

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Cursed Town**



High up in the Alps there lay a large, flourishing town, surrounded by towering, jagged mountain peaks which were blanketed with perpetual snow. The town, however, lay on a vast and spacious sunny meadow on which countless cattle grazed, for the people who inhabited that Alpine town were pastoral people, living in almost total isolation from the inhabitants of the lower regions. Seldom did a traveller or a sumpter-horse tread the mountain path which led over those high Alps to Italy; seldom did the inhabitants of that mountain town see a stranger.

One day, however, they saw an unknown wayfarer striding through their town, a tall, grave figure; his face was a brownish colour, but pale, with a long beard; his hair black, mixed with grey; his garment was a long brown talar, girded with a cord; his footwear strong shoes, fastened with straps around the ankles. The man seemed weary and sorely in need of rest, but he bore a curse: he could not sit down and tarry until someone bid him be

seated and stay awhile. The inhabitants of the high mountain town looked at the unknown man with a singular timidity, and he instilled a peculiar aversion in them. And the man went from house to house, and stood before every door, and waited for someone to say to him, "Sit down and rest," but no one spoke such words; instead, more and more people gathered, and gaped at him, full of curiosity. And the weary man stood and sighed.

Then the Town Elder, who was also a priest, walked up to him and said: "Listen, you stranger, we know who you are, we can tell by looking at you. You are none other than the *Wandering Jew*. You are damned to wander to the end of time because you refused the Saviour of the World, on his way to a bitter death on the Cross, a short rest on the stone bench in front of your house in Jerusalem – and so, hie thee hence out of our town, you cannot tarry and may not tarry in this place, and we cannot and shall not succour and shelter you to our own detriment. Go with God!"

Then the Wandering Jew parted his pale lips and said: "I will depart now and you will remain, but you will depart this life and I will remain. When I will return to this place, I will find a site here, not a town – and when I will come a third time, I will find not even the site which your town stood on."

Everyone who heard these words was alarmed, and they stepped timidly aside when the grim man shook his stick and strode through their crowded ranks; and he walked with weary gait out of the town, high up into the inhospitable mountains. None of them saw him again.

From that day on, no new house was constructed in that town – no herd multiplied – no baby was born – many families soon died out – after a number of years many houses stood deserted and falling into disrepair.

Avalanches came rushing down from the mountains and shattered

the houses to pieces. Landslides occurred, and massive boulders now lay where erstwhile the streets of the town had been filled with bustling and joyous activity. Fifty years hence, the large, extensive town was an Alpine village with houses lying scattered and far apart, with meagre sustenance, emaciated herds, ailing inhabitants. They no longer descended to the lower-lying villages, and no one from these latter climbed up to them – and so, in the end, everything there above became without form, and void – and there was no grave mound to arch over the last ones to die, but the collapsing houses buried them under rubble, then that rubble was buried in turn by rockslides, which are called *muren* in Alpine country, or rivers of mud poured down from the mountain peaks and covered everything.

After a hundred years, the wayfarer returned; he recognised the site from the location of the jagged peaks, tall trees had grown up from the ruins, and here and there still stood a fragment of wall; but it was no longer possible to tell for certain whether they were rocks or the work of human hands. Mighty bushes with colourful Alpine flowers had sprouted up where streets had been of yore, and there was grass where once the peaceful dwellings of men had been.

And the Wandering Jew sighed and said: “What did David, King over Israel, erewhile sing? He sang: ‘Thou shalt look for the place of the wicked, and it shall not be.’”

And he lifted his foot and walked on without rest or respite over the high mountains.

And the site of the town did not remain as it was, but became ever more desolate, more barren, more uncanny; yet quite gradually, and so slowly, year by year. The bushes of Alpine flowers died, the grass withered,

no more rain fell in this high mountain region, it was only snow that fell, and there came a time when it did not melt away, even when the summer sun was at its highest. The springs which had formerly roared down from the higher mountain peaks as delightful waterfalls froze over, and developed covers of greenish ice; they became glaciers, and these glaciers grew larger and larger, and nosed forward over more and more of the Alpine meadows, once so gloriously green and sunny, until they covered them completely.

And when the restless wanderer, after another hundred years had passed, came up the mountains again, he could no longer find nor recognise the site where the flourishing town had once been, and he opened his mouth and said: "Fulfilled is the Word of the King of Kings, which he spoke through the mouth of the prophet, his servant: 'I shall stretch out my hand upon them, and make the land desolate.'"¹

So spake he, and wandered on.

¹ Ezekiel 6:14.