

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Shudders**

Once upon a time there were two brothers, one of whom, the elder, was no fool, but rather clever and artful beyond measure; but the younger one was, as they say, as thick as two short planks. This caused great concern to his father, but none to him, for he passed his days on earth quite carefree and innocent, as fools live, and he might well have had in his head, without his knowing, the proverb: Johnny do not learn too much – you'd have too much to do. Whenever the father wanted something done, he always had to ask the elder one, Matthew, for the other one, Johnny, did everything wrong, smashing the oil-jug and the spirits bottle or taking an eternity. Matthew, on the other hand, made a good job of everything; he had only one fault – he was of a fearful nature, he got the shudders far too easily. When he walked past the graveyard in the evening, he got the shudders, and when he listened to a ghost story being told then sheer terror gave him such a gooseflesh that his arms looked like rasps, and he wailed, “Oh oh oh, I'm scared out of my wits.” But his brother, stupid Johnny, often laughed at him about this and said: “What, what? How *can* anyone get the shudders? I'd like to know that art, I've never been afraid in my life – I'd really like to learn how to shudder!”

“Do you look like someone who'd like to learn something?” the father scolded Johnny. “It's certainly time for it, you've become a big, strong lubber – but this learning how to shudder, you jack-of-all-trades, that's no good at all, it's no skill, you can't earn a grain of salt for your dear bread with that. And for that matter, do you actually know how to learn to shudder? What are the odds that you're too stupid even for that?”

While the father and the brother were laughing at stupid Johnny,

their neighbour, the verger and schoolmaster, came over to pay a visit, and hearing Johnny being ridiculed, he received the information that the knave wanted to learn how to shudder. “He can learn that wonderfully well at my home!” said the verger. “My schoolhouse is the most wretched shack of a dwelling in the whole village, all day long I’m afraid it will collapse over my head and strike all the promising urchins dead all at once. Hand Johnny over to me, I do after all have to teach knowledge to so many dunces, so I think you’ll agree I can teach him the meaning of fear!” The father assented to the proposal and Johnny followed the verger over into the rickety old schoolhouse. But he was not at all afraid; it mattered just as little to him that the house was threatened with imminent collapse as it mattered to the mayor and the honourable municipality.

Now the verger thought of another ploy that would invariably teach Johnny to feel fear. Bidding him ring the evening bell, he secretly slipped up into the belfry before him, and when Johnny had gone up the steps and grabbed the rope for the evening-bell, he heard a muffled moaning sound coming from the steps. When he looked around, a large white veiled figure was standing there, rigid and motionless. “Who are you? What do you want?” asked Johnny, without having felt the slightest twinge of fear. No answer. “I’m



asking you who you are!” cried Johnny in a louder voice. No answer. “Have you no mouth, Snowman? One more time – what do you want?” No answer.

– Quick as you please, our Johnny leaps at the figure with one bound, like Caspar at the Devil in the puppet-play, and – whoops! knocks it head over heels, for it had not bargained on such courage, and it rolls down a whole flight of stairs – and what kind of stairs? Stairs of so unique a kind as are only to be found in old village-church towers, worn down, rotten, narrow, full of centuries-old dust. Down below, the spectre lay moaning and groaning while Johnny rang for evening-prayer, swinging the bell-rope with vim and vigour as if nothing had happened; then he cheerfully climbed down the stairs and walked out of the tower, locking its door behind him. The vergeress had no idea where her husband had got to. “Well, where is he?” she asked Johnny. “Who?” Johnny asked. “He!” said the vergeress. “He went over to the tower before you, didn’t he?” – “I see!” said Johnny, “so *he* was it? There was a white apparition standing on the steps, and he wouldn’t speak or reply to me, so I pushed him down the stairs, he’ll still be lying at the bottom, groaning.” – “Gallows bird!” yelled the vergeress, and tearing the key from Johnny’s hand she ran to the tower, where her husband was lying in his bed-sheet, having broken a leg.

Now things did not fare at all well with Johnny: the vergeress lodged a complaint about him with his father, who became quite furious, shouting, “The boy’s a ne’er-do-well, he shall get out of my sight! Away, at the double! Here’s money – go, get yourself hanged wherever you want – never let me clap eyes on you again. You’ve brought us insults and infamy and injury, you good-for-nothing!”

“Go with God, Johnny,” Matthew mocked. “Just you take care to learn how to shudder – shuddering is said to be all the rage now, and the people in the outside world shudder at all kinds of things, so you’re sure to

receive your share of the shudders too!”

Johnny left; he had money, and if you have money, you have all the less cause to feel fear. On the way he would say to himself, many a time and oft, “If only I could shudder, if only I could shudder!” This was heard by a man who was walking behind Johnny, and he said to him, “Look over there – there stands the three-legged mare with a pretty company hanging from it, seven of them to be exact, as one says: a gallows’ full. Bed down for the night there, under the seven, and you’ll learn how to shudder.”



“If that turns out to be true,” said Johnny, “then I’ll give you all my money tomorrow morning. You can come to me and collect it, or you could of course just as well stay with me!”

“I’d have to be a fool to stay with you under the gallows!” the man replied. “No, my good companion, fear is learnt much more effectively when you are alone than when you are with another. *Good* night! – I’ll see you again early tomorrow morning!” – Johnny sat down under the gallows, made himself – it being cold – a fire, which shone nice and brightly up to the hanged men, and the keen night-wind moved their limply hanging bodies back and forth, back and forth.

“Oh, poor devils that you are!” Johnny cried up to them. “Why, you’re freezing, that’s why you’re rattling and chattering. Just wait, and I’ll fetch you down, you shall warm yourselves at my fire.” And quick as you please, Johnny found a gallows-ladder, climbed up, untied the hanged men, and

placed them by his fire, which he now made bigger and stronger. But they looked pitiful, green, yellow and wretched, black and blue, and ghastly, as the proverb says, and neither shifted nor stirred; the fire darted its tongues around and began to char the rags and tatters that hung around the corpses. “Now then!” said Johnny, “you’re letting your clothes burn! What they say is true of you: you really are as thick as thieves! Just wait – I’ll teach you to be so careless!” He took them, one after the other, and hung them back up, wrapped himself in his coat, stretched out by the fire, and fell asleep. Thus was he found by the man with whom he had walked on the previous day, and who now came to collect his money. But when he saw Johnny sleeping so peacefully, little hope arose in him that he had learned to feel fear overnight; and when Johnny awoke and told him what he had done, the man turned to go away, saying, “I haven’t earned your money this time, you’ll never learn the meaning of fear.”

Now as Johnny continued on his way, he said to himself, “It’s just a shame that I can’t learn what fear is, I suppose I must be too stupid to. All the same – if I could only shudder.”

This was heard by a carter who was walking along the same road, and he said to Johnny, “So, you don’t know what fear is? Then stop off at the inn by the road there, if you have money, that is; the innkeeper makes bills that will curdle your blood, and a shiver ran down my spine every time I had to stop at that inn.” – “We’ll see about that!” said Johnny, and thanking the carter, he strode towards that same inn.

“What’ll it be?” asked the innkeeper. “I’d like to learn how to shudder,” replied Johnny. “The people on the highroad say it’s easy to learn it here with you, you make such horrifying bills and wield such a horrifying

stick of chalk!" – Just wait, you young whippersnapper! the innkeeper thought, I'll teach you something all right that will make fear steal over you; and he said to Johnny, "My dear wanderer, you have received an untruthful report; the shudders can by no means be learnt in my inn, and I do not serve my guests in such a wise as some prankster has lyingly told you. If shuddering is your game, then go up to the old, cursed castle over yonder and see to it that you are given the King's daughter for wife, she whom her father has promised to the man who frees the castle from its poltergeists; there you'll have plenty chance to shudder and become rich."

"I'll do as you suggest," said Johnny, and the innkeeper spoke again: "There's more to it than your going up there. First you must ask the King for permission, and you must stay up there throughout three nights. If you escape with your life, then the Princess will be your wife."

"And if I don't escape with my life, what then?" asked Johnny – and the innkeeper laughed in his face and said, "I see all too clearly that you're a smart aleck, I'm sure you would have invented gunpowder if it weren't already invented!"

And Johnny went in haste to the King, asked for permission and received it, and the King said, "My son, you may take three things with you, but they must not be living things." Now, from his early youth, Johnny had really liked to light fires and to sit at the shaving horse and now and then at the lathe, and he was a dab hand at such things. Therefore he desired to take with him to the castle nothing more than a good lighter, a shaving horse and a lathe, "so I don't get cold," he said, "and I can while away the time." These were readily given to Johnny, and he took up residence in a handsome room in the old castle with a large fireplace. When night fell,

Johnny lit a bright fire which warmed and glowed very nicely. Suddenly there appeared two coal-black cats, they had eyes like green fire, and they wailed: "Miaow, miaow, we're cold!" – "Well, if you're cold, come on up and warm yourselves; there's a fire here!" said Johnny. And the cats did so, then they said, "time is hanging heavy on our paws, let us three play three-handed, Tippen or Poch." – "Poch, for me," said Johnny, "if you've brought cards with you." The cats did indeed have a pack of cards, which they showed to Johnny, and so he noticed that they had fearful claws on their black paws, and he said, "If you'll pardon my saying so, it's a right long time since your good mother last cut your nails, you ought to be ashamed of yourselves, come here – I'll trim them for you!" and he seized the cats and clamped their paws in the lathe. Then they bit at him, and so he took his wood-carving knife and cut their heads off, and he threw the cats' heads and bodies out the window into the castle moat. When he returned to the fire, a large dog was sitting there, and it bared its teeth to him and had a fiery tongue hanging down the length of an arm from its throat. Johnny was not happy about this either; he took his wood-carving knife once again and thrust it right between the dog's teeth into its maw, so the tongue fell to the ground and the upper head took its leave of the lower part. Now Johnny thought to have peace and intended to enjoy it; there was a bed in the corner, so he lay down in it and tucked himself up. But before he could fall asleep, the bed began to move like a steam locomotive and sailed all over the castle, upstairs, downstairs, through halls and rooms – but Johnny said, "Well, now I can feel what it's like when the great lords travel. Just keep going on like this." – Finally the bed may have grown weary of travelling; it rolled back into Johnny's room, where the fire still blazed merrily, then it

came to a stop, and Johnny fell asleep and slept as soundly as the dead.



On the next morning the King was standing by his bed, saying: “Now that’s what I call a sound sleep, I wish I could have that! No King sleeps so well. I’m pleased that the boy is still alive and snoring. Hey there! Johnny!” – “Top of the morning to you, Lord King! You’re here so early?” asked Johnny. “I trust that you slept well?” said the King. “Thank you, and the same to you!” replied Johnny. “You can have breakfast and lunch down at the inn on me, but in the evening you’ll be back up here, how about that?” the King said and asked. “Why, but of course,” said Johnny, “three nights it must be.”

When Johnny appeared before the innkeeper, the latter was quite amazed, and he exclaimed, “What? Still alive? – But you have learned how to shudder this last night, I should think?” – “No change!” replied Johnny. Then the innkeeper himself began to feel his flesh creep all over at the youth. Johnny had a high old time on the King’s tab without caring too much about it, and when evening came he was back up in the haunted castle and lighting himself a fire. Suddenly there was a clattering up in the chimney, as if everything was breaking into a thousand pieces, and then a fellow came

shooting down – but there was only half of him. “Well!” said Johnny, “and what’s this meant to be? There’s a moiety missing – one and a half men isn’t company.” No sooner had Johnny said this than – wham! the other half followed, falling down into the middle of the fire. Johnny took the two halves, threw them out from the fireplace into the room, and put his fire in order. While he was busy with this, he looked round, and the two halves had become a single fellow, but no handsome one, who was sitting on Johnny’s chair.

“Make way there!” yelled Johnny. “I sit here, be off with you, or I’ll halve you with the carving-knife!”

Suddenly there was another crash in the chimney, and bones and skulls of dead men clattered down, followed by several more men of the most hideous appearance.

“Good evening, gentlemen!” said Johnny. “I see you are *whole* men, I’m glad of that. You belong to the Handsome family, perhaps? Oh, what a shame there’s no mirror hung up in this room. Now how might I actually be of service to you?” – The men threw dreadful looks at Johnny; one of them took the charnel bones – there were nine, all told – and set them up as skittles, then the others took the skulls and rolled them at the pins.

“I love playing ninepins!” said Johnny. “Won’t you allow me to play with you? Are you playing Kegel or Coffins? Playing for money? Well?”

“Do you have money?” the men asked grimly.

“Oui!” said Johnny, and he put his hand in his pocket and jingled.

“Well then, shove away!” one of the men shouted, handing him a skull.

“If you’ll pardon my saying so, that’s an angular ball. Give it here, I’ve

a lathe ready, we'll turn it nice and round so that we can strike all nine of them," he said, and he sat down and turned the skull until it was round. Then the game began: Johnny bowled well, but the men bowled even better, so Johnny lost somewhat; and the game began again, Johnny bowled and cried out in joy, "All nine!" – "No, twelve!" cried the men in a muffled tone and disappeared with the bones and the skulls, and the old clock on the castle-tower struck twelve. "Well really!" cried Johnny. "What kind of way is that to behave? First they coax from me my little bit of money, and then when I bowl well, they do a moonlight flit!" Then he lay down in the bed, which stayed quite still today, and slept until late morning.

"It seems that he's no longer in the land of the living," said the King as he walked towards Johnny's room, "I don't hear him snoring like yesterday he must be a goner." But Johnny very quickly roused himself and said, "I trust you slept well, Your Majesty?" "Thank you kindly, and the same to you!" replied the King. "How did it go last night?" – "Very nicely, thanks for the kind enquiry, Lord King!" Johnny replied. "There was a species of chimney-sweeps here, they came down the chimney and we bowled with dead men's bones." The King felt his skin crawl, and he said, "But that is really quite horrifying!" – "What is, Lord King?" asked Johnny. "That – just that!" replied the King. "Well, good luck for the third night!"

"It's downright embarrassing that I can never learn how to shudder!" Johnny said to himself as the third night arrived. Suddenly there was a tremendous racket and six men entered the room carrying a coffin on a bier, laid it down before Johnny, and disappeared. Johnny thought, "Who can it be lying inside?" and opened the coffin. A man was lying inside; he was rigid and cold as ice. "Oh, he's cold, he's quite stiff with frost," said Johnny,

“I must warm him up!” and he lifted the corpse out of the coffin and carried it to his fire, but it remained cold. “He must go into the bed, he’s sure to get warm there” – and took it and laid it in the bed, and lay down beside it. After a while the dead man became warm and awoke and stretched and said, “Who told you to disturb my rest? Now you shall die!” – “Can’t that wait?” asked Johnny, and he quickly grabbed him, threw him into the coffin, then the lid on top, and swiftly screwed it shut. At once the six men came back, lifted up the coffin, and carried it away.

Soon afterwards a hideous giant with a great long beard walked in, shouting: “Worm! Now you must die! You must come with me!” – “I’m not going with you!” cried Johnny. “I’m in no rush to go; I still have things to do, as you see!” and he sat down at the lathe, and operated the wheel, and turned the spindle, and held the chisel to the wood. The giant bent down over the wheel to lay hands on Johnny. But all of a sudden he yelled out, “Ow! Ow! My beard, my beard!” The end of his beard had got caught in the catgut which helped to turn the wheel, and the rapid speed of the turning had wound it fast, and it was now pulling the whole head after it, and Johnny stepped on the pedal with a will, saying: “Fellow, take heed, now I’ll turn your big nose off, and turn your eyes out, and turn your fat head into a bowling-ball, as sure as my name is Johnny!” Then the giant gave the fairest words – if Johnny would let him go then he would show him the three chests filled with gold, one meant for the King, the second for the poor, while the third one would be his to keep. “Okay then,” said Johnny, “hand the thing over, but until I have it you’ll stay clamped in the stocks and carry the lathe on your shoulders.” That was a very uncomfortable portorage, the lathe on his shoulders and his beard interwoven in the wheel, which tugged

as he walked. The giant now led the way into another room and showed Johnny the chests full of gold. Meanwhile it struck twelve and he disappeared, and the lathe stood without a bearer. It seemed to Johnny that the chests were also making a move to disappear, so he cried, "Stop, stop!" and grabbed them and held them tight and dragged them over into his room, whereupon he lay down to sleep, again without fear.



The next morning, the King came and asked, "Well, *last* night you were most certainly terrified, were you not?"

"How come, Lord King?" asked Johnny. "I've been made a present of a chest full of gold, with one for you and one for the poor. Must it give one the shudders to be presented with gold?"

"You have accomplished great things!" said the King. "Through your fearlessness, you have freed the castle from the poltergeists and forced the enchanted treasure out into the light of day. You shall have your reward, and marry my daughter!"

"Much obliged, Lord King!" said Johnny. "However, it's a shame that I'm to get married but I'm still so stupid that I still haven't learned how to shudder."

"Oh, my dear son and son-in-law!" replied the King. "Just you get married, and everything will sort itself out. Many a man has not known how

to, then he got married, learned to shudder from sheer terror, and could never get rid of his gooseflesh again.” “I have that happy expectation, Lord King!” Johnny cheerfully exclaimed.

Soon there was a splendid wedding; Johnny was very happy, very rich, and had a wondrously beautiful wife, yet he said: “Don’t know how much longer I’ll have to wait until I learn how to shudder.”

“Just you wait, Johnny! You’ll learn to shudder yet, mark my words,” the young Queen, Johnny’s wife, said to herself; and she ordered a bucket full of small gudgeons and minnows to be brought her, and while Johnny was sleeping she lifted the blankets off him and poured the bucket full of water and little fishes over him. “Brr!” he started up, chattering with cold. “I dreamed I had fallen into the fishpond – Brr! I’m shuddering, I’m shuddering! I have gooseflesh like a rasp! Do you see, dear wife? Now, finally – now I know the shudders, now I know the shudders.”

