

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Three Brides**

Once upon a time there was a miller who had three beautiful daughters of a sprightly temper; but the youngest was the most sensible one of the three. One day, they had been to town and were now returning to their mill. On the way they chatted about this and that, and the eldest one said: "If only we were not kept on such a short leash, we would have lovers, and mine would undoubtedly have bought me a silk scarf just as fine as the one Margaret received from the hands of her sweetheart." "Yes," the second one then said, "and mine would undoubtedly have taken me to the dance, where all girls are taken by their boyfriends." The third sister said nothing; her sisters' sorrow seemed to touch her heart but lightly. But before they knew what was happening, a handsome man was with them, addressing them cordially and bringing forth all kinds of small presents, which he distributed among them; the girls accepted them blushing, and after he had promised to see them again at their father's he went on his way. The girls now exchanged observations and conjectures about him, but all were agreed that he was a handsome, loveable man. The miller shook his head when they told him of their adventure, yet what was his astonishment when, one day, the stranger appeared in the mill, took the miller to one side, and asked him for the hand of one of his daughters. The two men conversed at length, with the result that the miller left the choice of which daughter to wed to the suitor's pleasure. The stranger chose the eldest; chests and coffer were packed, and the young bride journeyed with her bridegroom to his far distant castle. Here everything was appointed as well as could be, and there was no wish of the young bride that was not granted.

Now one day her husband spoke to her: "You shall be the Lady of my

castle when I have found you obedient in all things. Bind this white napkin to your body, it has an egg inside; and here you have the keys to all the apartments of my castle, you may enter every one, save only the one that will open to this large key. I am going on a journey; if I return and find you to have been obedient, I shall hold you in high regard and honour as my faithful wife; if not, you will find me to be a harsh husband.” After he had departed, the young wife walked around the castle with the serviette, the egg, and the keys, unlocked all the doors, and had a look around the rooms; at last, in a remote part of the castle, she came to the door which the large key fitted. She thought of her husband’s prohibition, but curiosity won the day, she had turned the key in the lock; the door creaked, she stepped over the threshold – then let the egg fall from the serviette in terror and fled. When her husband returned, he saw at once what had happened, and he put the disobedient woman to death, in spite of her entreaties. Then he went to the miller, lamented that he had lost his wife to a short but incurable illness, and asked him for the hand of his second daughter. The miller did not refuse him this, and so once again the stranger travelled to his castle with a young wife. But it fared with her no differently than with the first sister, and the stranger turned up at the miller’s once again, saying his young wife had run away with one of his servants and asking for the third daughter. Although the miller was sorely distressed at the thought of losing all his children, he at length gave his consent.

Now when the third bride had arrived at the castle with her husband, he set her the same test he had given her sisters. However, she was cleverer than them, and thinking, “Why should you trail the egg around with

you? What a bind!” she left the egg and the serviette in her chamber while she inspected the castle. She also could not resist the temptation to open the forbidden door, and when she stepped over the threshold she saw, to her horror, a row of corpses, and the last ones were her two sisters. At once she thought of bringing the villain to justice, but she also knew that she had to manage the matter with cunning. Taking the severed head of her last murdered sister, she carefully locked the door again, concealed the head in a flower-pot, poured soil over it, and planted a hyacinth therein. She received her husband cordially on his return, and when he saw that the egg was undamaged he was affectionate towards her and praised her obedience.

After some time had passed, she asked him if he might take her to her father, who must be uneasy about her fate. He could not refuse her this request, and so they travelled in a splendid carriage to the mill; she took along the hyacinth, which was now blooming superbly. The miller was delighted to see his daughter safe and sound and apparently happy, but she could not gain a moment alone with her father; her husband watched her at all times, whether by chance or because his guilty conscience gave him a foreboding. So she wrote a short letter to be slipped to her father, and just when she was pondering how this was to be done a raven flew on to her shoulder and sang in her ear:

“Give, give, give!

We’ll capture the thief!”

The raven took the letter in his beak and flew to the miller; he read it with horror and sent to the nearest town for the officers of justice, and one

morning, before the stranger had time to rub the sleep from his eyes, he found himself seized and bound. His denials availed him not; when the hyacinth was pulled out of the pot, everyone saw the half-decayed head of the miller's daughter, which the miller recognised from her beautiful brown plaits. The robber's castle was destroyed and the murderer executed as punishment for his crimes.

Now the executed man had still some companions, who resolved to avenge the death of their leader. One day, when the unfortunate young widow happened to reach under her bed, she felt a hairy object; she was startled, for she well knew it to be a man's head, but she pretended to take it for a cat, crying out: "Are you back again, Kitty? Well, you may stay there for today, but see that you don't bring your kittens onto my bed!" She pottered around the room for a while longer then went out the door and revealed the secret to her father; he mustered the mill-servants, the house was diligently searched, and the companions of the executed robber were found concealed in various rooms. They were all given over to justice. Now, the young woman could, it is true, live in peace from that time on, but she could not forget the man who had been a murderer and whom she yet had loved. She grieved to her dying day, and her aged father saw her sink into her grave before him.