

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Tests of the Master-Thief's Skill**

In a village there lived a couple of very poor old people, as alone as alone can be, in a shabby little cottage which stood very far out, and this very cottage marked the end of the village. Both the old folks were upright and industrious, but they had no children. They had had a son, only the one, but he had been a degenerate knave who had secretly upped and gone, and from that day to this there had been neither sight nor sound of him, so that both the old ones believed their only child was long since dead and in the good keeping of God.

Now one day the old couple were sitting before their front door – it was a holiday – when there drove into the village a magnificent coach, drawn by six handsome horses, with a single gentleman sitting inside and a servant standing at the back whose hat and jacket simply bristled with gold and silver. The coach drove through the entire village, and the farmers, who were just coming out of church, well-nigh believed that it was a duke or even a king driving by, for the nobleman who lived up there in the old castle could not put on such a splendid display. Then the coach suddenly halted in front of the last house, and the servant leapt from the box-seat to open the door for the gentleman seated inside. This gentleman alighted and rushed towards the old couple, who had risen from their bench in utter astonishment. He warmly gave them good day and shook their hands, asking if he might not eat a dish of Potato Servems (dumplings) with them? The mother was most amazed at this, but the handsome young and very elegantly dressed gentleman promptly put a stop to her surprise by saying that no cook had as yet been able to make these servems to his satisfaction, so he wished, just the once, to eat it prepared by country folk, as in the days

of his youth. Then the old couple cordially invited the young nobleman, for such they took the stranger to be, into their hut, and he had the coach with coachman and servant drive in the meantime to the inn. The mother hurriedly fetched potatoes up from the small cellar of the cottage, peeled, scraped, and pressed them, put water to the boil, made the dumplings into balls, adding some lard, and put them in the oven, and blessed this food with the pious phrase: "God preserv'em." That is why, in many places in South Thuringia, dumplings are called "servems". In the time when the old woman was preparing the meal, her husband had gone with the stranger into the front garden where he liked to potter with the trees he had planted shortly before, and he had a look to see if the stakes to which the trunks were bound with withies still held fast, and if the wind had torn any withies away; and wherever it had, the old man bound the trunk fast again. Then the young stranger came out with a question: "Why do you tie up these small trunks three times?" – "Aye!" said the old man, "Because it has three crooks, I tie it up so it will grow straight." "That's right, old man!" said the stranger. "But there you have a crooked old gnar of a tree! Why don't you tie it to a stake too, that it may become straight?" "Ho ho!" the old man laughed. "Old trees, when they are crooked, never become straight again. If you will have them straight, you must tend them well when they're young." "And do you have children?" the stranger asked next. "Oh dear God, Your Grace!" the man replied. "I've had a boy, he was an arch good-for-nothing who played wild and wicked pranks, and in the end he ran away from me and has never once returned in all his days since. Who knows where the dear Lord has led him – or the Evil One." – "Then why didn't you bring your

son up to be straight in good time, like these here, your little trees!" the stranger asked in a distressed and reproachful voice. "If he became an ill-bred, crooked gnar and wild stock, then it's your fault. But if he were to come before you now, would you recognise him, do you think?" – "Don't really know, dear Sir!" replied the peasant. "He'll have shot up, no doubt, if he's still alive; but he had a birthmark on his body, I would know him by that, if need be. But he won't come back home until two Sundays come together." Then the stranger took off his jacket and showed the old man a birthmark; he clapped his hands over his head and cried, "Lord Jes's! You're my son – but no – you're so terribly noble. Have you then become a Count, or even a Duke?" – "Not that, father," the son said quietly, "but something quite different – I've become a rogue because you did not bring me up straight. Yet never mind about that, I've studied my art thoroughly, I'm not one of those lousy bunglers that are thick on the ground."



The old man was struck quite dumb with horror and with delight, and he led his son by the hand into the house and to the mother, who was serving the dumplings she had just got ready, and told her everything. Then

the mother embraced her son and flung her arms around his neck, kissed him and wept and said: "Thief or no thief, you're still my dear child, who I bore in my womb, and my heart leaps high in my breast to see you again in my old age! Oh, what will your godfather say, up there in the nobleman's castle!" – "Yes!" said the father while all three were stoutly tucking in to the dumplings, "Your godfather won't want to know you with your circumstances such as they are; in the end, he'll have you kicking on the gallows." "Well, I'll visit him nonetheless – that godfather of mine!" replied the son, and he had his coach hitched up and drove up to the castle.

The nobleman was delighted to see his godson, the poor child he had stood sponsor to out of the goodness of his heart, appear before him again in such splendid state, once he had disclosed his identity. But he was not in the least pleased when his young godson, upon the enquiry as to what he had become in the world, replied that he had become an arrant rogue. So he quickly began to rack his brains for a good way to rid himself of such a dangerous character sooner rather than later.

"Well now!" the nobleman said to his godson. "We shall see if you have thoroughly learned your trade and became a thief so great that it is no dishonour to allow you to run free, or one so minor that you will be hanged from the nearest gallows. The latter I shall do to you without fail in my jurisdiction if you do not pass the three tests I shall enjoin on you!" – "Just let me have them, gracious godfather! I'm not afraid of any kind of work."

"The nobleman pondered a little while, then he said: "Listen! These are the three tests. For the first one: steal my personal horse from its stable, which I have well guarded by soldiers and stable hands ready to kill anyone

who makes a move to force their way inside. For the second one: steal, when I am lying in bed with my wife, the sheet away from under our bodies, and steal my wife's wedding ring from her finger; but know this, that I have loaded pistols at hand. For the third and last one – and mark, this is the most difficult task: steal the priest and schoolmaster from the church and hang both of them, alive, in a sack in my chimney. The castle gates and doors shall stand open to you for this.”

The master-thief gave cordial thanks to his godfather for setting him such simple little tasks, and he went on his way, to carry out the first task the very next night. The nobleman took every measure to have his personal steed well guarded. His first groom had to sit on it, while a second servant had to hold its bridle, and a third its tail; and the lord appointed a military



watch before the door. The soldiers kept watch and kept watch, turned blue and turned the air blue, for it was cold and they were all thirsty – when a tired little old grandma appeared, carrying a little barrel in a basket, coughing badly and wheezing her way into the castle courtyard. The barrel

aroused in the soldiers' minds exceptionally alluring thoughts, viz. there might possibly be spirits inside and spirits are a specific against night-frost and bad vapours. So they called the little old grandmother over to the fire to warm herself and inquired about the contents of the barrel. Just as they thought! There were spirits inside, and refined ones too, Double-Orange liqueur, Purl-Royal, or some such kinds. Also, the barrel was not spitefully payed and bunged up but had a spigot, and the woman was offering – this was the best thing of all – the spirits for sale. So the soldiers bought one goblet after another and shouted to the guards in the stable that out in the courtyard their ship had come in; and the old woman had her hands full with pouring, so that the barrel was soon all but empty. But the old woman was none other than the arch-thief, who had disguised himself well and mixed a barbaric sleeping-draught into the spirits. In no time at all, one soldier after



another fell asleep, and the guards in the stable could not keep their eyes open; and it was a good job the thief was already in the stable beside the horse, for he could catch the groom in his arms as he tumbled off the horse, and he softly set him down astride the barrier, tying him with a little bit of

rope so the good man might not fall down and come to harm. To the Coachman in Ordinary, who held the bridle and was snoring in a corner, the thief lent a halter to hold, while the stable lad received a straw rope in place of the horse's tail. Then he took a horse blanket, cut it into pieces, wrapped them around the horse's feet, vaulted into the saddle, and in the blink of an eye he was out the stable and out the still open castle gate.

When it was broad daylight, the nobleman looked out of his window and saw a fine figure of a rider galloping along on a no less fine figure of a horse which seemed very familiar to him. The rider stopped and bid good morning up to the castle window. "Good morning, godfather! Your horse is worth its weight in gold" – "Oh, may all the devils in Hell take you!" cried the nobleman, when he saw that the horse was his own dappled mount. "You are a cunning thief! G-g-go on! Show some more of your art!" The nobleman took his riding whip and went to the stable in a rage; but when he saw the peculiar groups of the still sleeping guards, he could not help bursting out into laughter. Yet he soon said in his heart: when the scoundrel comes to steal my sheet tonight I'll blow his brains out, for I do not like to have such a dangerous character near me.

Now when night had drawn near, the nobleman went to bed with his wife, and he laid a loaded pistol and various other arms and weapons by his side; and he did not fall asleep, but remained watchful, listening and hearkening in case anything should stir. For a long time all stayed silent, but at last, when it was quite dark, it seemed that a long ladder was set against the wall, and soon afterwards there could be seen at the window the figure of a man who was going to climb in. "Fear not, wife!" the nobleman quietly

uttered as he took the pistol, aimed true, discharged its load, and shot the robber right between his eyes. The robber swayed, and directly afterwards a heavy fall could be heard down below. "He won't get up again," said the nobleman, "but as I'd like to avoid any fuss, I'll quickly climb down the ladder rather than make a noise in the house, and get rid of the body." That was fine by the noblewoman, and her husband did as he had said. A while later he came back up and said to the woman: "He's as dead as a doornail, but before I throw the poor devil into his grave I want to shroud him in a linen sheet, and as he had to lose his life for the sake of your ring, let us slip it on him; give me the ring and the bedsheet also." The woman handed both over, and he hurriedly climbed down again. However, it was not the nobleman but the master-thief, who, to execute his task, had cut a freshly-hanged man down from the first gallows he had come to (at that time there were still many gallows on all the roads in Germany) and then humped him onto his shoulder before climbing up the ladder. When the shot was fired inside he let the corpse plunge to the ground, rapidly climbed down the ladder, and hid himself. And when the nobleman came down and busied himself with the man he supposed he had shot dead, the



master-thief whisked up into the wife's room and, imitating his godfather's voice, demanded the ring and the bedsheet.

The next morning the nobleman again looked out of his window, as was his wont, and down below a man was walking up and down who had, so it seemed, linen for sale; at least, he was carrying a folded bundle over his shoulder, and holding a beautiful ring so that it flashed and glittered in

the morning sun. All of a sudden the man cried up: “Top o’ the morning to you, godfather! I trust that you and my godmother slept very well!” – The nobleman was thunderstruck when he saw his godson, whom he had shot dead with his own hand and thrown into a grave with the same hand the previous night, standing there in the flesh, and he hastily asked his wife for her ring and the sheet. “Why, you demanded them from me last night!” the lady replied. “Satan did! But not I!” the nobleman raged – yet he soon calmed down again by considering that the bold thief might have taken even more. He shook his fist out the window at his godson and cried: “Arch-villain! The third! The third task will surely bring you to the gallows!”

On the night after this, something strange came to pass on God’s acre. The schoolmaster, whose house was adjacent, was the first to become aware of this, and he reported it to the priest. Small burning lights were wandering with unsteady movements over the graves. “Those are the Holy Souls, Schoolmaster!” the priest whispered, horrified. Suddenly a large black figure appeared on the churchdoor steps and cried in hollow tones:

“Come here to me, come one and all,
For Judgement Day is set to fall!
O sons of Man, pray silently!
The Dead their bones are taking back!
Who wants to enter Heaven with me,
Needs only creep into this sack!”

“Shall we?” the schoolmaster asked the priest, his teeth chattering. There’s just time before the gate shuts. The Holy Apostle Peter is calling us, there’s



no doubt about it. But travelling-money?" "I have scraped together twenty crowns," the schoolmaster whispered. "I have put away a hundred French thalers for a rainy day!" said the priest. "Let's fetch it and take it with us!"

they both cried, and they did so; then they approached the black figure in fear and trembling. This was the master-thief; he had bought crabs and stuck burning night lights to their backs, and they were the Holy Souls; he had a monk's beard and a monk's habit, and a hop-sack into which he received the two Blackcoats after having relieved them of their savings. Now he tied up the mouth of the sack and dragged it behind him through the village and through a pond, when he cried: "Now we're going through the Red Sea!"; then through a stream: "Now we're going through the Kidron River"; then over the entrance hall of the castle, where it was cool: "Now we're going through the Valley of Josaphat"; then up the stairs: "Here we are at Jacob's Ladder"; finally, he hung the sack on a hook in the chimney on which hams were smoked, stirred the fire underneath it to make a thick smoke, and cried in a terrible voice: "This is the fire of Purgatory! This lasts some years!", then he cleared off. The priest and schoolmaster screamed blue murder, causing all the household servants to run together there. But the master-thief walked boldly up to the nobleman: "Godfather, my third test is also accomplished. The priest and the schoolmaster are hanging in the chimney, and if you so please, you yourself can watch them wriggle and hear them scream!" – "Oh you arch-prankster and arch-scoundrel, you arch-villain and master-thief of master-thieves!" exclaimed the nobleman,

and he at once gave the order to release the two from Purgatory. "You have defeated me, get you gone from here! There's a gold coin. Get you gone from here, don't let me set eyes on you again, and get yourself hung for your money, wheresoever you wish."

"Thank you so very much, gracious godfather, I'll do that!" the rogue replied. "But do you not wish to redeem the pledges which I honestly acquired? Your personal horse for two hundred crowns, your wife's wedding ring and the bedsheet for a hundred crowns, the priest's and schoolmaster's money for a hundred and twenty crowns! If not, I shall leave here with them." The nobleman was flabbergasted; he said, "Dear godson, why, that was all just a joke, you won't want to keep these goods for yourself; after all, I'm sparing your life." "Well then, I'll go and bring everything here to you!" said the master-thief. He went and had his horses put to his coach, and his old father and his mother seated inside; he himself sat on the nobleman's horse, put the splendid ring on his finger, and sent the nobleman only the bedsheet with a note, in which was written:

"Give the priest and the schoolmaster their money back, or your wife will be stolen from you by

Your obedient godson and master-thief."

The nobleman was gripped with dread, so he bore his loss, wanting only to never hear about his godson ever again; nor did any news of him reach his ears, for he had moved with his parents into a distant land and become an honest and respectable man.