

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Thief and the Devil**

“Once upon a time there was a hermit to whom a pious man gave a cow, out of mercy and for the sake of God. A thief heard about this and decided to appropriate this cow. When he was making his way by night towards the retreat of the hermit, who gave lodging to several pilgrims – which the thief also knew – he ran into a man who was pacing up and down on the same road. The thief suspected him to be another thief with the same intention as himself, and he asked, “Who are you? What do you think you’re doing here? What’s your game?” The other replied, “If you must know, I’ll tell you. I am the Devil and I’m going to break the hermit’s neck this night, for I have long hated him, and now, today, I have finally gained power over him, for this very night he is housing a malefactor. That is why I am waiting here until he and his companions have lain down to sleep. And what are you doing here?” – “I?” asked the thief. “I do not have so dark a design as you. Such evil plans, I would never hatch. I’ll only take a cow away from the hermit, out of compassion, for her bellowing disturbs the pious man’s devotions, and besides, he does not know how to handle a cow and she could harm him with her horns.”

So the thief and the Devil went together to the hermit’s retreat; he had tethered his cow and laid himself down to rest. Now the thief thought to himself: You must make haste to obtain the cow first, for when the Devil gets to the hermit and starts to throttle him, he will wake up and scream, at which the pilgrims will wake up as well and want to help him, and then in the end they will find and seize you. So it’s better to be on the safe side – first the cow, then the neck. He therefore spoke to the Devil: “Hearken and heed my words. Let me fetch my cow first, afterwards do with the hermit what you

will.” “By no means!” said the Devil. “First I throttle him, then you take anything you please.”

“Not so!” the thief countered. “I must enter the hermitage first.”

“Do you dare bid defiance to me?” the Devil softly hissed, his glowing eyes rolling wildly in his head.



“I have never yet been afraid of a stupid devil!” replied the thief. Then the Devil clawed at his neck – and the thief yelled, “Murder! Murder! Hermit! Hey! The Devil is after our necks! Help! Help!” – This roused the hermit from sleep, and the pilgrims also awoke, and the hermit rushed out of his

retreat with a crucifix – the Devil ran away from it post-haste; and the pilgrims brought their long, hard sticks, which filled the thief with fear, so he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him. Thus the hermit saved his neck and his cow because his two enemies had fallen out. Therefore, that man is wise who makes use of his enemies' discord and exploits it to his advantage.”

After these words of the Eagle-King's Third Counsellor, the First Counsellor began to speak again: “Do not trust, O King, this speaker and his smooth words, unless you want to lose yourself and all that is yours. Follow my advice and have this raven killed, for I fear that if he remains alive and among us, our end will be a shameful one. A sensible man does not allow himself to be deceived by words when God has given him his enemy in his hand. A fool, however, is deluded and deceived by flattering words. Do not, I pray, believe the words of the wounded raven, for there is no good faith in him; he comes from a false, thievish race. Up to now the ravens have never outwitted us, but what will happen from now on, and whether the society of this raven will be useful and beneficial to us, cannot be foreseen; I, however, think it exceedingly doubtful that he happened to turn up here for our welfare or advantage. I repeat my advice: Kill him! You know that I have never feared the ravens, but this one arouses in me an anxious foreboding that he will hatch disaster for us all.”

The Eagle-King heard these words, but he felt his heart swelling with kingly magnanimity; furthermore, he wanted to show that it was he who ruled and his counsellors were not Regents of the Realm, although many a one might believe himself to be such: so he said, “I grant mercy to the

unfortunate one; he shall live. Let him be well attended to and taken care of, and let his wounds be tended.”

Deeply pained, the faithful warner of the Eagle-King held his peace and kept his own opinion. As for the raven, who was gifted with a high intelligence and was as skilled in speech as his ancestor, but, better than the latter, was versed in the art of knowing when to speak and when to hold his tongue, soon earned for himself favour and patronage at the King’s Court, and most of all from the King himself. Full many a pretty tale he knew how to recount, which served for instruction as for amusement; he knew to jest with finesse and do homage with grace. He had to give lessons to the Eagle-King’s young Princes and Princesses and deliver lectures to them; the King appointed him as chamberlain and liked to have him always by his side. In return, the raven incessantly assured the King of his loyalty and his hatred for the ravens, and in an assembly he boldly proclaimed, “I would to God that I could become an eagle, even if I had to pay for the change with a painful death in flames, like that bird the phoenix! How I would then avenge myself on my enemies and cool my revenge in their blood!” Then the old and stern First Counsellor of the Eagle-King said, “O you dissembler! You acrid vinegar in our golden goblet! And if you burned yourself a thousand times, and another bird was born from you – if that were possible – yet every single time would you become an ugly, false, malicious raven, as happened to that mouse, of whom a tale from India speaks.” At these words the eagles desired to hear the tale, and the perspicacious eagle began his narration.

Next: *The Transformed Mouse*