

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Devil's Godson**

Not far from a little town there lived in a wretched hut a poor but honest fisherman, who barely managed to feed himself and his family, a wife and nine children. It was the first of May, a lovely sunny day, when the fisherman went out on the shining lake; no cloud disturbed the bright blue of the sky, and the nightingale and other small birds, rejoicing in the spring, sang amidst the beautiful blossoms of the willow and alder hedges near the strand. The man fished peacefully until evening came down and the glowing sun sank behind the mountains that encircled the lake; then he rowed homewards and stepped out of his boat just as the evening star was rising in the blue vault of the heavens. Now when he entered the lowly hut, he found his wife to be delivered of a tenth child, a son. The fisherman was greatly delighted, and only one small worry clouded his happy soul. He said: "Dear wife, pray tell me, who shall we ask to stand godfather? We have but few friends; it was difficult enough to find godfathers for the previous nine children, now how will it be with the tenth? Who will want to stand sponsor to such a poor fisherman's child?" After he had revolved the matter in his mind, he said: "Early tomorrow morning I'll walk down the highway and the first man I meet, I shall ask to be the godfather."

With this resolve he lay himself down to rest, and as soon as day dawned he ran out onto the highway which passed in front of his hut and began to walk down it with a spring in his step. He had not gone far when a richly adorned rider on a black horse came trotting along towards him; but not daring to make his petition to the rider, he ran along beside him, looking at him entreatingly. Finally the rider spoke: "My dear man, I can tell that you would like to speak with me; what do you want? Pray, speak freely and

openly.” Then the fisherman said, “As you have commanded me, so shall I tell you: yesterday my wife was delivered of my son, and not knowing to whom I should offer the godparenthood, I finally determined to approach the first man I would meet on the road to stand godfather to my little son; now, I saw you, my dear Sir, but did not dare to speak out.” When the man had finished speaking, the gentleman said: “You shall hear my answer right now. On account of necessary transactions, I cannot come in person to stand sponsor to your son, but send for a deputy, that will do just as well as my being there myself, and the child will be my godson and will remain so. On the evening of the day of baptism I shall call on you. But when will he be baptised?” The fisherman replied, “Tomorrow! But by your leave, I am a poor fisherman and will not be able to give the hospitality suited to your station.” “There is absolutely no need to worry,” replied the rider, “I shall attend to everything and arrange all the dishes for the meal.” After the fisherman had expressed his gratitude many times, he happily turned for home; but he had not gone far before the rider came racing up to him and cried: “I forgot one thing – when baptised, the child shall be given the name Hans!” Then he turned about to the left and rode away at full gallop. The fisherman was inexpressibly delighted; he stood still for a while, looking after the rider until he disappeared from his sight and all that could be seen was the cloud of dust raised by the haste of the horse’s hooves. When he returned home, he told his wife what had occurred; she shook her head and said anxiously, “Oh husband, what a foolish thing you have done! You know, do you not, the forester who lives over in the wood – this gentleman also stood sponsor to a son of his; later the scales fell from the forester’s eyes

and he realised that it was the Devil; and he had the son given the name Hans.” The man comforted her, saying, “Don’t you be so anxious, just wait and see; this gentleman may well be someone quite different.”

Now the child was baptised on the following day, and everything was done as the unknown gentleman had ordered. Yet when evening arrived, at which time he was to present himself, the parents were not in good spirits. Suddenly the door opened and the gentleman whom the fisherman had met walked in, accompanied by two servants, who served the most sumptuous dishes without anyone being able to see where the food came from. Later, when they brought the noblest wine in sparkling goblets, the parents finally became merry – although the mother only appeared to be so. She had looked at the gentleman’s feet and had perceived a cloven hoof sticking out, every now and then, from under his long breeches, and all her joy and all her hopes disappeared. When the bell in the nearby town struck eleven, the hollow strokes resounding through the raven-black night, the gentleman spoke: “Soon, dear people, I must part from you; so raise your son as befits good parents and look after him until his fourteenth year, when I shall come to take him away with me and put him to some trade that will feed him well, and take care of him in other ways.” No sooner had it struck twelve than the stranger cried farewell to the honest fisherman, swung himself onto his black horse, and tore away at a roaring gallop while howling tempests blustered at his side. But the fisherman’s hair, and his wife’s, stood on end, and the wife cried out through her tears: “Oh, if only God had protected us! Our beloved child is in the Devil’s claws; when he is small, he will give us only trouble and pains; and when he is grown up, and should be our

pleasure, then the Devil will fetch him and we may never see him again as long as we live.”

Their life together went on as before, the father plying his fisherman's trade and the mother performing her domestic duties. In the meantime the son grew up to the pleasure and satisfaction of his parents. They sent him to school, where he learnt very diligently and showed signs of a powerful intellect. Now when he had accomplished his thirteenth year, he said to his father one day (it was the very day on which he had left school): “Father, I am big enough now, and I want to learn something that will give me the foundation to earn an honest living in the future.” “What do you really want to do?” asked the father. “Truth be told,” replied the son, “I want to be a hunter.” The father approved and gave his consent, and took his son to the forester who lived in a wood not far from his hut. There, with the forester, he became so skilled a marksman that no game, neither deer nor hare, could escape him. Soon he would complete his fourteenth year. Then one day he visited his parents, and they revealed to him everything that had occurred on the days of his birth and baptism, which they had hitherto concealed from him for certain reasons. But the son was not frightened by this; his face shone with courage, and he said, “If it's nothing worse than that, dear parents, then I shall soon settle the matter! When my birthday on which the Devil is to fetch me comes round, I shall come to you, father, and row with you out to the lake, and there I shall await him.”

Now when the first of May arrived, the young hunter went to his father early, before dawn had begun to break, and rowed out on the lake with him. It was still dark, but soon the sun shone forth in radiant splendour,

reddening the waters. This day was just as lovely a day as the one on which the fisherman had fished the whole day long and then, in the evening, found his newborn son in the hut. Nothing had changed around the lake, the birds sang as charmingly as they had then, and the willow-hedges were blossoming with new life around the lake as they had been at that time. Only in the fisherman's spirits had a considerable change taken place, for fourteen years before he had been cheerful and free from care, but now he was melancholy and full of care for the life of his son. Now when they had rowed hither and thither on the lake for a while, the gentleman with the black horse appeared on the bank and signalled to the fisherman with his hand. The hunter promptly snatched the tiller from his father and rowed, for all that the latter strenuously resisted, towards the gentleman. When he had almost reached the bank, he stopped the boat. Then the gentleman said, "So how are you, my son?" But the hunter answered, "That's no concern of yours!" Then the gentleman spoke again, "And have you learnt anything?" The hunter replied, "I'm a hunter! But why do you ask?" The gentleman said, "Come with me, I shall teach you a better sport!" "I won't go with you!" said the hunter. To which the gentleman said, "Why do you speak to me so familiarly? I am your Godfather, after all: just you come nearer!" Now the hunter rowed towards him, and when he had almost reached the bank he gave the Devil such a thump on the head with the tiller that the latter was momentarily stunned and fell into the water, where he swam around. The hunter now steered the boat into the middle of the lake, while the Devil, who realised that he was defeated, dragged himself up on to the bank, leapt on to his black horse, and galloped away. Yet he thought about how he could

punish the mischievous knave, and he soon had an idea. While the hunter was still following the Devil with his eyes, he was suddenly seized by so powerful a whirlwind that he could not stay in the boat but was whipped up into the air and driven away, until at last, after an hour or so, he fell to the ground on the summit of a mountain. Walking hither and thither to investigate the area, he discovered that the mountain was as sheer as a cliff. How can I get down, he thought; but before he could devise a means of salvation the wind seized him anew and drove him far away again, until at last, thrown over a high wall, he fell down into a beautiful garden. There he lay, made weary by his rapid journeys through the air, and fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke from this, refreshed and thoroughly invigorated, he walked around the garden to explore it. What a wonderful garden it was! He walked through the daintiest arbours, flowerbeds and bushes, while above and around him sang birds of wondrous beauty, the likes of which he had never before seen nor heard, and every one of them was so tame that they all but flew onto his hands. There were flowers of incomparable beauty and the sweetest fragrance all around, seasoning the air, and crystal-clear springs and streams trickled coolly through the garden: in short, the youth believed himself in Paradise. He strolled around in it ceaselessly, until at length he came to a spacious, fair, blooming arbour; in it he found a small table covered with a profusion of the most palatable dishes and drinks; and being hungry, he sat down at it and ate his fill. When evening had come, he lay down on the grass bench that was situated in the arbour and sank into a deep slumber. Early the next day, when the sun had barely begun to rise, he was woken by the wondrous songs of the birds; he got up and strolled

further through the garden. Suddenly he heard a dreadful rattling, and he soon saw what this meant. The high, thick walls parted and a magnificent coach drawn by four dapple-greys rolled in, and in a flash a marvellous castle was standing there; the wall slid shut again, and a lord and a beautiful lady alighted from that coach before the castle. Not wanting to be noticed, the hunter tried to swiftly creep behind a bush, but the lord had already seen him. "How did you come into my garden?" he asked him, and the hunter recounted all the particulars of his story. And the lord said, "Well, if you are a hunter, you shall stay with me! Outside this garden is a mountain, which belongs to me; there you will find game in great number, and there, every day, you shall shoot the meat for my roast." And so the hunter stayed with him and had to eat at the lord's table.

Every day he went with him into the garden; every time, the lord would walk up to the wall and it parted instantly, and they passed through; but the lord accompanied him every time and helped him come back in by making the wall open again. The hunter had exceptional skills, just as if they had been given by the Devil; for when the lord wished to put him to the test, he marked a black dot on a tree, and the hunter fired and cleanly hit the dot. Then a hare ran past and the lord said, "Shoot that hare!" But he replied, "We'll let him run a little more!" And when the hare was so far away that they could hardly see it, the hunter fired his gun and the hare was weltering in its blood (or rather Lethe, as huntsmen call it). Then the lord said, "I have been wanting a lad like you for a long time, you're just the man for me!" So the hunter spent the best of days here, and the only work he had to do was to supply his master with a few hares or some other game

every day. Soon this sojourn became even more pleasant to him because he liked his master's beautiful daughter beyond measure, and she secretly found the young hunter delightful. This eventually led to a mutual confession and to solemn vows of love. One day when they were promenading together in the garden, the Princess even gave him permission to go to her father and ask for her hand in marriage. Midday was appointed for this, and when the meal was over the hunter put forward his request. The lord said, "My dear son, I love you with all my heart, and this love will not refuse or deny you my only daughter." The hunter was beside himself with joy at this consent. The marriage was arranged for the coming days; the hunter only requested that he might be allowed to visit his parents with his bride beforehand, to surprise them with his good fortune. The lord gave his permission. The very next day, the joyful hunter drove, with his beautiful bride-to-be, in a glittering coach drawn by four dapple-greys, through the wall which instantly opened at their approach and closed instantly behind their coach. On their journey, the bride gave the delighted bridegroom a ring and said, "Whenever you turn this ring on your finger, the wall will open by itself for you." Now they travelled at random through many lands for a long time, but finally they came, as if guided by invisible powers, upon the road that led to his home. They soon arrived in the little village that was inhabited only by fishermen and poor folk. But how amazed was the bride when he cried Stop! before a miserable hut! He alighted. But she said, "So am I to become the wife of a destitute man? I am going to the inn." He, however, entered his parents' hut quite unworried, and great was the joy of their reunion. After he had told them the story of his good fortune, he betook

himself to the inn, to travel with his beloved bride, who had, to be sure, wounded him with her haughtiness, back to the place of his good fortune. But how amazed was he when he heard that the beautiful Princess had not alighted at all; she had simply refreshed herself with a cool drink and then driven away in all haste. He stood, all-a-mort. Then he sadly crept away, not knowing whither he went, until at last he saw before him the mountain to which the Devil's whirlwind had transported him. And hope began to stir in his despondent heart once more. "Perhaps your Devil Godfather will help you this time also!" he thought, and ascended the mountain with joyful steps.

Soon he was on the barren spot where, formerly, the whirlwind had set him down so ungently, but he did not find any succour for his hope just yet. Below him he heard the rustling of a fearful forest of firs. "I'll find deliverance there!" he cried, and walked into it with courageous steps. There, under a big fir-tree, he saw three wild men who seemed to him to be robbers, for they were quarrelling and squabbling vehemently, and they were just about to come to blows when he stepped in among them and said: "Tell me, what is the cause of your quarrel? I may be able to dispense advice, or even settle the dispute!" The robbers replied: "We robbed a sorcerer, taking from him a cloak with the property of making invisible the man who puts it on; also a Wishing-Hat: when you put this on your head the correct way and then say, I wish I were here or there, and you name a place, wherever it may be, you will be transported there on the instant, and if you turn the hat round so you are wearing it back-to-front, then by wishing yourself back at your previous location, you will find yourself there

immediately; and finally we took a sword: you only have to touch someone's head with it and their head will in an instant be lying at their feet, but if you point the sword at the sky and then sheathe it, the head will be back in its old place. We are now disputing the division of these three valuable objects. Everyone wants the hat, the cloak, and the sword, yet it is not permissible that one of us should receive these three items and the others nothing." Such were the robbers' words, and they demanded that he pronounce judgement on the division, to which they would willingly submit; and they even handed these three objects over to him, foolishly enough, for him to try out. He threw the cloak over his shoulders, and the robbers could see him no more; then he took the sword and struck off the head of all three of them; and finally he put the hat on the correct way and said: "I wish to be back in the castle where I formerly lived!" And in an instant, without his knowing how, he found himself before the castle wall. Taking off his cloak, he turned the ring on his finger, the wall parted, and he walked into the castle. He was astonished to find everything there decorated in the most magnificent fashion; the smell of exquisite dishes wafted towards him from the kitchen, which was in a state of animated activity and bustling tumult. So he walked in and asked what the meaning of all this was. By way of reply, he was told that the wedding of the lovely Princess was being celebrated, for she had brought a handsome young Count, her bridegroom, back with her from her journey, and she had remarked that never would she wed the son of a poor fisherman. Dreadfully taken aback by all that he had heard, the Devil's Godson threw his cloak over and around him, making himself invisible. Then he walked into the room where the wedding-guests

were assembled and saw the new bridegroom sitting with his bride. Full of wrath, he sat down between the two, but they did not see him. A plate full of soup had just been placed before them; he seized it and tipped the soup out. In amazement the betrothed couple looked at one another, not knowing which invisible power had caused the plate to rise and shed its contents. Now the bridegroom grasped a piece of meat and was about to raise it to his mouth when – hey presto! there it lay, under the table. Now the bride tried this, but the bite of food flew with her fork into a corner. All the wedding guests were astonished, and horror and a secret fear came over them all, so that everyone's hair stood on end. Then the hunter threw off his cloak, and how startled was the bride when she saw him sitting between her and her bridegroom! He leapt up and spoke to the Count: "Who gave you permission to abduct my bride?" and the next moment the Count's head lay on the floor. The bride threw her arms around the hunter's neck and hugged and kissed him. "Oh, my dear darling," she said, "how grievously I insulted you, when I gave up your pure love for nobility and preferment! My bridegroom and I are not yet joined in marriage by the hands of the priest; oh, forgive me my trespass, I love you just as dearly as before, and accept me back as your bride!" He replied, "I forgive you, and shall right away use this day's celebration for our marriage; as for your second bridegroom, whom I do not know to be either an evil or a good man, he will be so good as to come back!" Without further ado, he seized his sword, pointed it towards the sky and sheathed it, and in a trice the Count's head was back on his neck. Everyone was astounded. The Count, deeply moved, fell at his feet and thanked him for having brought him back to life. He declared that

he would readily renounce his claim and the hunter might feel free to keep the bride, whom he had been engaged to first; only, he should refrain from performing any further decapitations on him. Then the Count departed. Now a priest was sent for to confirm the happy couple in holy matrimony. When this had been done, the hunter thought of the three robbers, the directors of his good fortune, and it seemed to him unjust to abandon them eternally to death. Their heads still lay at their feet, and he decided to return them to their old place. So he pointed the sword at the sky and thrust it into its sheath, and after doing this he was firmly convinced that the robbers had been brought back to life, and also that they no longer needed to quarrel about the division. And the hunter lived in undisturbed bliss with his wife until the end of his days.