

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Steaks of Wrath**

Once upon a time there was a knight who had, besides abundant wealth and land, a bad wife whom he never could manage to master, and a worse wife was hardly to be found on this earth. He, however, was honourable and of a gentle disposition. They had an only daughter, and the mother raised her in her own wicked ways, imprinting her with her own stamp, so that she became whingy and stingy and vicious and malicious.

Nevertheless, God had fashioned the girl into a beautiful maiden, so everyone who saw her thought her a picture of lovely goodness, but anyone who became more closely acquainted with her soon perceived her wickedness and gave her a wide berth. Now the maiden was eighteen years old and would have liked to take a husband, but no man came who desired her as a wife.

This worried her father tremendously, and one day he spoke to her: "Daughter, your mother's ways and her bad advice have ensured that you remain without a husband, or, if a man takes you who does not, like I do, have a mind to bear with patience a woman's wicked wiles, then you will be beaten more often than there are days in the year, and you will regret all the more having followed and obeyed your mother in every particular."

The daughter of the pious knight was very loath to hear this, and she said angrily, "Well, pater! You may talk a great deal before a single word of yours pleases me! You have also given my mother much too much good guidance, which she does not thank you for. You know what? Do what seems good to you, and let me be. For even if a suitor were to come tomorrow desiring my hand in marriage, I would always have to be the one who carried the longer knife in wedlock."

“Oh my daughter!” the knight replied. “I do not think it good for you to have such thoughts. You should set your mind to being better than your wicked mother, or it may well come to pass that you end up with a husband who is so upright and pious that he will use force on you, and in the end you will have to yield, dishonoured and disgraced.”

“Well, really!” replied the daughter. “Talk is cheap. Buy me some more before the market closes”¹ – and more such nasty satirical remarks were made to her father, so that he cried out in fury, “Oh, you wicked Kriemhild!”² As you will not follow your father, so will your back take its fill of blows! Whoever wants your hand, be he knight or be he servant, he shall have you, and shall educate you as he pleases!”

“Or I him as I please!” the daughter defiantly replied, and other words ensued until this quarrel came to an end.

Now some three miles away from the castle of this good knight was the seat of another knight who was rich in wealth and estates and had thoughts of going courting; and his countenance was handsome and his manners courteous. He made enquiries and heard word of how beautiful, and how ugly at the same time, his neighbour’s daughter was, and he thought: “I shall venture to turn her nature towards virtue, and make her good; if not, then I will take her for her beauty’s sake, for better or for worse.” Then he rode with his kinsmen to the maiden’s father and asked him for his daughter’s hand. This knight revealed to the young suitor what

¹ Bechstein here misreads his source: “es ist wol fail / koffent der selben noch me / e der marckt zerge, giving “Eh der Markt aus ist, gibt es noch mehr selben Koffents zu kaufen” (“Before the market closes, there is more of that small beer up for sale.” As this does not really make sense, I translated the original.

² In the medieval German epic poem *Das Nibelungenlied*, Kriemhild was the wife of Siegfried the Dragon-Slayer who betrayed him to his death. Her name became synonymous with “she-devil.”

kind of manners his daughter had, and he replied, “Yes, I’ve heard about that, but just give me her to wife! If God so wills that we live together for just one year, you shall see how good she will become!” – To which the future father-in-law replied, “May God protect you from her ill temper! Be on your guard, for if she follows in her mother’s footsteps, then however long she lives, you will never know a happy day with her.” But the suitor persisted in his resolve, and an agreement was entered into, and marriage articles, to the effect that the young knight would, as soon as he returned, take the maiden back with him to his home.

The mother knew of these negotiations neither more nor less, but nothing at all; and when she learned that her daughter was engaged to be married, her wrath was extreme, and she summoned her daughter and said, “Daughter, know this, that my curse shall strike you if you do not resist your husband as I have your father, with contention and sharp words, always and everywhere. Listen to what I’m telling you: I was a small girl when I came to your father, much smaller than you, for you are fully-grown. For three whole weeks your father beat me every day, making me ill, and refreshed me with water, and yet I won the struggle and have constantly maintained my rights to this day!”

“Mother!” the excellent daughter replied, “I tell you, that even if I have to live a thousand years, I’ll make my husband a laughing-stock.”

In the meantime, the day arrived for the bride to be conducted to her husband’s home; the knight rode up on a beautiful, valuable steed, bringing with him a slim greyhound and carrying on his hand a majestic falcon. He received the maiden without further ado, placed her behind him on his

horse, sent away all of his servants so that none would ride with the two of them, and directly took leave of the father of his bride. The father spoke moving words at parting: "God's grace be with you, O daughter! May He give you happy contentment and a more peaceable heart than I have found in my wife!"

No sooner were these words spoken than the mother raised a racket and shouted after her daughter, "Hear my words! As long as you live, you should be just as subservient to your husband as I have taught you!" and the daughter cried back, "Yes, my mother, it shall be so, according to your teaching."



And so they both rode together on their way, quite alone, but thinking of his bride's wickedness, the knight avoided the highway and rode down an uncomfortable, steep and narrow side-road, a good league in length, yet he rode swiftly and so covered half a league of the rugged, untrodden stone path in a short while. Then they came to an eyot fringed with bushes, and

the falcon, true to its nature, began beating its wings and desiring to leave the knight's hand, for it wished to swoop down on the herons. The knight said, "Let that be enough beating of wings, or I'll tear your head off." Shortly afterwards the falcon saw a crow flying past, and he wanted to go in pursuit; again, the knight spoke: "You are deluded, if you think you can strive to cause vexation and show yourself unwilling to be still, and so I shall do justice to you this instant. Die, as you will not follow my will!" And he throttled the falcon like a hen. The maiden was alarmed at these words and the violent deed, and she began to fear the knight. Now the path became ever narrower, stonier, and thornier, and the greyhound's feet began to hurt, and it was no longer able to keep up at the horse's side. The knight, who was leading it on the end of a leash, had to keep dragging it after him, and because this incommoded him, he scolded the greyhound: "You wicked Hovawart – take care, your wrenching my arm like this will bring disaster down upon you!" But the poor dog simply could not follow, and so the knight drew his sword and struck its death blow.

The maiden suppressed a cry of displeasure, but the blood in her veins ran cold, she was sick at heart, and she thought: Dear Lord, what a brute this man is! Was it the Devil who brought me to him? -The knight kept the naked sword in his hand and now began to scold his steed: "What's with the snorting? Why don't you amble or trot? You want to ride only over level plains, I suppose? You must die!" Now as the poor horse could not go at an ambling trot, a gait he had never been taught, the knight said, "Wife, dismount!" She said, "I do as you command me." Then the knight also dismounted and hewed the horse's head from its trunk, saying, "If you had

followed my will, you would not have been given to death. Wife, you have seen how things turned out. The horse began to vex me sorely, like the greyhound and the falcon. Now, it is an unfamiliar and arduous thing for me to go by foot, and I am not used to it. I shall now ride *you!*” and he began to put the bridle and straps on her, then he made to buckle the saddle on. She said, “Master, I shall have quite enough to carry with you, leave the saddle and the headgear, dearest master of mine, I shall carry you better and the more smoothly without it.”

“Why, wife, how would it become me to ride you without saddle and bridle?” the knight asked severely. “You have bad manners, making so bold as to contradict my will!” And then she submitted to his saddling and bridling her on the spot, like a horse, and placing the bridle bit in her mouth, and giving her the stirrups in her hands to hold them tight; then he mounted and rode her thus a short while, some three spear-throws in distance, until the heavy burden made her feel faint.

Then the knight dismounted her and said, “Wife, are you gasping for breath?” – “Oh no, lord!” she replied. He said further, “This is a pretty field, here you can go at ambling-pace.” She said, while crawling onwards on her hands and knees, “I shall do it willingly. Many horses run around my father’s courtyard, and I’ve learnt ambling-pace from them.”

“So will you do everything I want?” asked the knight, and she replied, “And if I should live a thousand years, I would do whatever pleased you!” Then he bid her stand up and took her gently by the hand and courteously led her home to his castle, where his friends were assembled; they greeted her with reverence and escorted her to her chamber. All was done with

great joy, and the woman was the most delightful wife, respectable and well-bred, without cunning or deceit, faithful, quiet, gentle – no virtue was wanting in her. She received her guests cordially and cheerfully, and she carried out the wishes of her lord and husband without hatred or resentment, as a worthy wife should.

Now when six weeks had passed, the young wife's father and mother visited their daughter to see how she was faring and how she was comporting herself. Soon enough did the mother learn what had happened, and how her daughter obeyed her husband; and she scolded her angrily, shouting at her: "Oh, a curse upon you, unhappy woman! What I have had to see and hear makes me doubt that you are my child. What? You let your husband be your master?" And with these words the wicked mother struck her daughter in the face, and then everywhere else she could, took her by the hair and tore at it, and beat and chid, kicking up a terrible row. The young wife wept and yelled, "If you have come here to scold, at least wait until you have found cause! I have the best of all men and he is good and honest, but if anyone does not do his will, he goes for the jugular in his wrath. Therefore, mother, show good sense and take care not to speak ill of him, for he is so irascible that everything which goes against his will he adjudicates and annihilates in his fury."

"Oho! Tomorrow is another day!" jeered the mother. "However bad your husband may be, it does not cause me the slightest concern! I don't give a fig for him! You silly goose! The Devil must have got inside your head for you to dare to threaten me, your mother, with your husband!"

"Mother, I'm *not* threatening you!" the daughter said in self-defence.

“I’m just telling you the truth; I really must advise you to give my husband a better greeting, for if you intend to do to him as to my father, then he will beat your back black and blue, and although you don’t have much hair left, there’s still enough of it for him to tear out!”

“That would be a master-stroke!” the mother angrily replied. “I don’t fear him, even were he as big as a mountain; I fear him no more and no less than your father! Where has he got with me these twenty years? To this day, I haven’t yielded an inch to him!”

While the elder woman was speaking these contumelious words, the father-in-law and the daughter’s husband were standing in a secret place, where they heard every word, and the old man said quietly to his son-in-law: “I am profoundly pleased that you have vanquished my daughter’s intransigent spirit, and I’ll happily leave you and her my worldly goods when I depart this life.” The son-in-law expressed his gratitude for his father-in-law’s friendly intention, and the latter then said, “Do advise me what to do with your mother-in-law, who constantly opposes me and sours and embitters my life! If it could only be brought about that she were at least to relent her harshness a year or so before her death, I would feel the most particular delight, and all my suffering would have an end!”

Thereupon the son-in-law promised to change the mother-in-law for the better after his own fashion, if the father-in-law did not forbid him. The latter said, “I shall forbid you nothing; if you boil or roast her, I’ll bring wood for the fire.”

The knight at once secretly gathered four strong, quick servants, assumed an intense anger, and went to the boudoir where the old woman

was still sitting, railing incessantly at him and her daughter. When she saw him coming, she greeted him derisively: “Welcome with God, welcome, Lord Inexorable!” – “Thank you so much, Lady Deplorable!” resounded his counter-salute, and he walked up to her with resolute steps, saying, “Lady, have done with your frowardness, I beseech you, towards your lord and mine. He should deal you countless strokes on your back with an oaken yardstick until the pain smarts so much that you become a good wife.”

“Well!” she said, “I have indeed heard that you have slain a good number in such wise, dear Sir Cuckoo! However, I have held on to my hide and hair up to now, and hope to wear them for some time longer! Now tell me, what have I done to you?”

“You scold my lord, your husband, every day, and make his own house a misery to him!” replied the young knight; but she had an instant riposte at hand: “In my house I am called Shrew! I can be his master there, as I am my own, and God shall never, so long as I live, give him a single day more of happiness!”

“And if God grants me good fortune,” said the son-in-law, “I shall see to it that, before the two of us part, you will have given up your shrewish tricks and antics.”

“Be careful you do not fail!” she cried. “Or you will gain from it, by the Great God of Schaffhausen,³ nothing but derision and disgrace!”

“I know what makes you so crazy and mad and bad,” said the knight. “You have two anger-steaks here, one at each hip, and that is the reason why you have such bad habits; if someone were to cut them out for you,

³ This was a 22-foot wooden crucifix in the minster in Schaffhausen, Switzerland. It was burnt as an idol in 1529.

that would be splendidly done, for you would then be happier than wife has ever been, and it would be no less good for your husband.”

“Oh! I am pleased you are such a good doctor, but teach your art to my daughter!” was her reply. “Do you also have bartram going cheap, and hellebore? You mix mugwort into a potion, no doubt?”

“Ha! Your scorn is great!” cried the knight. “But it will cost you very dear; as soon as we have your anger-kidneys and anger-steaks, you will become better and more docile than a child!”



“Enough of your yelping, you yapper!” scolded the woman. But on the knight’s signal the servants seized her and threw her down, and the son-in-law whetted a large, sharp knife, put it to one of her hips, and cut a long, deep wound through gown and shift, making her scornful laughter die quite away; then he said, throwing a lump of flesh into a dish, “You see, woman, you have been a bad wife for many a year, and that was the fault of your anger-steaks – I can allow you to keep them no longer.” She lay there, miserable and screaming, “I didn’t know that about myself, but I know which devils you have consulted about me!”

“Yes, you have one anger-steak left,” said the knight, “in your other leg – it too must come out!”

“Oh,” she wailed, almost in tears, “it is really small, it does not do me

too much harm! God help me! The one you have already cut out, it was to blame for all the harm. I am free of all anger, and will be quiet, just leave the other one uncut.”

Then the daughter cheerfully said to her husband, “Consider carefully what you do; I fear, if the other anger-steak does not also come out, then all the hard work on the one will be wasted, for in the end the other anger-steak will have young, if you do not cut it out too.”

“No, no, dear daughter!” cried the mother. “Talk him into leaving me unscathed, you know I’ll be good!”

“Mother,” the young wife replied, “you advised me to fight with my husband, to not be subservient to him; for that and because she treated my father so ill, just cut her anger-steak out!” And the knight took hold of the other hip, but she cried out, “No, no! It’s too much! Daughter, remember that I carried you in my womb, and help me make my peace with your husband! I swear to be good from now on, and may the gentle and just Lord keep me from anger. The knight has taken the greater anger from me, and the lesser one is not worth a fig!”

“Well then,” said the knight, “if she desires peace, I shall leave her alone, but let her swear this instant that, at any time when she does not eschew anger, she will submit to being cut.” Hereupon she was raised up and her wound dressed.

And the woman cast all strife and discord from her, became a good, demure wife, and forsook her violent temper; and when the next day came, she took leave with her husband of her son-in-law, and he wished that God might protect her from all evil.

Now when, after this, she nevertheless spoke a little word or two to her husband that he was sorry or sad to hear, he only had to say, "I cannot help it, I must send for our son-in-law," and she would turn red with fear and say, "There is no need for that, his coming would be no boon to me. I have, as you know, the mind and the will to do what pleases you, and I advise all women to declare to their husbands what I have now declared to mine, that is, if they wish for a peaceful life."

And that is the end of this tale, and every man and every woman is free to draw whatever moral they like from it. But the ancient poet who tells this tale also gives the following advice:

If you have an evil wife,
Get her quickly out your life,
Give her to the knight instead
And lay her on a sled,
Buy a beard for her, and now
Hang her from a little bough.
And on the same tree
Hang two wolves or three.
More atrocious wretches on
A gallows couldn't be seen –
Unless you caught the Evil One
And hung him up in between.

