

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Smith of Juterbog**

In the little town of Juterbog there once lived a smith, of whom both young and old tell a wondrous tale. This smith was once a young fellow who had a very strict father but faithfully observed God's commandments. He made lengthy journeys and underwent many adventures, and he was exceptionally dexterous and capable in his trade. He had a tincture of steel which made any armour or hauberk that was coated with it impenetrable, and he joined the army of Emperor Frederick II, where he became the Imperial Armourer and took part in the campaign against Milan and Apulia. There he captured the carroccio of the city, and finally, after the Emperor had died, he returned to his home with great riches. He saw good days, and then evil ones, and passed his hundredth year.



One day, he was sitting in his garden under an old pear-tree when a little grey man came riding along on a donkey; this little man had previously proved, on several occasions, to be the smith's guardian spirit. He lodged with the smith and had his donkey shod, which the smith did willingly and without requiring payment. Thereupon the little man told Peter that he

should make three wishes, but in so doing he should not forget the best thing. Then the smith, because thieves had often stolen his pears, wished that no one who had climbed the tree would be able to come back down without his consent; and because he had also had things stolen from his parlour many times, he wished that no one would be able to enter there without his permission, unless it be through the keyhole. After each of these foolish wishes the little man warned, "Don't forget the best thing!" And then the smith made his third wish, saying, "The best thing is a good schnaps, so I wish that this flask will never be empty!" "Your wishes are granted," said the little man; and after passing his hand over some iron bars which were lying around the forge, he mounted his donkey and rode away. The iron had been turned into shining silver. The smith, who had fallen into poverty, was now rich again, and he lived on, and on, in good health, for the cordial drops in the flask which never ran dry were, unknown to him, an elixir of life.

At length, Death came knocking, having seemingly forgotten him for so long; the smith seemed ready and willing to go with him, and requested only that he be so good as to provide him with a slight refecton, by fetching



a few pears from the tree, which he could no longer climb himself on account of his great infirmity. Death climbed up the tree, and the smith said, "Stay up there!" for he had a mind to live awhile yet. Death ate all the pears on the tree, and then his fasts began; and from hunger he consumed himself, hide and hair, which is why he is such a hideously skinny skeleton today. But no

one died any more on Earth, neither man nor beast, and this brought great disaster; so in the end, the smith went out to rattling Death and came to an accord with him that he would leave Peter in peace hereafter, then he let him come down. Death fled away in a fury and began to make a clearance on Earth. As he could not wreak revenge on the smith, he set the Devil on him, that he might fetch him away. The Devil set out directly, but the crafty smith could smell the brimstone coming, so he locked his door, then he and his journeymen held a leather sack to the keyhole; and when His Sable Majesty passed through it, this being the only way he could enter the smithy, the sack was tied up at the mouth and carried to the anvil, and then the heaviest hammers were used to thump away on the Devil, with no mercy whatsoever, until sight and hearing left him, he became thoroughly tenderised, and he forswore ever returning.

Now the smith lived a great while longer in peace until, all his friends and acquaintances having predeceased him, he grew tired and weary of this earthly life. So he set out and went to Heaven, where he humbly knocked at the gate. Then Saint Peter looked out, and Peter the Smith recognised him as his patron saint and guardian spirit, who had often manifestly delivered him from danger and difficulty, and had at the last granted his three wishes. But now Saint Peter said, "Get you hence! Heaven shall remain locked to you, for you forgot to request the best thing: Salvation!" At this answer, Peter turned round and decided to try his luck in Hell; and he walked back down, soon finding the straight, broad, and much-trodden road. But when the Devil heard that the Smith of Juterbog was approaching, he slammed the gates of Hell in his face and placed Hell in a state of high alert



against him.

Now, as the Smith of Juterbog could not find refuge either in Heaven or in Hell, and the world could no longer afford him pleasure, he went down to the Kyffhäuser Mountains to be with Emperor Frederick, whom he had formerly served.¹ The old Emperor, his lord, was pleased to see that his armourer Peter had come, and he immediately asked him whether the ravens were still flying around the tower of the Kyffhäuser castle ruins? When Peter answered in the affirmative, Barbarossa heaved a sigh. But the smith remained in the mountain, where he will strike shoes for the Emperor's led-horse, and the horses of the Princess, and those of the riding ladies, until the hour shall strike of the Emperor's redemption, which will also be that of his own. And that will happen, so tradition tells us, on the day when ravens no longer fly round the mountains, and when an old, withered, and dead pear-tree will once more begin to bud, grow green, and blossom. Then the Emperor will come forth with all his men-at-arms, fight the great battle of deliverance, and hang his shield on the reverdant tree. After this, he and all his companions will go to everlasting rest.



¹ This confuses Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (r.1155-1190), whom legend had asleep in a cave under the Kyffhäuser Mountain, ready to awake when the Holy Roman Empire needed him, with Emperor Frederick II (r.1212-1250), who defeated the Second Lombard League (including the Milanese) at the Battle of Cortenuova in 1237.