

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Monk and the Bird**



In a monastery there was a monk by the name of Urban, a very pious and industrious man, who was entrusted with the key to the cloister library; and he guarded this treasure with care, wrote many a fine book himself, and studied much in the other books and the Holy Scriptures. There he found a saying of the Apostle Peter, which read: *To God a thousand years are as a day and a watch in the night.*¹ This seemed simply impossible to the young monk, he would not and could not believe it, and he struggled with tortuous doubts. Then it happened one morning that the monk walked down from the

gloomy bookroom into the bright, beautiful cloister garden, and there in the garden was a colourful little woodland bird, searching for grains of corn. It flew on to a branch and sang as sweetly as a nightingale. This bird was not the least bit shy, but let the monk draw near; and he would gladly have caught it, but it flew away from one branch to the other, and the monk followed it a good while. Then the bird sang again in a loud and high voice, but it would not let itself be caught, although the young monk pursued it, a while longer, out of the cloister garden and into the wood. At last he desisted and went back to the monastery, but everything he saw there seemed to be different. Everything had become broader, larger, and fairer – the buildings, the garden – and in place of the lowly old monastery church there stood a proud cathedral with three towers. This seemed very strange,

¹ 2 Peter 3:8.

even enchanted, to the monk. And as he came to the monastery-gate and hesitantly rang the bell, a completely unfamiliar gatekeeper stepped towards him – only to shrink back in consternation. The monk now strolled through the monastery graveyard, in which there were so many headstones that he could not remember having seen before. And when he walked towards the brethren, they all drew aside, utterly horrified. Only the Abbot – however, not his Abbot, but another, young one – stood his ground; but he held out a crucifix to him and cried: “In the name of Christ who died on the Cross, Spirit, who are you? And what do you, who have escaped the caverns of the dead, seek among us, the living?”

Then a shudder ran through the monk’s body, he tottered like an old man totters, and he lowered his gaze to the ground. Behold – he had a long, silver-white beard, flowing down over the belt on which the bunch of keys to the barred bookcases yet hung. The man seemed to the monks to be a miraculous stranger, and they led him with timid reverence to the Abbot’s seat. There he gave the keys to the library to a young monk, who unlocked and entered, and returned with a chronicle in which it was said that three hundred years ago the monk Urban had vanished without a trace, nobody knowing whether he had fled or met with some fatal mishap. “O little woodland bird, was that your song?” the stranger asked with a sigh. “For barely three minutes did I follow you, hearkening to your song, and three centuries have since flown by! You have sung to me the Song of Eternity, which I was unable to comprehend! Now I grasp eternity and worship God as dust, and unto dust!” Thus did he speak, and he bowed his head; and his body crumbled into a heap of ashes.

