

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Talking Donkey**



In a range of high and thickly-forested mountains there lived a mighty mountain-spirit¹ who liked to tease people: he often tormented the wicked and played all sorts of unpleasant pranks on them, but he was helpful to good people, even if his help had a peculiar tang and all kinds of frights or fears preceded its arrival. And so a poor trader was walking one day down the mountains towards the valley, carrying a great deal of glassware he had purchased from a glassworks up in the mountains for resale; and he was calculating, like the milkmaid in the fable,² the profit he would reap from his glassware. So much from the flasks and retorts an apothecary had ordered, who was to pay twice the first cost; so much from the round lightbulbs for the shoemakers' workshops; so much from the bottles for wine and water

¹ Rübezahl (called "Number Nip" by early English translators) lived, according to legend, in the Giant Mountains, between Bohemia (the Czech Republic) and Silesia (Poland).

² "The Milkmaid and her Pail."

that innkeepers require – and this came to a tidy amount of profit; the glass-dealer was also wiser than that milk-maiden, for he did not leap up into the air at the thought of his profit, but paid attention to his path, which was quite steep and uneven, and to his load, which was not light.

The mountain-spirit invisibly accompanied the glass merchant and heard the thoughts he spoke out loud in soliloquy; now, as the man was thinking of rather more profit than was really his due, so the spirit made a snap decision to play a prank on him and make him shake in his shoes. A little distance up ahead, he made himself visible and transformed himself into an old, smoothly sawed-off tree-stump at the bottom of a very steep stretch of the path, which could with justice be called a knee-breaker - into a stump that stood close by the path, so very inviting to rest. The glass-man walked carefully down the steep slope, and this descent with his load was much more arduous for him than ascending the mountain would have been; therefore, he needed to rest a little, and catching sight of the old tree-stump, he sat down on it with his dosser³ of glassware. In an instant, the mountain-spirit (transformed into the stump) disappeared, and the glass merchant crashed down on the ground together with his load, and the latter shattered into a thousand pieces. Not *one* item remained intact.

“Oh God! Oh God!” yelled the glass merchant, quite beside himself. What a shock, what a loss! The man behaved as if he were about to put a period to his life. He could not fetch any other glass, for he had no money left, and they gave nothing on credit at the glassworks, and his hard-earned little sum of money which he had laid out on new glassware – here it lay, in pieces.

³ A basket for carrying objects on the back.

Then a young journeyman came riding down from the mountain on a donkey, whistling and singing, and he came upon the wailing man and asked him why he was crying and lamenting so. The merchant told him about the disaster that had befallen him, and the wanderer asked him how high he estimated his loss and damage.

“Oh, assuredly eight to nine dollars, together with what I could have earned upon the shattered wares!” he calculated with a sigh. “I would like to help you, poor devil,” said the donkey-driver, “but I have no money myself. Yet – I’ll tell you what – down below in the valley there lives a miller who is both a rogue and an innkeeper; he fleeces his customers without mercy, and in just as unchristian a manner does he fleece and diddle all those who stop off at his inn. He is covetousness and avarice made flesh, and by way of punishment, *he* shall replace your glass for you.”

“How is it possible that a miserly and covetous man do this of his own free will?” asked the glass dealer while he walked on beside the rider, obligingly taking the donkey by the bridle wherever the descent became steep.

“Of his own free will?” the traveller asked with a scornful smile. “No, my good companion! The miller won’t do it of his own free will, I’m certain of that. But he must do it nonetheless. We shall sell him my donkey, which – between friends – is worth ten to twelve dollars, and so if he gets the donkey for nine dollars he’ll joyfully shake on the deal and give us food and drink on the house into the bargain.”

“Yes – but – dear sir,” the glass-man asked meekly, “You’re not going to – your donkey – for *my* sake?”

“Sell to the miller?” the rider completed. “Well, and whyever not, my

good companion? That is no matter to me; I can find other donkeys.”

The glass-man did not immediately surrender to belief in the prospect of good fortune that was held out to him. It seemed to him quite incredible that a man who, by his own admission, had no money, should deprive himself of a valuable donkey to do him a kindness – he, of course, did not know that the donkey’s owner was none other than that puckish mountain-spirit who had made him fall and caused his loss in the first place.

They soon reached the mill, and there was the miller standing at the door, pleased to see strangers approaching, and also eyeing with satisfaction the fine-bodied, exceedingly well-fed donkey. The donkeys in his stable looked nowhere near as sleek and strong as this one. The guests ordered bread and sausages and beer, one word led to another, the glass-merchant recounted his misfortune, and it seemed as if the miller would die laughing from malignant joy; he laughed so hard that he had to hold his barrel-shaped stomach, and he positively shook.

This irritated and annoyed the glass-merchant beyond measure, but a glance from the traveller gave him to understand that he should keep perfectly calm.

When the miller had laughed his fill, the stranger’s donkey, which was tethered outside before the door, gave a bray, whereupon the miller directly steered the conversation towards it. “A handsome fellow, in truth, your donkey! How old?”

“Four years!” – “How much?” – “Not for sale!”

“Shame! I could have used him; last week one died on me.”

“You must have been feeding him too well, miller!” the stranger jibed.

“Oho – quite the opposite!” the miller let slip.

“Indeed? Then I would feel sorry for my donkey were he to come into your hands. My donkey is used to eating *well*.”

“Yes, of course!” the miller corrected himself. “And he won’t want for anything with me. I just meant to say that mine went off his food, and that’s why he perished. I’ll give you seven dollars.”

“Oho! What more could I possibly ask for?” the donkey-owner jeered. “Whatever are you thinking of, miller? Seven dollars for such a splendid donkey? Out upon you! I wouldn’t sell him for twelve dollars.”

Inside the miller a real donkeymania was aroused. “I’ll give eight dollars!” he cried, plunging his hand into his pocket and jingling his coins.

“Give eleven, and it’s a done deal!”

“No! Nine!” shrieked the miller. “That’s my last word.”

“And my last word is ten, and I won’t budge from that, and food and drink on the house!” said the donkey-owner.

The miller scratched behind his ears and would have continued chaffering, but the stranger was firm as a rock. “Free fare and ten dollars, not a groat, not a penny, not a farthing less!”

“You’re a man of stone!” the miller wailed.

“Oh yes – you might rather say, a man of the mountains!” scoffed the stranger.

The miller *had* to have the donkey, so he counted ten dollars out on the table with many moans and groans, yet not, by any means, in good, round dollar coins, but rather in nothing but groats and thin, mouldy two-groat coins, so-called tin-caps,⁴ which were covered with flour and

⁴ Blechkappen, also called Ephraimiten (Ephraimits) after Veitel Heine Ephraim, who minted these inferior coins, in which copper replaced silver (up to 70%), for Frederick the Great, to help to finance the Seven Years’ War (1756-63).

verdigris. The stranger contentedly swept up the money, after it had been counted through several times, then put it into a little leather purse which he placed in his companion's hand, the miller having by this time delightedly run out to lead his donkey into the stable. The glass-merchant was astonished at the gift – was about to give his thanks – but the stranger spoke: "Save your thanks. I owed you nine dollars; take the tenth one for the shock you sustained. Now go into the stable and see what the miller is up to, and farewell! When the miller asks where I've gone, just tell him I'm over the hills."

The delighted glass-merchant hoisted his dossier of fragments onto his back and proceeded over the yard towards the stable, where the newly purchased donkey was already standing unbridled at the manger; the miller had made a litter of fresh heather for it with his own hand, and he was now carrying under his arm a large sheaf of soft, fragrant mountain-hay, which he spread out in the manger for the donkey.

But how amazed was the glass-merchant, and how violently did the miller start, when the donkey fixed the latter with an ineffable look, shook its head, wagged its long ears doubtfully, snorted hotly, and finally opened its wide mouth to say in a deep voice: "Jew of a man, Jew of a miller – I'm sorry, but I eat no hee-haw-hay! I eat only bree-braw-bread and mee-maw-meat!"

Utterly horrified, the miller dashed out of the stable, almost knocking the glass-merchant at the door head over heels, and yelled: "The Devil's in the stable! Where's the good-for-nothing character who sold me a hobgoblin?"

"He's over the hills!" cried the glass-merchant, now laughing as

heartily as the miller had previously laughed at him.

The miller called all his servants together and kept yelling about a talking donkey, for not having travelled far in the world, and not numbering among the companions of an earlier age, it was something quite incredible for him to hear a donkey speak; but his servants thought he was off his rocker. Now he led them all to the stable to show them the donkey, but behold – in its place there hung, from the halter in front of the donkeys' manger, a truss of straw; and the miller now solemnly averred that *he* was a beaten ass.

And the glass-merchant went on his way, blessing the mountain-spirit and conceding, with all his heart, the loss and vexation he had suffered to that miller who rejoiced in others' misfortune.