

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Sharp Shears**



In a small town there once lived an honest tailor who attended to his work most assiduously, plying his needle and thimble, and iron and shears, from morning to evening; but he never got anywhere and never found the path to success. All that one could say about his lot was: this tailor passably and honestly made ends meet. His family, consisting of a wife and several children who

needed to be supported, the hard times and the many cares they caused, drew many a sigh from the tailor. He would have liked to be somewhat better-off, but he did not know how to go about it; he would have liked to work even more, but he really could not do more than he was commissioned to, and he could not conjure up new customers, wish as hard and as often as he might.

But the times became ever worse, and it reached the stage where the poor tailor could no longer keep even a single journeyman, and when his last apprentice had been released from his articles and had packed up his things in his knapsack and gone abroad in search of work, no other boy applied to be apprentice, for it was said of the tailor that he was nothing more than a jobber, a word which basically signifies: a scoundrel.

Then one day, towards dusk, a tailor's journeyman finally came knocking at the door, applied to the master for relief, and asked for work. The poor master at once poured out his sorrows to him and said that he

would give him work with all his heart if he only had some. The tailor's journeyman replied that the master should just take him on; wherever *he* worked, there was luck, there was plenty to do.

"Well then! You shall have an eight-day trial," said the tailor, who easily drew hope even if there were only a thimbleful. Several things still to be darned were found, and the next morning the work began: Master and journeyman sat opposite one another, and the former's needle stopped still when he saw how nimbly and skilfully the new journeyman sewed. His needle flew so fast that one could hardly see the hand at work.

Now the master took a closer look at his new journeyman, and was amazed at his figure. He was almost as thin as a thread; the tailor, who was far from being portly, was to him what a thick trunk is to a thin riding crop; the master did not find the journeyman's face agreeable: it was the spitting image of a billy-goat's physiognomy, and in addition, the journeyman appended to everything he said a strange, giggling laugh, that sounded exactly like a bleat.

No sooner had the work begun than there was a knock at the door and in walked an unknown gentleman, who ordered a new garment and laid the money for the cloth on the workbench straight away. Trembling with joy, the tailor hopped around the stranger and took his measurements. Oh, it was so long since he had last felt the bliss that a tailor experiences when taking measurements for a brand-new garment. The stranger recommended haste and left, and the master's wife, who had to hurry to a draper's to fetch the cloth, could not get dressed quickly enough.

"Does Master see that I was right?" asked the journeyman. "Luck enters a house with me, meh-eh-eh-eh!"

“I’m pleased, I’m very pleased!” the tailor replied with a self-satisfied smile.

“Did the gentleman leave ten dollars for the cloth?” the journeyman asked further. “Then we send eight to the draper’s and we keep two – meh-eh-eh-eh!”

“God forbid, and Heaven preserve me!” cried the tailor, horrified. “No, that would be a sin, that would be stolen goods, that would give no increase!”

“May Master not talk to me of – and sin; I don’t know such words – meheheheh!” the journeyman replied with a tremendously scornful expression on his face, working diligently all the while. “Master is redolent of the paltry little town in which we find ourselves – Master should live in a big city and see if he could have a customer as stupid as ours, paying the money for the cloth in advance! There, you would need to keep a good five of the ten dollars because so very many other customers never, ever pay for the cloth the tailors make into garments, and the outlay together with the making-up charge goes to the – the Devil – meh-eh-eh-eh!”

The pious tailor threaded a new thread in his needle, stretched it out very long, held it under the journeyman’s nose and said, “Look, monshure! Honesty is best in the long run!”¹

“A fine reckoning, which takes you far!” scoffed the journeyman with his constant, insupportable bleating laugh.

The cloth was brought, it was fine and good; the tailor sharpened his chalk and got ready to cut out. The journeyman looked in the camera obscura, which is kept on tailor’s workbenches to receive scraps of cloth,

¹ Literally, “Honesty lasts longest.”

lining and suchlike, and pawed around in it with his foot, but there was absolutely nothing inside other than a few fibres from the last darning job – then the journeyman followed every movement of the tailor’s hands with furtive glances – then he said, “Well, Master! Your eldest urgently needs a little coat, or the Mistress could well do with a Sunday jacket. Cut out nice and sensibly – throw the spare pieces of cloth here – in the hell – meh-eh-eh-eh!”

“Hell is with the Devil – not with me! I won’t keep even a little patch for a bonnet-frill for my wife!” the honest tailor retorted.

“Pah!” the journeyman cried, twisting his billy-goat face into a grimace and horribly baring his teeth. “Then why is the hell there? What does it have an opening for – meh-eh-eh-eh?”

“Actually, it is not called a *hell* at all, it is called a *hole*, because it is a dark, hollow space – no honest tailor has anything to do with Hell,” replied the garment-maker as he cut out the cloth with great conscientiousness.

“Schoolmaster! Oh, German-language teacher!” the journeyman scoffed, throwing a look full of the most furious derision at the honest man. But the tailor was not put out of countenance and the new job was begun. In the course of the same day yet more orders came in – one after another; there was already enough work to fill a week.

The master-tailor did not like his new journeyman at all; he would gladly have given him the elbow as early as the morning of the first day of work, but he had taken him on for a week-long trial, and that was that; and the journeyman did, in fact, seem to have brought luck along, and if he sent him packing, he could not finish all his orders in two weeks on his own. And a second worker like this journeyman was simply not to be found.

On the next day, the work was busily continued, with many a dialogue, with many a derisive remark, and many a goatie laugh mocking the master – who, however, minded it little. He thought: Mock and scoff without cease, make as many cutting remarks as you wish, just keep on working as you do; your mockery does not bite me, your derision does not sting me – the hot pressing-iron of your tongue does not burn me.

And so the tailor made much better progress, through patience and a clear conscience, than he would if he had continually quarrelled and squabbled with the journeyman.

Between the working days there now fell a Sunday. The master and mistress slept an hour longer, it being of course a day of rest. On the previous evening, the mistress had swept out and scrubbed down the workshop so it was all spick and span; she was therefore not a little astonished when, looking in on Sunday morning, she saw scraps of cloth, pieces of yarn, and shreds of lining lying all over the floor, and the journeyman sitting on his seat, hard at work; he had on a clean shirt that was open at the front, and the mistress perceived, to her horror, that the journeyman's chest was completely covered with black hairs.

She withdrew and expressed to her husband her astonishment that he had made the journeyman work on the Lord's day, which was a downright sin – and after she had swept the workshop so clean just the evening before, too!

“What? He's *working*?” the master asked in utter amazement. “I would never have dreamt of ordering him to do that. He shall stop it right this minute!”

The master walked rapidly into the workshop. “And a very good

morning to you! Now what is the meaning of this? Don't you know today is Sunday?"

"Thanks very much, Master! Well, meh-eh-eh-eh!"

"Listen! Stop your stupid laughter! I won't have it!" said the master, puffing out his chest. "Today is Sunday, today there is – once and for all – no tailoring done. Sun-day is Rest-day!"

"May Master not take my work in bad part!" the journeyman defended himself with ostensible humility. "*Whom* am I working for, exactly? For *you* or for myself? Why, for *you*, without doubt. I am used to constant activity, that's just how it is, I must always have something to do – I know no rest and no idleness. Do you not know the pretty proverb: an idle brain is the Devil's workshop, and the Devil finds work for idle hands? Meh-eh..."

"That may be –" replied the master, somewhat bewildered. "Stop working now. Have your breakfast and get dressed. You'd also do well to have a shave – just take a look in the mirror – why, you have a beard just like a billy-goat."

"Meh-eh-eh-eh!" the journeyman burst out laughing. "May Master forgive me – I have to laugh – meh-eh-eh-eh! at *you* using such a comparison. Well, your will be done."

The journeyman went into his chamber, shaved and dressed, and with his beard, which he had left untouched, he looked like a living satyre on the entire commendable Guild of Tailors.

He had on a coal-black tail-coat of shiny summer material with tails that hung down to the ground, and there was something concealed in one of the tail-pockets, as if there were a long snake cucumber inside, presumably a tobacco-pipe, for a kind of black tassel hung out. Under the

tail-coat the tailor's journeyman wore a waistcoat of flame-coloured barracan, and his inexpressibles were of pure nankeen. Instead of a hat, the journeyman possessed only a dashing little cap of black velvet, similar to a biretta, which was red-rimmed and burnished with gold braid. In his hand he carried a strangely knaggy stick of juniper-wood, the handle of which formed a kind of dragon's head, this having grown so as a freak of nature.

"Hey – you're dressed to the nines, Schwarzburger!" the master cried to the journeyman, who, as the latter's passport² revealed, came from Schwarzburg.³ "Only your beard does not please me; and nor does your cap, it has such strange corners at the front, just as if there were a pair of goat's horns inside!"

"Oh, stop getting my goat, Master!" cried the journeyman. "First I have a goat's beard, poor devil that I am, then even goat's horns! Know that if you carry on like this, I can down tools, I can call it a day."

"Peace on Sunday, the blessed holy-day!" the master commanded. "Let us not lock horns. Here, journeyman, have a hymnbook – we're going to church."

In vain did the master hold the book out to his apprentice – the latter did not touch it – and gave an embarrassed laugh:

"Meh-eh-eh-eh, Master! Put it away – put it away – I must – yes, to my shame, I must confess to you – I cannot – I cannot *read*."

² "Wanderbuch" – "a police-book for a travelling journeyman, in which his name, conduct & c. is written, and which serves as a passport from station to station" – Hilpert's dictionary. Both a passport and a journal, it would include information on his place of birth, profession, age, height, hair, facial features (including the chin), and any other distinguishing features.

³ Historically, either of two principalities (Schwarzburg-Sondershausen and Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt) in the Holy Roman Empire, located in present-day Thuringia.

“Hm! Hm!” the tailor murmured in amazement, and he said: “It surprises me that, with the countless excellent educational institutions which Germany enjoys, and with the superabundance of teachers who disseminate true education and enlightenment all around, there should be a place where the instruction were still of so defective a nature that a German tailor could not read – however, just take the book, put it down before you in church, and pretend to be looking in it – that is what many thousands of people do, who can read very well. It *looks* like reverence.”

“I truly cannot, may Master spare me that!” the journeyman resolutely refused. “I cannot enter a church – the cool air oppresses my weak breast – I will take a little stroll, Nature is my temple – and this is a lovely region, is it not, Master?”

“Oh yes,” the mistress interposed in the conversation. “After you go out the lower gate, the road sharp left leads to a rocky valley; this road is called the Dragon’s Ditch, and further on, at the end, there’s a splendid boulder which is called the Devil’s Pulpit.”⁴

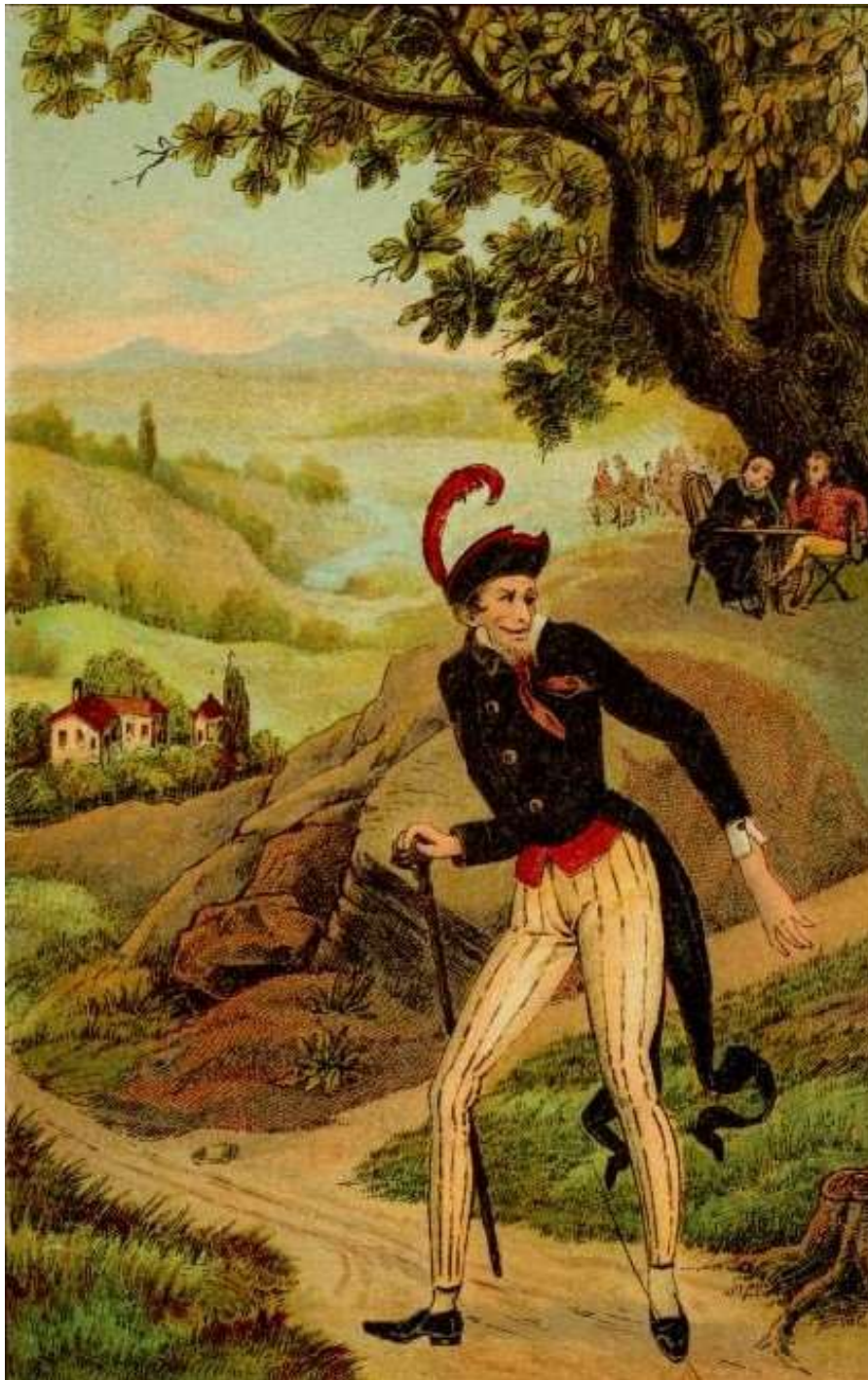
“Ah! That’s nice! I’ll go there! I kiss your hand, Mistress! I wish good devotions all round! Meh-eh-eh-eh!”

On Sunday, following vespers,⁵ the respectable tailor went for a stroll with his family; the weather was very inviting, and a nearby place of amusement, where good beer was to be had, became very crowded. The children found playmates, the mistress found friends and gossips, and the master found a clergyman who was well disposed towards him, and with whom he took the air a little in agreeable converse, in the vicinity of the

⁴ “Teufelskanzel”: “kanzel” means both “pulpit” and “spur, promontory.”

⁵ Here, referring to the late afternoon, not the evening.

pleasure garden. There they encountered the journeyman.



“My! What kind of a character is that? I have not seen *him* here before!” said the clergyman. “Look, Master, at that queer figure, that ghastly physiognomy, and how the fellow limps!”

“He limps, it is true; I hadn’t noticed that at all!” replied the tailor.

“What? You know him, Master?”

“He is my new journeyman,” answered, with a certain self-importance and emphasis, the tailor; for it did flatter him to be the man who kept a journeyman. This journeyman, however, took a byway and turned off to the left so as not to encounter the two men, who were speaking of him.

The clergyman seemed to be as curious as he was suspicious; he directed question after question to the master, so that the good man, who was too honest to want to have a hell, was given Hell nonetheless. “What is all this you are telling me, Master?” cried the clergyman. “He looks like a goat – bleats like a goat – seems to have horns under his cap – limps – will not take the hymnbook – cannot stand the air in church? Oh, you silly-billy, you scapegoat! You goat of all goats! Master, for Heaven’s sake, how you acted the goat by taking *this* goat into your Christian house! Thank Heaven which let you find me here today. Your journeyman – it is the very Devil!”

The tailor gave a cry and came close to fainting – yes – yes – all became clear to him – the sudden accumulation of work, the wicked, tempting advice to keep the money for the cloth, to throw enough cloth for whole jackets into the hell – the journeyman’s scorn which he invariably expressed for everything that was sacred and holy; now it was all – fearfully – connected. While grace was being said, the journeyman had nosebleeds and ran out the door – he had not taken *salt*, neither for his meat nor his potatoes, the thing in his long coat-pocket had twitched very strangely every now and then, as if an eel were wriggling inside, and the tassel, which sometimes dangled out, was not of black mohair – it was hairs.

“Master!” the clergyman began anew, very gravely. “You have been chosen for a great deed, one such as no tailor ever yet performed – if you

accomplish it, you will win eternal glory; if you fail to accomplish it, then you are lost, body and soul, with your wife and children, in both this world and the world to come. *You* now have the Black One in your house, he is serving you on speculation of corrupting your soul, the soul-snatcher. Pay attention to how we shall exorcise him and make him averse to returning, for you know fine well that a cat never revisits a house in which it has had its tail hacked off or its ears cut off. Have the grinder sharpen your shears and have them to hand – then I'll tell you the further particulars, never fear.”

That evening, in the place of amusement close by the little town in which the tailor was resident, terrible blows were exchanged between tailors' journeymen and shoemakers' journeymen. A shoemaker's journeyman had poked fun at the misshapen boots which the foreign tailor's journeyman was wearing; first, witty words, then offensive ones, flew around, then blows fell thick as hail, first with sticks, then with chair-legs, and never before had there been so many shattered nasal-bones, bumps, holes in heads, and suchlike. Everyone agreed in opining that all Hell had been let loose.

On the following day no journeyman went to work. The whole body of journeymen was agitated and no one wanted to work, so, keeping Saint Monday,⁶ they passed through the town smoking and singing, arm in arm, walking the width of the street; the tailors' were joined by the barbers', turners', glaziers', drapers', and dyers' journeymen, the shoemakers' by the tanners', joiners', smiths', masons', and carpenters' journeymen. The Schwarzbürger was the leader of the first-mentioned party – he had stuck a

⁶ “blauen Montag feiern” (literally: celebrate Blue Monday) refers to craftsmen taking the Monday off work because of a hangover.

red cock's feather in his cap, and when the Battle of the Journeymen flared up that evening, which everyone had duly prepared for by drinking many a glass of spirits throughout the day, a great deal of blood flowed, and – this happened once in a blue moon – the tailors' party held the field; all the same, on the evening of this Saint Monday, rare indeed was the journeyman who was not black-and-blue or bloody when he returned home.

Only the Schwarzbürger showed no trace of a wound, nor any fatigue, but was working, brisk and sprightly as ever, early on Tuesday; however, he pulled a very wry face when that clergyman walked into the workshop and shuffled restlessly to and fro. The master received the man of the cloth with great reverence and pointed behind the journeyman's back at the freshly whetted sharp shears; and the clergyman began to direct all kinds of questions at the journeyman, such as: "What is your Christian name?" – Trouble was brewing. "I was not baptised," the journeyman replied.

"Then you are perhaps a Jew?" the clergyman asked.

"I am not a Jew."

"Or a Turk? Or a pagan?" the questioning continued.

The journeyman pretended not to hear very well and replied, "Yes, I am a tailor. Meh-eh-eh-eh!"

"You are the Devil, unclean Spirit!" the clergyman thundered.

"Exorciso te, creatura daemonica!"

Then the Devil began to shake, and he got cramp in his skinny calves, and in the meantime the tailor had stooped under the Devil's seat and sighted the proper place; he now reached boldly out and – rip! – clean snipped off the tail the Devil had guarded so carefully up to that time. The

Devil roared like hell and leapt up and away and never returned. He left his tail where it fell, and the clergyman picked it up to place it beside the other rarities of nature and art that were kept in the reliquary chamber.

The tailor was fêted as a hero; he received many commissions and ended up with twelve journeymen and six apprentices. But he would not suffer any of them to throw good, large pieces of cloth into the hell. The sharp shears were never used for any other work but remained a family keepsake and treasure, and when the tailor had passed away with the name of a pious Christian, a true likeness of them was chiselled into his gravestone, and this was built into the outer wall of the church, just at the place where the reliquary chamber lay inside.

Since that time the Devil has gone around without a tail, and the great service the tailor thought to have done the world with his bold snip is seriously called into question today; for when the Devil still had his tail, which he was only too happy to let trail here, there, and everywhere, it was easier to give him a wide berth than it is nowadays, when he struts around tailless. Since he began to appear so modish with his tail docked so short, the name *Buck* has arisen for those men who present themselves all prinked and primped and prettified, who puff themselves up, snootily and haughtily – and yet, for all that, are nothing more than poor or stupid devils.