

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Brave Little Beggarman**

Once upon a time there was a very poor devil who was one of the closest kin to the universally known Mr. Have-Nothing, and was a godfather to Mr. Do-Nothing; and he hated work with a vengeance. The only thing he did was this: he liked to read fine books of fairy tales, in which there are so many tales of people becoming rich without any effort, and the road is described that leads to the Land of Cockaigne. But the tale that the poor devil liked most of all was “The Brave Little Tailor.” Such a hero, he thought, he could be too – what were the odds? – if only the proper opportunity presented itself. And lo and behold – that same opportunity *did* present itself. The young beggar, walking through a region of high mountains, came upon a herdsman’s hut, where he begged for alms. What could the Alpine pasture give him? There are no pennies or kreutzer there, no breadrolls and no wieners. A piece of green cheese – that was all he received, with a few amiable expressions, perhaps by way of a makeweight, such as: young wastrel, good-for-nothing, vagrant, ne’er-do-well – there were so many of these that the beggar was positively shaking when he left the Alpine hut.

When the young ambulator came down from the herdsman’s hut, he said: “It’s Fasting Farm up there, ten horses wouldn’t take me back up!” Then he took out the piece of cheese, laid it on a stone beside him, sat down to rest, and observed the world with his mouth wide open, as if he were waiting for a roasted pigeon to come flying up and straight into the hole.¹ This pigeon failed to materialise, but on the cheese there settled,

¹ A reference to the old poem about Schlaraffenland (The Land of Cockaigne, The Land of Milk and Honey) “Von dem allerbesten Land so auff Erden ligt” (1671), which formed the basis of a tale in Bechstein’s *Deutsches Märchenbuch*. In his dictionary, Ebers (1796: I, 910) translates “gebratene Tauben fliegen keinem ins Maul” as “you must not expect that Fortune comes a Wooing to you; or roast Larks are not found on Hedges.” As we would say nowadays: Do not simply wait for Fortune to fall into your lap.

attracted by the good smell, a crowd of flies, and this made the little beggarman think of the apple and the flies in the tale of the Brave Little Tailor – he took his hat, slapped it down – and at once cried out in delight, “I’ve done it, I’ve done it! Seven at a stroke.”

Straight away he wrote on a card, in large letters and in elegant, High German script, just as the Brave Little Tailor had done, “Seven at a stroke!”, fastened the card to his hat, and strutted into the first village he came upon. In this village there was great perplexity and fear. There lived a dreadfully large, strong, and savage bear in the neighbouring forest, which wreaked havoc on the cattle and on the beehives, and which no one had been able to catch or kill. And now, all of a sudden, a hero was passing through the village, bearing on his hat the boastful writing: “Seven at a stroke!”



“What do you bet that he’s our man, hero, saviour, and liberator?” said the brave peasants. “*Seven* with *one* stroke? Then he can fell *one*, namely a bear, with seven strokes, and he can do it any way he pleases.” And they offered the beggarman a handsome sum of money if he prevailed over the bear, and its skin would be his as well, and he might eat his share of the bear-steaks.

“Perfectly fine by me!” said the beggar lad. “I’ll make short work of the beast. Whish! Whoosh! And he’s dead.”

The peasants were astonished at the hero’s courage and showed him the way to the forest, but were very careful not to accompany him in. But the hero sweated a cold sweat when he found himself utterly alone in the dark forest, and his heart sank into his boots when he heard a growling in the distance which did not allow the shadow of a doubt that it might *not*

be the growling of the bear.

Good gracious, what a turn of speed! How the chicken-hearted little fly-killer made his way through thick and thin in anxious, panting flight, while Bruin leisurely trotted along behind him, completely unable to comprehend why that man up ahead of him was running so frightfully fast. There was a hut by the way, into which the beggar ran, then he pressed himself tight against the door, which he left open – the very next moment the bear also entered and ran towards the opposite wall – like a shot, the beggar at the door ran back out, slammed the hut door shut, took out the key, made sure that the bear could not escape through a window, and returned to the village.

The peasants, who saw him in the distance swaggering towards them, said amongst themselves: “Look, the bear hasn’t eaten him, now that’s a good sign. None of us would have come back. But did he kill it? That’s the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question.”

Soon the little beggarman was surrounded, and throwing out his chest like a mob orator, he cleared his throat and said: “Rejoice, friends – the victory is ours! I have captured the savage monster, in the event that you wish to give him dancing lessons and then exhibit him for money; so you will pay me suitable indemnification for the promised skin.”

“What the – dancing lessons? Exhibit him for money? We want to see him killed!” cried the peasants; and after arming themselves, they advanced, under the leadership of the brave little beggarman, towards the forest hut in which Bruin was kept captive, and from which his powerful growling bore witness to an exceedingly evil mood, giving all the peasants goose-pimples. They did not know, nor could they think of, a way to

proceed, for if they unlocked the door and went in, the bear would bite them to death, and if they did not go in the bear would come out, and the old trouble would start all over again.

“Some heroes you are!” scoffed the brave little beggarman, and calling for a shotgun with both bores loaded, he shot the bear dead through the window – whereupon all the peasants shouted:

“Viva! Long may he live! Not Bruin of course, but our hero, saviour, and liberator.”

When the little beggarman had his money and his bearskin, which he sold on without further ado to a rich layabout in the village, the peasants remembered something else, and they said: “Valiant hero, saviour, and liberator! There is one more affliction that weighs heavily on us. Up there in the mountains lives a wild man with a wild Fangga,² his wife. They plague us too grievously all the time, and we must pay them taxes and tithes far beyond what is reasonable, and if we fail to do so, they throw millstones down onto our rooves and visit us with thunderous avalanches and torrents and mudslides, making us a thousand times worse off than before.”

Then the brave little beggarman quickly made an angry face and yelled at the peasants like a provincial judge: “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place? Good God! Then I wouldn’t have needed to first spend my time on that miserable bear, whom I caught with my bare hands – child’s play for me – and dragged by the ears into the forest hut. Such a giant, such a wild man – ha! That’s duck soup for me. You’ll see how I let *him* have it, along with his wild Fangga, the rotten strumpet!”

² In the Tyrol (from where this story originates), the Fangga is a fearsome, hairy giantess with a huge mouth who devours children or triturates them against dead trees. (Claude Lecouteux, *Dictionnaire de mythologie germanique*, 4th ed. Paris: Imago, 2014.)

The peasants were almost frightened by the little beggarman's excessive courage; they doffed their caps before him and stood reverentially around the grandee. They deliberated, then stated that, if he liberated them from the wild man and the foul Fangga, they would buy him a farmstead from the communal funds and would present him with the right to settle in the village, and elect him as mayor for life, and he would never have to remove from there. Was he satisfied with that – was it enough for him?

“Yes, I'm well satisfied with that, and it's enough for me!” the beggarman replied. “And now let's go! May God have mercy on the giant when I get my hands on him!”

The peasants showed their hero the nearest footpath up into the mountains, and he strode bravely onwards, and was happy when he was alone, with nobody else around him. “God rot you and your giants!”³ he cried. “I've enough money on me from the capture of the bear and from the bearskin. I'm going over the mountains, you'll never see me again!”

But the hero did not go over the mountains, for on those heights where the last forest came to an end he ran into the wild man. Oh, how anxious and afraid he was; how bravery and heroism fell by the wayside! Swift feet, that was the only help. The little beggarman rapidly doubles back, with the wild man in pursuit. When the giant is running at full speed, the lad turns around and, before the giant realises what is happening, he passes through his legs; then the giant tumbles down and plunges, measuring his length, into a rocky gorge, and cannot get back out. Then he cries to the lad: “I won't do anything to harm you – just run up to my wife and have her

³ “Krieg' die Kränk” – literally, “Get epilepsy.”

give you a wedge!” – “Right away –” says the lad, and he runs to the wild Fangga and asks for the money-sack: that was her husband’s order. The Fangga does not believe this and shouts down into the gorge, “Should I give it?” – “Of course! And be quick about it!” shouts the giant, so the Fangga gives the money-sack to the little beggar lad, and he makes off with it over the hills.

The wild man is still roaring – the Fangga comes and frees him, and receives many clouts, her handing over the money-bag instead of a wedge having driven a wedge between them; and then the giant runs after the robber. He has, in the meantime, arrived among shepherds, taken a lamb, hidden it under his shirt, and, while running, cut open the lamb’s stomach and flung out its intestines – which latter action the shepherds watched with horror.

Now the wild man arrives and asks the herdsmen if they had not seen a man running past? – “Oh, indeed,” they said, “he plunged a knife into his stomach and flung out his intestines so he could run all the faster.”

“I should have been the one who knew that trick!” roared the wild man, and he drew his knife, cut open his stomach, ran forward, and crashed to the ground, quite dead. The little man was standing not far away and saw him fall. Now he went back to the peasants, still covered in blood, waved his knife and cried: “That was a hard victory! It was a struggle to the death. He lies up there! With this little knife, I’ve slit his whole body open.” – The peasants rejoiced and cried one “Viva!” after another for their hero, saviour, and liberator.