

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Four Clever Companions**



Once upon a time four travelling companions were wandering together, having met one another on the road quite by chance. The first of them was a king's son, the second a nobleman, the third a merchant, and the fourth a craftsman. All four of them had run out of money, as tends to happen to rich and poor alike on journeys, and they had nothing left but the clothes on their backs, their moneybags being empty. Now as they approached a large royal city, they felt tremendously hungry, and they raised the question of how they were to find money and food. And the king's son said, "Let us deliberate however we will, everything will go only the way that God has ordained, and he who trusts in God with faith and hope will not be

forsaken.” Then the merchant said, “Nothing can beat prudence coupled with good sense!” And the nobleman: “A strong, well-proportioned youthful figure is worth yet more.” Then the traveller who was a craftsman observed, “According to my small wits, I maintain that diligence and practice are best of all.”

In such conversations did the four fellow travellers arrive, towards evening, in the environs of that royal city, where they rested before the gate; and three of them spoke to the fourth, the craftsman: “You extol diligence above all else – well, in that case, go in there and see to it that we can all defray the cost of our meals this evening!” – “I’ll do that,” replied the labourer, “provided that every one of you follows me by practising what he preaches for the benefit of us all.” His companions promised him this, and so he entered the city and made enquiries as to what a man would have to do to earn enough for four men to satisfy their hunger for a day? He was informed that nothing was more profitable than carrying wood, for wood was expensive and the forest far away, and the city-folk were idle. So the man briskly went to the forest, tied up a large, heavy load of wood, carried it back to the city, and received for it two silver pennies, which he was able to use to cover the cost of food and drink for himself and his companions; and, exceedingly pleased with himself, he wrote with chalk over the door of the inn where they were staying the night: “Through diligence and the exercise of his strength, the honest man has earned two silver pennies in one day.”

On the next morning three companions spoke to the fourth, the nobleman: “Now look and see to it that *you* provide us with food today,

and make use of your beauty and youthful vigour, and whatever else you know.” He went into the city, thinking to himself: “You cannot work and do not want to, and there is nothing else you can do. And yet you would be disgraced, were you to return to your companions empty-handed.” And wrapped in gloomy thoughts, he took his stand by the pillars of a house, prepared to part in sorrow from his wandering companions. Then a young, beautiful, and rich widow walked past, saw the nobleman’s fine, youthful figure, and wished to learn where he might be from. She sent her maid-servant, invited him to be her guest, heard about his circumstances, and established such friendly relations with him that, when he parted from her, she presented him with a hundred gold pennies. Then he returned with sumptuous provisions to his comrades in the lowly inn before the city-gate and wrote over the door: With robust youth, a man earned a hundred golden pennies in one day.

Now on the third day, three of them spoke to the merchant: “Today you go out and earn for us, through your prudence coupled with good sense, another satisfying day and the provisions we desire.” Then the merchant went forth and walked through the city, which lay by the sea, down towards the harbour; a merchantman had just dropped anchor in the harbour and the merchants were greeting the owner of the ship, inquiring about his wares, and wishing to trade with him, but he demanded too much from them all and they could not come to an agreement with him. Then they said to one another, “For the moment, we shall make him no further offers; he will shortly come to rue his prohibitive demands, and even if his wares are truly worth so much, there is no one besides ourselves desirous of

buying them.” And then those merchants walked away from the captain. But the poor merchant, who was the son of a rich merchant, went up to the captain, discovered himself to him, and told him his father’s name, and bought the entire ship’s cargo from him for fifty thousand guilders. The merchants soon returned, and because they needed the wares they paid the purchaser a five-thousand-guilder profit on top of his purchase-price. Then the young merchant merrily returned to his companions, and he wrote over the door where his comrades’ writing was to be seen: Through prudence and good sense, a man earned five thousand guilders in one day. And he then threw a magnificent banquet for his companions.

On the following morning three of them spoke to the king’s son, whose origins they did not know: “Companion, it’s your turn to go forth and provide us with food and drink. See what God bestows on you and your faith and hope, and may it turn out to be plentiful!”

Then the king’s son made his way into the city, thinking: “What are you going to do? You have not learnt a trade, you have no youthful beauty, you do not have a rich merchant for your father, and you are not clever nor are you prudent. You have only your trust in God, and God will help you.” Then the king’s son sat down on a stone in the street and lost himself in deep and gloomy thoughts.

In this royal capital the King had recently died, and on this day his remains were being taken out of the city to a nearby cloister, and all the people were following the cortege. But the king’s son sat so deeply sunk in thought about the adverse fate he had experienced that he paid no heed to all that was happening around him, and so he failed to stand up when the

cortège with the royal bier went past. Then a grandee, incensed at this impropriety, walked up to him, gave the Prince a slap on the face, and said, kicking him off the stone on which he sat, “You cursed villain! Do you bear no grief in your heart at the death of the King whom all are mourning? Away with you!”

The king’s son kept silent as the procession went past, and when it returned he was still sitting on the stone, sad and absorbed in his thoughts. So the grandee angrily walked right up to him again and accosted him with harsh words: “Did I not tell you just now that you must make yourself scarce?” And he signalled to the bailiffs and had him taken to prison. There he sat, yet he was full of hope that God would release him. And afterwards, when the people assembled to choose a new King, the previous one having passed away without an heir, then the grandee said that he had a man in prison who seemed to be a traitor and he should be publicly examined before having justice dispensed on him. So the prisoner was set before the people and asked how and why he had come to this land. And he replied, “Know that I am a King’s son,” (and he named his father’s name) “and when my father died, the Kingdom fell to me; but my younger brother had a larger following, so he forced me from the throne, and because I had cause to apprehend that he would kill me, I escaped from my inheritance and came to this land.”

Among the people who heard this were many men who had known the Prince’s father and had also travelled around that Kingdom. They declared that the said King had been a just and pious man, and that his eldest son was also pious and able, and some of them cried out, “Viva!

Long live the King!” And then the others also cried out, “Viva! Long live the King!” and they chose the king’s son for their lord. Then he was raised up and borne through the city in triumph, after the custom and tradition of the land, and then was carried around the city walls as well, when he came with the crowd to the nearby inn where he had stayed with his travelling companions, and over the door of which the three mottos of his companions were written; and he looked at them, and ordered to be written thereto: Diligent care, vigorous youth, prudent judgement, and whatever men encounter of good and of evil, these all come from God, to men according to their merits.

Then everyone marvelled at the sense shown by the new King; they were pleased with their choice, and they understood that this ruler had been sent them by God. Now, when the King had been taken into the throne-room and was sitting on the throne of his Kingdom, he sent for his travelling companions and gathered around himself all the nobles in the land, all the wise men and all the people, as many as the hall could hold, and said: “Praised be the Lord, the King of Kings, and thanks be to his holy name! My dear companions did not believe that God directs our steps, but now they must recognise the truth of that in me, for neither physical strength united with industrious care, nor the vigour of youth and a shapely figure, nor a merchant’s wit and wisdom, have helped me to the throne. Never, since that day on which I was cast out of the Kingdom by my brother, had I hoped to have such honour and dignity to my share again; poor and in pilgrim’s garb came I hither, but it was the hand of God that led me, it was God who raised me, it was Him to whom my heart adhered

with faith and hope!”

At these words, a man among the people rose and said, “Now have we heard how worthy you are, O King, of this kingdom, as God has endowed you with so much wisdom and good sense. We shall be well-advised by you, a wise King, for He in His fidelity did not lead you into that company without reason. Praise and thanks be to Him!” Then the people joyfully concurred, and the King spoke again: “When I was driven out, I served a nobleman for some time incognito, but I felt moved to leave his service, and when I had received my wages and bought myself clothes, I was left with only two pennies. Then I thought to myself: You will offer one penny to God and use the other in your time of need. Then I met a



bird-catcher; he was carrying a pair of turtle-doves to market, and I thought: Man cannot serve God better than by saving a creature from death, and so I haggled over the two doves; and as the fowler would not give me both for one penny, I thought to myself: If you leave one in the cage, they will be separated from one another, and that is the greatest disservice you could do them. So I gave up both my pennies for the two doves, took them to a wide field, and let them fly away. Then they flew onto the branch of a wild pear-tree, under which I was standing, and as I was about to depart thence I heard one dove saying to her mate, “This man has delivered us from death, and bought us our lives at the cost of everything we had. We owe him gratitude and recompense.” And the doves

called to me and said, “You have shown us great mercy, and it is our duty to return the favour. Under the roots of this tree there lies a great treasure; dig for it, and you shall find.” I dug and found the treasure, took possession of it, praised God, and asked Him to take the good doves under his protection and preserve them from all evil; then I said to them, “Now, if you have so much good sense and wisdom, and you even have the power of flight, how did it come about that you ended up as prisoners of the man out of whose hands I bought you?” To that, both turtledoves answered, “Oh, you wise querist! Do you not know that the flight of birds, the fleetness of deer, the strength of bulls, are as nought against fate or divine providence! No creature can protect itself against this, and just so little as a creature of our kind, so little can men on earth escape the judgement of God.”

When the King had explained to the nobles and the people how he had come to attain a quiet faith in God, he was praised anew; and he ordered that his travelling companions stay close to him. The nobleman he made a Gentleman of the Court, the merchant he placed in charge of the Kingdom’s finances, and the craftsman he made Superintendent of Trades; and in this way was the good fortune of every one of them founded on reason, good sense, prudence, and trust in God.