

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Judge and the Devil**

In a town there lived a man whose every chest was filled with gold and goods, while he himself was full of every kind of vice; so wicked was he, it seemed to everyone nothing short of miraculous that the earth had not swallowed him up. This man was a Justice as well – that is to say, a Justice who was full of every kind of injustice. One market-day he rode out in the morning to see his beautiful vineyard, and on his way home the Devil approached him, in rich clothes and the figure of a very fine gentleman. As the judge did not know who this stranger was, but was eager to find this out, he asked him, not in the politest manner, who he was and whence he came. The Devil answered: “It is better for you that you not know who I am and where I’m from!” “Oho!” exclaimed the judge. “Be you who you may, I must know, or you are a lost man; for I am the man who wields power around here, and if I do this and that to harm you, there is no one who will or can prevent me. I’ll seize your person and property unless you give me an answer to my question!” “If things are as bad as that,” replied the Evil One, “then I suppose I had better reveal my name and provenance to you: I am the Devil.”

“Hm!” growled the judge. “And what is your business here, I would like to know?” – “Look, Judge,” answered the Evil One, “I have been given the power to go into this town today and take that which is given to me in all earnest.”

“Well!” replied the judge, “do so, but let me be witness of it, that I may see what is given you!”

“Do not ask to be there when I take what is allotted me,” the Devil dehorted the judge; but the latter began to conjure the Prince of Hell with powerful words of incantation, saying: “I order and command you by God and God’s commandments, by the power of God and the wrath of God, and by all that binds you and your confederates, and by the eternal Judgement

of God, that you will, before my face and in no other wise, take what is given to you in earnest.”

The Devil started, and trembled at these terrible words; and scowling most bitterly, he said: “Oh, that I had never been created! You bind me with such powerful bonds that hardly ever have I been in such a pinch. But I give you my word as Prince of Hell, which I never break in that name, that it will not tend to your advantage to persist in your wish. Desist from it!”

“No, I shall not desist from it!” cried the judge. “Whatever happens to me in consequence, I shall bear with submission; I want to see, and that’s that! Even should my life be at stake!”

Now the two of them, the judge and the Devil, went together to the marketplace. It being market-day, a large crowd had assembled, and everywhere the judge and his companion, who was a stranger to all, were offered brimming goblets and urged to pledge a toast. The judge drank, as was his wont, and offered a tankard to the Devil; but he did not accept the drink, for he well knew that the judge was not in earnest.

Now it happened quite by chance that a woman came driving along a pig which would not go as she wanted but crissed and crossed, so the angry woman screamed at the pig in the utmost vexation: “Well then, go to the Devil! May he take you, hide and hair!”

“Do you hear that, companion?” cried the judge. “Now reach out and take the pig.” But the Devil replied: “Regrettably, the woman was not speaking in earnest. She would mourn and grieve a whole year long were I to take her pig. What is given me in earnest, that only may I take.”

Something similar happened soon afterwards with a woman and a cow.¹ The latter also would not let itself be steered by the woman, so she too began to shout: “The Devil take you and wring your neck!” “Do you

¹ The German has “Kind” (“child”), clearly a misprint for “Rind” (“cow”) but one that was never corrected. It spoils the progression: pig-cow-child.

hear, companion?" the judge asked again. "The cow is yours – don't you hear it being given to you in earnest?"

"Oh no, she too did not mean what she said!" replied the Devil. "She would lament bitterly were I to take her at her word and not relinquish my right to the cow."

Now the two of them saw a woman who had her hands full with a child, which was howling vehemently and behaving very naughtily, so that the woman exclaimed, brimming with indignation: "If you won't follow me, then may The Evil One take you, you brat!"

"Well? Are you not taking this child, either?" asked the judge, who was quite bewildered, and the Devil replied: "I do not possess the power to take the little child. This woman would not in all sincerity wish me to have her child, not for ten, not for a hundred, not for a thousand pounds; as much as I'd like to take him, yet I cannot, for the woman was not in earnest."



Now the two of them came to the very heart of the market, where the press of people was at its most dense, so they had to stand still for a space, unable to pass through the seething, swarming mass. Then a woman espied the judge; she was poor and old and ill and weighed down with adversity. She began to wail and cry out, and everyone in the crowd could hear the following vehement words: "Woe to you, judge! Woe to you, you who are so rich while I am so poor. Denying me the mercy of God and Man, you took from me, who had done no wrong, my only cow, which fed me, which was my sole support. Woe to you, you who took her from me! I beseech and cry out to God that He, through his death and the bitter passion He bore for mankind and for us poor sinners, grant my plea, and it is this: that the Devil take your body and your soul to Hell!" At these words the judge did not speak nor even utter a squeak, but the Devil said to him with thundering scorn: "You see, judge, *that* was in earnest – as you are about to discover!" So saying, the Devil stretched forth his claws, seized the judge by the hair, and flew away with him through the air like a vulture with a hen. Everyone in the crowd was shocked and astonished, and wise men pronounced the moral:

That man is most unwise
Who deals with the Lord of Flies;
Who consorts with the Evil Lord
Will receive a dark reward.