

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The King in the Bathhouse**

Once upon a time, there was a King to whom many German- and Italian-speaking lands were subject, and this gave him a vainglorious temper, so that he believed himself to be the one and only mighty lord in the world. Now it happened that he went one evening to Vespers, where he heard the priest say the words: DEPOSIT POTENTES DE SEDE, ET EXALTAVIT HUMILES. As he knew no Latin, he asked the learned men around him what these words meant. And they were interpreted for him: The Lord God hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.¹ The King was startled by this quotation and became wrathful and gave the command that this saying of St. Luke the Evangelist was henceforward not to be said, it was not to be heard by anyone, and it was to be utterly eradicated from the Holy Books. The King's Emissaries carried his command into every land, to every priest, and into every cloister. Those books in which this passage of the Scripture was left, they were to be burned. And so those words were effaced and eradicated in great number, and were no longer said or chanted in Divine Office.

Now it happened that one day the King went into a bathhouse, and God, to make him pay for his sin against the Holy Word of the Gospel, sent an angel who assumed the King's form, and He touched the eyes of the people with a kind of blindness so they would hold the angel to be their ruler and not know the real King. When the King stepped out of the bath, he seated himself on a bench on which the angel was sitting. The bath-keeper bid him get up and find a seat elsewhere. "Are you drunk, bath-keeper," asked the King, "that you speak to me so outrageously? I am he, the King,

¹ Luke 1:52, from the 'Magnificat,' the Hymn of the Virgin Mary.

your master!" "You're a fool, more likely," the bath-keeper replied. "My Lord the King is sitting right here; whose King are you, then? And where is Your Majesty's Kingdom? Narragonia, I suppose?"

"Villain!" yelled the King, beside himself with rage, and he took a bucket and threw it at the bath-keeper's head. The keeper's servants heard the commotion, came rushing over, and anointed the King with oil from their fists until the angel intervened and rescued him from their hands. But then he left him and walked out of the bathing-room, and the King's servants, who could not do otherwise than take the angel to be their master, dressed him in the King's magnificent garments and escorted him to the Imperial Palace on proud steeds in a glittering procession. As for the King, he was thrown out of the bath-house naked and bare by the keeper and his assistants, and there he stood in front of the door, not knowing what was happening to him. And the people gathered round him and mocked him, his own retinue among them, for no one knew him. And naked as he was, he hurried away with great shame from the people, who ran after him as if following a fool, to the house of his cupbearer and most trusty counsellor.

It was after the time of the midday meal, and the cupbearer was sitting and taking his midday-rest when the King rang at the door and desired admission. The porter asked who he was and what he wanted, and he said, "I, the King!"

"Fie upon you!" cried the porter, "I have never seen a King looking such a disgrace. There's no way you're coming in!" Then the King shouted



and made a monstrous din which the cupbearer heard, and he asked what the matter was. The porter said: "Lord, there is a man outside who is naked and bare and says he is your Lord King; and the people are behind him, sporting with the simpleton."

"Let him in!" the cupbearer said with compassion. "And give him a makeshift garment that he may cover his nakedness." This was done, and then the King walked in to the cupbearer, who was also unable to recognize him as his lord, and said, "Oh, my friend, you will, you must know me to be your King, even though a fantastical fate is visiting me today and driving me away from my honours and estate. Remember the words that freely passed between us yesterday morning, when I gave you, my counsellors, an order that I wished to see executed, and you dissuaded me from it as unworthy of a Prince." And the King spoke of more such secret matters to the cupbearer, who began to laugh, and said: "You are telling the truth, indeed, but the Devil must have whispered it into your ear!" And the King spoke: "Whatever I may have done to deserve the misfortune that smites me, my heart yet tells me that I am a true and rightful King."

The cupbearer did not want to contradict, for that tends to put fools into a passion, and among the wise it is not regarded as a sign of good manners; but he ordered food to be served to the stranger, while he thought to himself: I shall take the news of this rare event to the King. He, the cupbearer, was so highly regarded at Court for his wise counsels that he could gain admittance at any time, and so he set out at once for the royal castle, where he appeared before the angel and brought him the tidings of his extraordinary guest. The angel commanded him to bring the King to Court, and the entire royal household congregated in a large hall, with the

servants filling every staircase and gallery. When the cupbearer appeared with the humbled King, everyone cried in derision: “God be with you, Lord King without a land!”

The angel sat in sumptuous splendour on the throne beside the beautiful Queen, and he greeted his Doppelganger, whose blood boiled with hatred on seeing his supposed enemy sitting by his wife. The angel spoke: “Pray tell, is it true that you are King here?” and the King replied, “I did see the day when I wielded power here, where my Queen received me as her Lord and King, she whose amiable greeting I must now do without, though it was never withheld from me before; not until today, this day of my disgrace and my suffering. Oh, with what affection did I part from her lovely arms this very morning!”

The Queen flushed with shame at the insinuation that she had embraced the stranger, and she spoke to the angel: “My royal Lord and husband, this man is surely out of his wits!”, and an old knight of the Court cried: “Silence, villain! You ought to be dragged on a cow-hide to the gallows!”, and the young lickspittles at Court, wanting to gain favour and display their valour, grabbed at the King; and they would have used him ill enough had the angel not warded them off and led the King away into a handsome, secluded chamber. There he spoke to him: “Speak! Do you believe or do you not believe that God has power over the whole of Creation? Behold how His almighty power tramples you into the dust! What help is your mighty host to you? Who obeys your summons and command? The truth – *deposuit potentes de sede* – lives on, and you and your ilk will never, in all eternity, suppress it!”

So spoke the angel to the King, who asked, trembling, “Man, who

are you? If you are God the Almighty, of whom you speak, may Your Grace have mercy on this poor, deluded man!”

“I am not God!” the angel said to this, “but I am one of his messengers and a servant of the true Christ. He sent me, and He sent you punishment for your pride. God exalts and abases whom He will! Why do you persecute this truth?”

Then the King fell down at the angel’s feet and besought God’s grace and forgiveness. The angel bid him arise and said: “You must have faith in the Word of the Scripture from the mouths of priests! You must be compassionate to those who pour out their sorrow to you! You must be as just to the lowly as to the great! If you do so, you shall once again occupy the seat of your power and your honours.”



And the King humbled himself again before the Messenger of the Lord; he bowed, and kneeled down, and said: “I follow you gladly, grant me grace through God!” Then the angel offered him his hand, gave him the royal raiment, and bestowed upon the King his original form; and the King

discarded the miserable coat the cupbearer had ordered to be given him. And the angel disappeared before the King's eyes and flew back up to Heaven, the Home of Souls, the Realm of the Eternal Father.

The King spoke: "Praised be sweet Christ, the Mighty Lord. What the angel told me is the real truth." And he walked forth from the chamber as one whom no harm had ever befallen. His vassals reverently asked: "Lord, what has become of the fool?" He called the Queen and his people together around him and told them everything, how things had come to pass and what he had suffered; his fight with the bath-keeper and everything besides; and he showed them the miserable coat. This frightened the lickspittles, who were ashamed at having injured and misknown their Lord in such a wise, and many of them now thought they would answer for it with their lives and lands. Even the Queen begged the King for grace and mercy, and assured him by all that was holy that she had not recognised him. He gently took her hands in his and said, "Wife, be silent! God willed it so! After all, I no longer knew myself."

Then he bid the *deposuit* sentence be written again in the old books where it had been erased, and had it said again in the churches, and became a truly humble ruler. And may he who reads this tale humble his heart before God, and beseech Him in His Grace to preserve him from arrogance and pride.