

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Magic Contest**

There was once a young bookbinder's journeyman who went travelling into foreign lands, and he wandered until he did not have a single kreutzer left to tinkle in his pocket. He was finally compelled by his strained relationship with his now lank purse to make serious enquiries after work, and he was soon taken on by a master and had a very, very cosy billet. His master said to him: "Assistant, you will have it good here with me; the work you have to do every day is little indeed. You will simply dust these books as clean as a whistle every day and then stand them up again in order. But this one book which stands here apart – you must not touch it, far less look inside it, or it will go ill with you boy, mark that. The other books, however, you may read as much as you please."

The assistant took his master's words thoroughly to heart and had the time of his life for two years; every day, all he did was clean the books then read some of them, while enjoying the choicest food – and he never laid a finger on the forbidden book. He won thereby the complete trust of his master, so that the latter would often stay away from home for days on end, and also undertake a journey on occasion. But as man constantly craves what is forbidden, so one time, when the master was away on a trip for several days, there stirred in the apprentice a powerful yearning to finally learn what was written in the book which always lay, like a sacred relic, in its appointed place. – For he had read through all the other books. To be sure, his conscience opposed doing what was forbidden, but his curiosity was stronger; he took the book, opened it, and began to read inside. In this book there were the deepest, most precious secrets, and the most powerful spells were contained therein; and everything gradually revealed itself to

the astounded, awestruck assistant in so crystal-clear a fashion that he even began to try his hand at magic. Everything succeeded. When the lad spoke a powerful spell from this book, what he wished for was there before him in a flash. The book also taught how to change any human form into another. Now he experimented further and further, and in the end he turned himself into a swallow, took the book, and flew back home at top speed. His father felt no little amazement when a swallow flew in at his window and then suddenly became his son, whom he had not seen for two years. The lad warmly clasped the old man to his breast and said, "Father, we can now be happy and secure, I've brought a magic book with me which can make us richer than rich." The old man was very pleased to hear this, for his was a hand-to-mouth existence. Soon afterwards the young wizard turned himself into an extremely large and fat ox and said to his father: "Now take me to the market and sell me, but demand a large sum, a really large sum, so they will pay a high price for me; and be sure not to forget to take off the little rope that is tied round my left hind foot, and to bring it back home with you, or I'm done for."

The father did everything as instructed; he sold the ox for a heavy sum of gold, for when he appeared with it at the market a crowd of people very soon gathered around it, everyone admiring this rarity of an ox, and Christians and Jews came to blows in their eagerness to buy it. But the buyer who made the highest offer, and paid, and led the ox away in triumph found, on the next morning, instead of a magnificent ox, a little bundle of straw lying in his cowshed. And the bookbinder's journeyman? He was back home with his father in high spirits, and the two of them lived in clover

on the money. Many a man is full of bull, but no one buys him at a high price.



Soon afterwards the lad changed himself again, this time into a splendid black horse, and he had his father take him to the horse-market and sell him. Again a crowd gathered round, to see the beautiful, glossy black steed. –However, that Master Bookbinder, when he had returned home, had realised at once what had happened; and as he was not really a bookbinder, but a wizard who only pursued this occupation for the sake of appearances, he immediately knew the score and set off in pursuit of the absconder. Now, at that horse-market the master was among the buyers, and as he knew every page of the little magic book, he instantly understood the truth about the horse, and he thought: Just wait, now I'll catch you. And so he sought to buy the horse at any price, which he succeeded in doing without much difficulty, for he took it at the very first selling price. The father did not know the buyer, but the horse began to tremble and sweat violently, and it gave signs of extreme anxiety and fear; yet the father could not possibly suspect the great danger of his son's present situation. When the

horse was led in to the new owner's stable and put into the place appointed for it, the father wanted to remove the rope again, but the buyer would not by any means allow this, for he knew fine well that he would then be done out of his catch. So the father had to go away without the rope, and he thought to himself: He'll be able to help himself, for sure; if he knows so much that he can turn himself into a horse, then he can certainly use his magic arts to free himself in that stable and come home.

But in that stable there was a terrific crush of people: large and small, old and young – everyone wanted to have a look at the exceptionally beautiful steed. A saucy lad even dared to stroke the horse and pat it caressingly, and the horse liked this, so it seemed, very much; and when this lad, becoming ever more familiar, came closer and stroked the horse's head and neck, it whispered to him very quietly, "Dearest boy, don't you have a knife on you?" And the lad answered in happy astonishment: "Oh yes, I've a really sharp one." Then the black horse spoke again, very quietly: "Pray, cut off the rope on my left hind foot," and the lad quickly cut it in two. And in that moment the beautiful steed collapsed before everyone's eyes and became a small bundle of straw, and a swallow flew forth from it and out of the stable into the high blue heavens. The master's attention had wandered from the horse only for a moment; now there was no time to lose. Using his art, he swiftly changed himself into a vulture and shot after the fleeing swallow. Only a moment more and the vulture would have had the swallow in his claws, but the swallow noticed the enemy, looked down at the ground, and saw a beautiful castle directly underneath, and a Princess was sitting in front of the castle, and without delay the swallow turned into a

gold finger-ring and fell down, right into the fair Princess's lap. She did not know what was happening, and put the ring on her finger. But the vulture's keen eyes had seen everything and the master magician rapidly changed himself from a vulture into a spruce squire, who walked up to the Princess and asked her most politely and most humbly to deliver back into his hands that little ring with which he had just been performing a trick. The beautiful Princess smiled with a blush, pulled the ring from her finger, and was about to hand it over to the conjurer – but look! It fell from her tender fingers and rolled, as a tiny seed of millet, into a crack in a stone. In an instant the squire transformed himself into a proud cockerel which eagerly pecked for the millet seed in the crack, but in a flash the millet seed became a fox and this bit the cockerel's head off. And thus was the master magician vanquished. Now the young journeyman resumed his natural form, fell at the Princess's feet, praised her, and gave her thanks for having worn him on her finger and, in this way, betrothed herself to him. The Princess was mightily shocked at everything that had happened, for she was yet very young and inexperienced; and she gave him her heart and her hand, but on the condition that he henceforth renounce all transformations and stay unchangeably true to her. The youth swore to do this and sacrificed his book of magic to the flames – but this was very ill done of him, for he could have left and bequeathed it to you, dear reader, or to me; the two of us would certainly never have horsed around.