

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

A shepherd left both his children, a son and a daughter, nothing but three sheep and a cottage, and he spoke on his deathbed: "Share them between you as a brother and sister should, so that strife and discord do not arise between you." Now when the shepherd had died, the brother asked the sister which she would rather have, the sheep or the cottage? And when she chose the cottage, he said, "Then I'll take the sheep and go out into the wide world; many a man has found his fortune before now, and I'm a Sunday's child." After that, he left home with his portion of the inheritance;



but a long while passed and fortune was not to be found. One day he was sitting, sorely irked, at a crossroads, and uncertain which way to take; suddenly he saw beside him a man with three black dogs, each one of which was larger than the last. "Well, young fellow," said the man, "those are three fine sheep you have there. I tell you what – give me the sheep, and I'll give you my dogs in return." In spite of his

melancholy, the boy could not help laughing. "What am I to do with your dogs?" he asked, "my sheep feed themselves, but the dogs will have to be fed." – "My dogs are of a special kind," the stranger replied; "they will feed you instead of you them, and they will make your fortune. The smaller one there is called, 'Bring a Meal,' the second one, 'Tear-to-Shreds,' and the big, strong one, 'Break-Iron-and-Steel.' The shepherd eventually suffered himself to be persuaded into parting with his sheep. To test the particular virtues of his dogs, he said, 'Bring a Meal!' and straight away one dog ran

off and returned with a large basket full of the most exquisite dishes. The shepherd now did not regret the exchange; he lived well and wandered around the land a long while.

One day he met a coach drawn by two horses and covered with black cloth; the coachman also was attired in black. Inside the coach there sat a supremely beautiful maiden in black apparel, weeping bitterly. The horses trotted sadly and slowly and hung their heads. "Coachman, what's the meaning of this?" asked the shepherd. He was given a gruff reply, but he would not cease asking until the coachman told him: a large dragon lived in the region, and to save his land from being laid waste, the King had been forced to promise it the yearly tribute of a virgin, whom he devoured bones and all. Every time the lot was cast among those maidens of fourteen years of age, and on this occasion it had fallen to the King's daughter. This had plunged the King and the whole land into the deepest anguish, and yet the dragon had to receive its sacrifice. The shepherd felt pity for the beautiful young maiden and followed the coach. It eventually came to a halt at the foot of a high mountain. The maiden alighted and slowly walked towards her dreadful fate. The coachman now noticed that the stranger intended to follow her and warned him against this, but the shepherd would not be dissuaded from his purpose. When they had climbed up half the height of the mountain, there came down from the summit a frightful monster with a scaly body, wings, and immense claws on its feet; a red-hot stream of sulphur blazed out from its throat, and it was just about to pounce on its prey when the shepherd cried, "Tear to Shreds!"



and the second of his dogs hurled himself at the dragon, sank his teeth firmly into its flank, and harried it so hard that the monster eventually sank

down and breathed out the last of its venomous life; the dog ate it up completely, leaving nothing but a pair of teeth which the shepherd put into his pocket. The Princess had passed out from terror and from joy; the shepherd brought her back to her senses, and now she fell at her saviour's feet and besought him to go with her to her father, who would reward him richly. The youth replied that he wished to see something of the world first, but he would come back after three years. And he kept to this resolve. The maiden sat down in the coach again and the shepherd went away by another road.

However, dark thoughts had hatched in the coachman's mind. When they were driving over a bridge, which a large river flowed under, he stopped the coach, turned round to the King's daughter, and said: "Your saviour has gone and has no desire for your thanks. It would be nice of you to make a poor man happy. Therefore tell your father that I killed the dragon; if you will not, then I'll throw you into this river and no one will ask after you, for everyone will think that the dragon has devoured you." The maiden lamented and pleaded, but in vain; in the end she had to swear to pass the coachman off as her saviour and not to betray the secret to a soul. So they travelled back to the city, where all the people were beside themselves with delight; the black flags were taken down from the towers and colourful ones raised in their place, and with tears of joy the King embraced his daughter and her supposed saviour. "You have delivered not only my child, but the entire land from a great scourge," he said. "And so it is fitting that I reward you. My daughter shall become your wife; but because she is yet too young, the wedding shall not take place until a year

from now.” The coachman expressed his thanks, then he was fitted out in splendid clothes, made a nobleman, and instructed in all the refined manners that his present rank required. The King’s daughter was terribly shocked and wept bitterly when she heard this, and yet she did not dare break her oath. When the year was up, she could achieve nothing more than one year’s grace. This also came to an end, and she threw herself at her father’s feet and asked for one more year, for she had in her mind the promise made by her true saviour. The King could not resist her pleas and he granted her request, but with the rider that this would be the last extension he would permit her. How quickly the time elapsed! The wedding day was now fixed, red flags fluttered on the towers, and everyone was in a mood of jubilation.

On that very day it so happened that a stranger with three dogs arrived in the city. He inquired after the cause of the general rejoicing and learned that the Princess was about to be wed to the man who had slain the frightful dragon. The stranger called this man an impostor who had adorned himself with borrowed plumes, but he was seized by the watch and thrown into a narrow prison with iron doors. Now when he was lying on his bundle of straw and reflecting on his unhappy fate, he suddenly thought he heard the whimpering of his dogs outside – and a bright idea dawned on him. “Break Iron and Steel!” he cried as loudly as he could, and at once he saw the paws of his biggest dog at the barred window through which daylight filtered scantily into his cell. The bars broke and the dog sprang into the cell and chewed through the chains which fettered his master; then he sprang back out and his master followed him. He was now free, it was true, but he

was grievously pained by the thought that another was to reap his reward. He was hungry as well, so he called to his dog, "Bring a Meal!" Soon afterwards the dog returned with a serviette full of exquisite dishes, and embroidered in the serviette there was a royal crown.

The King had just sat down to table with his entire royal household when the dog had appeared and pleadingly licked the hand of the maiden bride. With a joyous thrill she had recognised the dog and tied her own serviette on to him. Regarding this as a sign from Heaven, she asked her father for a word in private and confided the whole secret to him. The King sent a messenger after the dog, who soon afterwards brought the stranger to the King's cabinet. The King took him by the hand into the hall; the former coachman blanched at sight of him and begged for mercy on his knees. The King's daughter recognised her saviour in the stranger, who gave further proof with the dragon's teeth he still carried in his pocket. The coachman was thrown into a deep dungeon and the shepherd took his place at the Princess's side. This time she did not request that the wedding be postponed.

The young married couple had lived in blissful content for some time when the former shepherd remembered his poor sister and expressed the wish to share his good fortune with her. He sent a coach off to fetch her, and it was not long before she was in her brother's arms. Then one of the dogs began to speak, saying, "Our time is now up; you have no further need of us. We remained with you all this time only to see if you would not, even in prosperity, forget your sister." And with those words, the dogs turned into three birds and disappeared into the heavens.