

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Hospitable Calf's Head**

A married couple had three sons, and two of them were bright, or at least imagined themselves to be, while the third one, the youngest, Hans, was the stupid one; but he was also the mother's favourite, and consequently the common object of his brothers' envy. When the latter were quite grown up, they decided to see the world together and make their fortune abroad, so they said to their father: "Father, give us ten dollars each, we want to go out into the world, we want to see foreign cities and countries and make our fortune." And to their mother they said, "Mother, give us a knapsack full of bread and bacon, we want to go on a far journey."

"It's good for the boys to go away and learn about the world, we should let them go!" said the mother to the father, and so the brothers' wish was granted.

Hans saw his brothers making the preparations for their journey, and when he heard their resolution, he said: "I want to go too! I want ten dollars, I want a knapsack full of bacon and bread too! I want to see the world too!" – "A fat lot you'll see and earn out there, stupid Hans!" grumbled the father, and the mother cried out, "Oh, my pet! Stay at home and earn an honest keep!"

But Hans wanted to go, that was that, and no amount of persuasion was any use; he received what the brothers had received and set out with them on their journey.

"There can be nothing more stupid than stupid Hans saddling us with his person! *He* really could have stayed at home! Some useful experiences *he's* going to have! We'll stride away lustily so he can't keep up with us, then he'll turn back of his own accord," the brothers said to each other while

walking along, when Hans, the youngest, was already a little way behind them, he not being able to take such big strides as his two elder brothers.

Hans let his brothers walk on for a stretch. Suddenly he shouted, “Ho! Hey! What’s this? What’s lying there? Oh, it’s treasure!”

The brothers, hearing Hans call out in this way, stopped in their tracks, looked round, saw their brother stooping and exhibiting signs of amazement over something lying on the ground, and said to one another: “Look, Hans has found something which we walked past while engrossed in conversation – back, at the double!”

Speedily did the elder brothers run back to their Hans and look towards the treasure he had found – however, nothing lay there but a lump of glass gall that flashed in the sun.

“Simple-minded, stupid Hans!” the disappointed brothers scolded. “My God!” said Hans, “it isn’t a diamond? I’m sorry!”

A while later, the brothers had again stridden a good distance ahead of Hans, who was smaller and weaker, and he could not keep up because, as an idle mummy’s boy, he had never particularly made a habit of walking. Then he shouted once again, “Wow! Hey! Now this is something! Hey! Come here, one and all! Oh, how splendid! Oh, how splendid!” – and he leapt for joy around one spot.

The brothers believed that Hans really had found something this time and ran back to him. But when they reached the place, it was a large swarm of rose-chafers which lay there, agglomerated on the one spot quite by chance – and they chided Hans even more severely. – Hans, however, made his stupidest face and said, “I thought it was a pile of cudats.¹ So it’s

¹ Hans says “Kudaten” instead of “Dukaten” (“ducats”).

nothing? I'm sorry." – But both times he had called out only to be with his brothers again without having to double his steps to catch them up.

Unfortunately, this trick, having been tried twice, could not be continued. When they had walked another stretch and Hans had been left behind once more, in a forest, and again came to a halt by a supposed find and shouted, his brothers behaved as if they did not hear him – and both of them went on their way, and soon they were lost to their brother's sight behind the trees of the forest.

"Run on!" said Hans, "then I can rest all the better!" – And he sat down on a stone and opened his knapsack, and ate bread and bacon, and had a drink, for his mother had slipped a full flask into the knapsack by way of precaution; then he laid the satchel on a comfortable spot and, resting his head on it, had a snooze. As Hans was not used to walking abroad and had become very tired, so his snooze lasted rather a long while; and by the time he finally awoke, evening was approaching.

'Alas, alas!' thought Hans. – 'Is it so late already? Where am I to go now, at night in the forest? Robbers could come and take my ten dollars from me. Wolves could come and eat what bread and bacon I have left, and me to boot afterwards. That won't do. Hans, Hans! If only you had stayed at home with your mother!'

It quickly became dark and Hans was afraid to go on. 'Where I am right now, there is no one but me,' he said to himself – 'and I am no danger to myself. But if I go on, I could run into someone who would do me harm. There's a thick oak here – I'll shin up and take a seat up in the branches; no robber will seek me there, and wolves don't climb.'

No sooner thought than done. Hans climbed up the tree, and once

up he looked around a little. Behold, he caught sight of a stately house very close by, whose rooms were lit up.

“Oh, stupid Hans that I am!” cried Hans. “Could I not take a few steps further and stop at the handsome inn? Good heavens! When a man has ten dollars in his pocket, does he need to seek a bed for the night up a forest-tree?” – Hans hurriedly climbed back down the tree and strode towards the house, whose lights soon shone out towards him. Before long he was standing in front of the house; it was light and large, but there no signs of life to be seen. Hans found the doors open, everything was brightly lit by burning candles, the doors of a suite of rooms also stood open, but there was not a soul anywhere, nor a dog, nor a cat. However, in one of the rooms there was a set table, on which were placed a bottle full of wine and dishes full of white bread, pancakes, cold meats, butter, cheese, and so forth. In a room right next to that one was a lovely cradle; and in the cradle lay a c – no, no child, but a very pretty *calf’s head*, on silk cushions. Hans stole a glance at it and murmured, “A splendid calf’s head! Shame that it isn’t roasted. It would go down very well right now.” Then the calf’s head opened its eyes and Hans gave a start; he had not thought it to be alive.

“A very good evening to you,” said the calf’s head – and Hans stammered, scared out of his wits, “Thanks a lot!”

He was still so little acquainted with the world, our good Hans, that he had never yet heard a calf’s head speak.

“You are most welcome!” the calf’s head said further. “My days are so terribly tedious. Sit down, eat, drink, make yourself at home – over there is a four-poster bed where you can sleep, and when you have awoken then you can tell me what is going on in the outside world.”

‘I?’ thought Hans, startled anew. ‘I am to tell about the world? Some affecting tales they will be! If I know nothing, the thing will end up doing something bad to me. I wonder if it is a whole calf or only a head? I wonder if it can leap out of the cradle? I don’t think it will bite – it looks too good-natured for that.’

Hans sat down and ate, tucking in with a will, yet while eating he was plagued by thoughts, which had never been the case with him before.

‘How do I go about it’ – thought Hans – ‘so I don’t offend against politeness? How do I address the calf’s head? I cannot tell if it’s a he or a she. Is it already married or still single? It seems to be still quite young. Should I say to him or to her: Sir or Madam? I’m sure to do something stupid either way.’

In spite of these hard thoughts, Hans shovelled down his food with extraordinary relish; and when the meal was over, there was no evening chat between him and the head, for Hans was tired again, and he lay down in the four-poster bed and slept into the next day. The calf’s head did not take this amiss; it had admirable patience. The following morning, Hans found that his clothes had been cleaned, and then he found his breakfast beside the cradle of the calf’s head, who bid him a friendly good morning, moving its ears very gracefully. But now it was time for Hans to talk, and he made the attempt, and behold – it went better than he had expected. He spoke about himself first of all, for every man is the centre of his world, about his mother, about his father, his brothers, his aunts and uncles and their children; about his parents’ house, their livestock, how many goats, ducks, hens they had, how many songbirds; then about the garden, its trees, vegetable patches, and flowers.

In the calf's head, Hans had the most amiable listener. Every now and then it seemed to Hans that a tear was glistening in its large, pale-blue eyes, and that it was breathing more deeply, almost like a human sighing. One word led to another; the conversation never faltered. Hans described, right down to the last detail, the village in which his parents' house stood, the houses, the church, the school, the graveyard, the gravestones, the priest, the mayor, then the village meadows, the stream, and the neighbouring mountains.

Hans was amazed at himself, at his knowing so much. Many a day passed in this fashion. Then he thought of all the fairy-tales which he had been told by his grandmother when she was still alive and he but a little boy, and then by his mother – of enchanted princes and princesses, of sorceresses and wizards, of cursed castles and glass mountains. The calf's head listened to all of this with great pleasure, and it seemed particularly delighted when the fairy-tales described how the enchanted princes and princesses found their deliverance. And all this time the calf's head was most assiduous in ensuring that Hans never lacked for food or drink, and that he did not overtax himself or his memory with all too much narration. More and more came to Hans' mind: he told of the ghosts in existence, of Fire Spirits and will-o'-the-wisps, of the Wild Hunter and the gnome, of the nixie in the stream and the White Lady on the old castle hill near his village. Finally, Hans remembered that he was really quite musical as well and had with him an instrument that he knew how to play to give splendid entertainment. Hans unpacked this musical instrument, which had been carefully stowed in his knapsack – it was a Jew's harp – and when Hans struck up the first notes, the calf's head opened its eyes wide and

expressed silent applause by wiggling its blonde ears.

For a long time did Hans enjoy the hospitality of the calf's head, and of the house-servants who always remained invisible, and he thought: it's a good thing I see nothing of the servants, I won't need to give a tip when I leave – for Hans was gradually coming to have thoughts of leaving. He knew no other world than that little one of his home village; it filled his soul and the circle of his ideas, and as every day his speech was only of it, and all his thoughts lived only in it, then it was no wonder that a quiet longing for home rose in Hans's heart.

The calf's head possessed much more psychological perspicacity than know-it-all humans will, on the whole, credit calves' heads with, or concede that they are capable of; and so one day, when Hans was again talking about his home, making a miserable face the while, it spoke these considerate words: "My good guest," it said, "you long to go home; I comprehend this feeling, and I honour it. Travel home, I shall provide you with what is needful – but come back. Over there is a staff – strike that chest with it and take the finest of the garments that lie inside – behind that door over there is the stable. Open it with the staff and take the best steed. In that chest over there is money and a magic whistle; if you lose your bearings, blow it, then animals will come bounding up and will run before you to show you the right way."

Hans was astonished and did as he was bid.

In a hunting-page's outfit trimmed with gold braid, on a magnificent white horse, with a splendid bayonet and rifled gun, Hans rode away, all his pockets full of money, and the whistle hanging on a golden string around his neck. Hans promised the calf's head by all that was holy that he would

return to it. Whether or not Hans gave the hospitable calf's head a kiss at parting is not quite known for certain.

How had Hans's clever brothers fared in the meantime? They were very glad that stupid Hans did not bother them any more; they ate heartily for as long as the bread and bacon in their knapsacks lasted and for as long as the ten dollars of each of them sufficed in the inns, which came in fact to about eight days. But then they said to one another: "The world is indeed too big for us to get to know it all. How would it be if we were to turn back? After all, there is nowhere any better than home. In these eight days we've seen quite a number of foreign towns and even more lands, and one land looks very much like another. We haven't made any particular fortune, admittedly, but we *could* perhaps have found something. Our not meeting with any good fortune out here is proof of the old truth that the true treasure of a man's happiness lies only in his homeland. Let's make haste to revisit this treasure."

When the brothers came home, the father glowered at them and said, "What true heroes you are, you vagabonds! You damned wastrels! You've run through twenty dollars and torn ten dollars' worth of clothes and shoes. Now work for it! I won't give you a groat until you've made up the money I threw down the drain for you!"

And the mother cried, "You good-for-nothing scamps! What have you done with my Hans, my dear child? How on earth could you dare to cross our threshold without my Hans?"

The brothers had a very hard time making their raging mother understand that Hans had kept behind them on purpose, most certainly to go his separate way.

The brothers had to work terribly hard, for thirty dollars take some earning.

A while later, a small commotion arose in the village towards evening. A noble squire, attired like a Prince, was riding through. The people thought it was the King himself, travelling *incognito* without any servants.

Everyone ran to their windows or out their doors, and a great number ran after the rider. Then shining guilders fell onto the road – so it was the King, and everyone shouted Viva! and fought over the coins. The spruce young rider halted in front of the house of Hans's parents and dismounted. A whole horde of boys jostled over to serve the supposed Prince in the capacity of equerry or groom.

Hans's parents stepped reverently out of their house. What could the unknown lord want with them? The brothers came from their work, looking more like mudlarks than goldcrests.² They stood open-mouthed with amazement as the stranger threw his arms first around their mother, then around their father, and hugged and kissed them; and afterwards cried, "Come, Michel! Come, Velt!³ Give me your hand! Perhaps you all don't know your Hans any more?" and he held out them his hands to them.

It was Hans – no Prince, no King. "Stupid Hans is back, he's got rich and throws money around him, Hans the Fool!" ran the rumour through the village. The old couple rejoiced; the brothers, squinting with envy, led Hans's handsome horse into the stable and whispered to each other, "We have to work ourselves to death to pay our father back those paltry thirty

² The German has "Mistfinken" and "Goldammern" or "Bramblings" and "Yellow Buntings" respectively. "Mistfink" (literally: "manure finch") also has the meaning "filthy person, dirty so-and-so, dunghill," a reference to the brothers' appearance as a result of their work.

³ As the name Hans, so familiar to English readers, was retained in this story, so the other names were not Anglicised into Michael and Walt.

dollars, while Hans, the lucky beggar, who doesn't have a clue about managing money, scatters it over the street. Tonight we'll take the money from him, it's no use to him, is it? In any case, it's not easy to understand why such an idiot is walking the earth."

In the night the brothers entered the bedroom where Hans slept. However, Hans was not so stupid as his brothers thought. When the thieves broke into his bedroom, he fired a small bullet into the fat flesh of one of them and cut a pretty circumflex in the other with his hunting-knife. This caused a commotion and the father got out of bed, and when he saw what had happened, he furiously seized his whip and lashed at the wounded knaves, beating the living daylights out of them and making them howl, and they did not show their faces before their brother again.

Hans made merry and feasted with his parents, and yet he no longer felt quite happy at home; so, showering his parents with presents, he saddled his horse himself and rode away. He wanted to go back to the house in the forest, to the hospitable calf's head, where there was no envy, no covetousness, no being undervalued, no rapacity, but quite enough to eat and drink, and good conversation, for the calf's head also knew how to talk, and what is more, it expressed itself in extraordinarily refined language, from which Hans inferred that it must have received a very good education.

Hans rode out into the blue, and soon he no longer recognized the road, but the whistle was a tremendous help. One blow on it, and there came a hare or a fox, or a bird, which ran or flew before his horse; and when he had reached the forest, frisky deer sprang ahead, and so Hans made it back to the castle without danger or adventure. The calf's head cried a heartfelt "Welcome!" to Hans when he entered, and expressed its

joy at seeing Hans again.

“You come in the nick of time, my worthy friend!” said the calf’s head. “I have expected you with ardent longing, for if the favourable hour I am awaiting had elapsed unseized, you would not have found me again, and all my hopes would have been shattered.”

Hans pricked up his ears at these, to him, so mysterious words, and the calf’s head continued: “Pay precise attention to what I tell you, for my happiness, and perhaps your happiness also, depends on these directions. Go now into the kitchen, where you will find a chopping block, and in the adjoining pantry lies a well-ground axe. Take this axe and lay it on the chopping-block – then come back in to me.”

Hans followed this behest precisely. ‘If I have nothing further to do,’ he thought, ‘there’s really nothing to worry about.’ He soon carried out the command and walked back into the room that the calf’s head inhabited. “My good friend,” it cried to him, “that was a very easy stroke of work, was it not? But now comes something more difficult.

“Take now this cradle in which I lie, and carry it, with me, into the kitchen, and place it beside the chopping block.”

“I’ll do that too, with pleasure!” said Hans, and he carried the cradle into the kitchen. It was indeed rather heavier than Hans had expected from its appearance, but Hans was strong.

“But now, best of friends,” the calf’s head continued, “now comes the hardest stroke – now do not be shocked. Uncover me now.”

Hans cleared away the silk cushions – oh, the pity of it – the neck of the calf’s head ended in a snake’s body as thick as an arm; it hung from the head like a hideous excrescence and was blue, like an intestine full of

blood.

“Now lift me out of the cradle onto the block, and use the axe to chop off this loathsome serpentine pigtail which hangs from me.”

Hans shuddered and stammered, “Am I then to kill you, you good, unique calf’s head? Your like will never be found in the world again!”

“Just make haste and don’t waver!” the calf’s head replied. “You will be well rewarded.”

Hans obeyed, not without fear and apprehension. He laid the head down, he raised the axe, he took careful aim, he swung it down – and behold, not a drop of blood flowed, the snake’s body disappeared, the calf’s head turned into the countenance of a lovely girl, and she rose up from the cradle, a fairy figure of captivating grace, and stepped out, and threw her arms around Hans. “You have released me, you good man, you pure man, you true man! Now take whatever you will! The castle and its treasures, and me as well, if I please you.”

Now the castle was teeming with servants; all of them had been enchanted, all of them rejoiced at being given life anew.

“My gracious Princess!” said Hans in amazement. “Even as a calf’s head you appeared very alluring to me, but I like you a thousand times more as you are now. I’ll take you!”

Hans was very happy – he endowed his parents, forgave his brothers, married the beautiful Princess he had set free, and lived with her in joyful and pleasurable seclusion – neither he nor his wife yearned for the so-called high society, and should it be the case that the two of them have not died, then it may be supposed, with some likelihood, that they are still alive today.