

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Cunning Raven**

The eagle which had flown to the raven, as it lay there on the ground, seemingly a picture of misery, asked him at once, “Who are you? How did you come hither? Whither have your brothers gone?”

In a faint voice the raven answered, “Why do you torment me with questions? Don’t you see my wretched condition? Let me lie and die in peace! I cannot tell you anything, but if I could speak a word with your King, no harm would come to him from it.” Then the eagle called his King over, and when the latter cast eyes on the raven, he said, “I know this one well! He is the Raven-King’s close Privy Counsellor and a descendant of that wretched chatterer who cost my ancestor the Imperial Crown for the entire plumed race. I am extremely surprised that we find him in such a state.”

Then the King of the Skies asked the old raven, “Tell me, what brought such adversity upon you?” – “Oh, most puissant Lord and King!” replied the raven, “Bad advice and foolish understanding!”

“How so?” asked the eagles – and he answered: “After you did to the ravens what you did, killing a great number, our King summoned his Privy Council and asked us, his counsellors, if he should fight you? So I said: ‘It seems to me that you should not by any means fight against the noble Lords of the Skies, for they are more powerful than we are, and more courageous of heart. My advice is that we be reconciled with them, to live in



peace and quiet; and, instead of showing ourselves to be refractory, we rather pay them a yearly tribute to place ourselves under their protection' – but my words were received very badly, for every other counsellor advised our King to wage war against you and to fight to the death, let it turn out for the better or for the worse. I, however, remained resolute in my opinion and cried: 'No one is more easily freed from his enemy's hand than he who makes himself submissive to him. Look at the seedlings in the field and the stalks of the meadow-grasses, how they bend before the wind. The wind snaps the crown off the tall and stiff tree because the tree supposes it ought not to yield and sway, but the slender, fragile reed remains unbroken because it has learned humility. Modesty saves us from misery!' As I talked in this way, all who heard me yelled, 'You are a faithless counsellor! You support the host of our enemies! You are promoting our detriment to earn yourself favour over there, dishonourable traitor that you are!' – and they fell upon me and beat me, bit me, scratched me, and kicked me, so that I am left lying here half-dead, and the only wonder is that I still breathe."

At these words the Eagle-King turned to his First Privy Counsellor with the question, "What do you think it advisable to do with this raven?"

"I think nothing advisable, my King," the Premier replied, "but that we throttle this raven on the spot, for he is incomparably cleverer than us, he is one of the most cunning and sly of the whole race of ravens; by exterminating him, we will work the most appreciable loss to the Raven-King and the ravens while making ourselves immeasurably more secure, for they have no other who is so able to devise well considered, clever and shrewd advice as is this one here. The wise men of old said: He

to whom God gives something great and good in his hands, and then loses it, will seldom find it again; and he who has an enemy whom Fortune has sent into his hands, and yet does not heed this but lets the enemy escape, he is a fool whom all the wisdom in the world may not avail.”

“What do you think?” the Eagle-King asked his Second Privy Counsellor after these words. This latter was less sanguinary and said, “My advice is that you do not have the raven killed. It is proper to show mercy to the humble and the helpless. Even if this raven is our enemy, he is nevertheless our defenceless prisoner at the same time. We have not seized him in battle against us, it is his misfortune that has delivered him into our hands and power. Many a one has found help from his enemy that was refused him by his friend and, as a result, become his enemy’s friend and his friend’s enemy.”

“What do you say to this?” the eagle now asked his Third Privy Counsellor, who replied, “I also, my most gracious King and Master, cannot vote for the killing of this, our prisoner; my advice would rather be that we make good use of him. His friends and his King have maltreated him and ignominiously abandoned him in his distress. He can, and he will, reveal to us all the secrets of our enemies, and it can only be to our benefit when one of our enemies is at odds with his people. To set one’s enemies at variance and then triumph over them was declared by the sages of old to be the best stratagem for waging war and for ruling, as happened with the thief, the Devil, and the hermit.”

“What happened with them?” asked the Eagle-King, and his Third Privy Counsellor recounted the following tale.

Next: *The Thief and the Devil*