

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Courageous Flute-Player**



Once upon a time there was a merry musician who played the flute like a maestro, and so he travelled around the world, playing his flute in villages and towns and thereby earning his keep. Now one evening, he came to a tenant-farm and overnighted there, for he could not reach the next village before nightfall. He was cordially received by the farmer and bidden to dine with him, and then, once the meal was over, to play some pieces on his flute. When the musician had finished, he looked out of the window and perceived in the near distance, by the light of the moon, an old castle which seemed to be falling to ruin. "What old castle is that?" he asked the farmer. "And whom did it belong to?" The farmer told him that many, many years ago a Count had lived there who was very rich but also very miserly. He had sorely plagued his subjects, had never given alms to a single pauper, and had finally died without heirs (because his miserliness had stopped him even from marrying). Afterwards his closest relatives had wanted to take possession of the inheritance but they had not found even the smallest pittance. Because of this, people asserted that he must have buried his

treasure and it might be lying hidden in the old castle to this day. Many men had already gone into the old castle for the sake of the treasure, but not one of them had ever been seen again. Therefore the authorities had prohibited entry to the old castle and earnestly warned everyone throughout the land about it. – The musician listened attentively, and when the farmer had finished his account, he remarked that he felt a strong desire to go in just the once, for he was courageous and knew no fear. The farmer begged him with great urgency not to enter the castle, and so save his young life, and in the end almost fell at his feet. But it was no use pleading or beseeching – the musician was unshakeable.

Two of the farm labourers were ordered to light a pair of lanterns and accompany the courageous musician to the eerie old castle. Then he sent them back again with one lantern while he took hold of the other one and boldly climbed up a high flight of steps. From the topmost step he entered a large hall which had doors all around. He opened the first door and went in, sat down at an old-fashioned table which was there, set his light down on it, and began to play his flute. The farmer could not sleep a wink that night for sheer anxiety, and he often looked out the window. Every time he heard his guest playing his instrument over in the castle, his joy was inexpressible. But when his wall clock struck eleven and the flute-playing ceased, he started violently and did not think but that the ghost or the Devil, or whoever else dwelt in this castle, had most certainly wrung the handsome lad's neck. Yet the musician had fearlessly applied himself and attended to his flute-playing; however, when hunger had begun to stir within him, for he had not eaten much at the farmer's, he paced up and down the room and

looked around. Then he caught sight of a pot full of uncooked lentils; on another table there was one vessel full of water, one full of salt, and a bottle of wine. He rapidly poured water over the lentils, added salt, lit a fire in the oven (there was wood lying beside it), and cooked himself a lentil soup. While the lentils boiled, he drank the whole bottle of wine and then he played his flute again. When the lentils were ready, he removed them from the fire, tipped them into a bowl which was there on the table ready, and ate heartily. Now he looked at his watch and saw that it was the twelfth hour. Then the door suddenly opened and two tall black men walked in carrying a bier on which there was a coffin. Without saying a word, they laid the coffin before the musician, who was not the least bit disturbed from his meal, and went back out the door just as silently as they had entered. Once they had retired, the musician hastily stood up and opened the coffin. An old man lay inside, small and wizened with grey hair and a grey beard; but the youth felt no fear, and he took the man out and placed him by the stove, and no sooner had he warmed up than life began to stir in him. The musician gave him lentils to eat and then he was entirely occupied with the little man, even feeding him like a mother would her child. The little man came fully to life and said to him: "Follow me!" Then the little man led the way while the youth took his lantern and followed him without hesitation. Now he led him down a long, dilapidated flight of stairs and so the two of them at last arrived in a deep, eerie vault.

Here there was a large pile of coins. The little man commanded the youth: "Divide this pile into two equal parts and mind that nothing is left over, or I'll take your life!" The youth simply smiled, began at once to count on

two large tables, back and forth, and it did not take him long to sort the coins into two equal piles; but at the end – there was a kreutzer left over. So the musician thought for a moment, then took out his pocket knife, placed the blade on the kreutzer and cut the coin in two by using a hammer that was lying nearby. Now when he had thrown the one half on this pile and the other half on that one, the little man was elated and said: “You heavenly man, you have released me! For a hundred years now, I have had to guard the treasure I scraped together out of avarice, waiting for someone to succeed in dividing the money into two equal parts. No one has succeeded before now and I have had to throttle them all. One heap of coins is now yours, but divide the other one among the poor. Divine man, you have released me!” And then the little man disappeared. The youth went up the stairs into the same room as before and played merry tunes on his flute.

The farmer was pleased to hear him playing again, and at the crack of dawn he went to the castle (for anyone might enter during the day) and greeted the youth with delight. The latter told him his story, then he went down to his treasure and did as the little man had ordered by dividing one half among the poor. As for the old castle, he had it torn down, and there was soon standing in its stead a new one, which the musician, now a rich man, made his home.

