire came nearer; he was leading both their steeds by the reins.

“Lord, where are you?” cried the approaching squire from the distance.

“Here! Here on the moor, and among ruins,” cried the knight.

By tying the straps and traces together, the squire, with some difficulty, helped his master out of the marsh, over which dawn began to break – and now master and servant were gradually able to see where they were. On a marshy heath, beside a building in utter ruin at the end of a forest – and a distance away in the misty dawn was that structure at which the squire had rested – a circular gallows; what had appeared to be three towers were three tall stone pillars, the connecting beams having long since decayed and collapsed.

Cool blew the air from the east; damp settled the mist. In silence the knight and his squire rode on their way. The knight never forgot his eerie adventure and the castle of the Black Count.

