

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Most Indispensable Thing**

In days of yore there lived a King, and he had three good and fair daughters whom he loved very much, and they loved him dearly too. He had no sons, but it was the custom in his kingdom for the line of succession to also pass to wives and daughters, and as the King's wife was no longer alive, he was free to choose one of the three Princesses to be the heir to his throne, and it did not necessarily have to be the eldest. Now, because this King loved all three of his daughters equally well, he found the decision a hard one to make, and after communing with his heart, he resolved to choose the one who revealed the greatest sagacity. This decision he imparted to his three daughters, and he fixed upon his approaching birthday as the day of judgement. Whoever brought him "The most indispensable thing," *she* would become Queen.

Now each one of the Princesses pondered over this – what could the most indispensable thing possibly be? And when the King's birthday arrived, the eldest approached him first, bearing a fine purple garment, and said: "The Lord God made men to come naked into the world, but He closed the gates of Paradise to them, so *garments* and *raiment* are indispensable to man."

The second daughter brought a loaf of fresh bread she had baked herself, laid across the top of a golden goblet filled to the brim, and said: "The most indispensable thing to men born from dust is *food and drink*, for he is not able to live without these; that is why God created the fruits of the earth, fruit and berries and grapes, and taught mankind how to make bread and wine, the holy symbols of his love."

The youngest daughter offered, on a little *wooden plate*, a small

heap of salt and said: "The most indispensable things, my father, I deem to be salt and wood. That is why ancient peoples paid divine honours to trees and held salt to be sacred."

The King was filled with wonder at these gifts and became thoughtful; then he said, "The most indispensable thing to a King is the Purple, for if he has that, he has everything else, but if he loses it then he is King no more, and is merely a common man, like to other men. And so, for your having discerned that fact, my beloved eldest daughter, the Royal Purple shall adorn you after me; come to my heart, receive my thanks and my blessing!"

Now when the King had kissed and blessed his eldest daughter, he said to the second eldest: "Eating and drinking are not always necessary, my good child, and they drag us down all too much to what is common. They indicate, as it were, the mediocre masses, the common herd. If you take pleasure therein, I cannot prevent it, just as I cannot thank you for your ill-chosen gift; but you shall be blessed for your good intentions." And the King blessed his daughter, but he did not kiss her.

Then he turned to the third Princess, who stood pale and trembling and had a foreboding, after what she had seen and heard, of what was about to come.

"You do indeed have salt on your wooden plate, my daughter," said the King, "but you have none in your brain, yet you live; and consequently, salt is not indispensable. We do not need salt. You have shown me a peasant's sense with your salt, not the sense of a King, and I take no pleasure in stiff wooden objects. Therefore I cannot thank you and cannot

bless you. Go from me, as far as your feet may carry you, go to the stupid and crude peoples who worship old blocks of wood and tree-trunks instead of the living God and hold your contemptible salt to be sacred!”

Then the youngest king’s daughter turned away in tears from her harsh father and walked out of the court, and out of the royal capital, far, far away, as far as her feet could carry her.

And she came to an inn, where she offered her services to the landlady, and the landlady was moved by her humility, innocence, youth, and beauty, and took her on as a maid in the house. And when the King’s daughter proved herself to be very able in domestic affairs, the landlady said, “It’ll be a shame if the girl doesn’t learn a proper trade – I’ll teach her how to cook.” And the King’s daughter learned how to cook there, and grasped it very easily; and soon she was cooking a good many dishes which were even better and even tastier than those of her teacher. As a result, the inn enjoyed a considerable increase in custom, simply because its meals were so superbly made, and the reputation of the good chef, who was so young and withal so beautiful, spread throughout the land.

Now it came to pass that the eldest Princess, daughter of this cook’s father, was to marry, and a regal wedding was to be arranged; and the decision was reached to summon the far-famed cook to the Court, that she might crown the feast with her skill, for the lords at the Royal Court – marshals, hereditary cupbearers, hereditary carvers, masters of ceremonies, chamberlains and other excellencies – did not all share that view once expressed by their most gracious master, the King, that eating and drinking are not always necessary, and drag one down among the

common herd; rather, good feasts with fine wines were what they liked, and they paid homage, at least in secret, to the true old proverb: Eating and drinking hold body and soul together.

The wedding feast was prepared with all magnificence, and the King's favourite dish, which the express carver had especially ordered, was not lacking; and when it was time for the meal, one dish after another arrived on the table, and received high praise.

And at last there came the King's favourite food, which was offered to him first of all. But when he tasted it, he found it utterly insipid; his cheerful expression faded and his face darkened, and he spoke to the First Chamberlain, who was standing behind his golden armchair: "This dish is completely ruined! That is most – calamitous, do not pass the bowl on, and call the cook here to me!"

The cook walked into the majestic hall and the King accosted her indignantly: "You have ruined my favourite dish, you have put the kibosh on my joy because you did not put even the slightest sprinkling of salt on my favourite food!"



Then the cook fell at the King's feet and humbly said: "Practise mercy, Majesty, my royal master, and forgive me! How could I have dared to mix salt in your food? After all, I once heard, from the mouth of a mighty King himself, the words: 'We do not need salt, salt is not indispensable! Salt shows only a peasant's sense, not the sense of a King!'"

The King ashamedly recognised these words as his own, and his daughter in the cook; and he raised her from the ground on which she was kneeling and held her to his breast. He told the tale to all his wedding guests and had his youngest daughter sit by his side once again. And now the wedding celebrations began in earnest, and the King was happy once more in the love of his daughters.

Salt is sacred.