

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



Once upon a time three young musicians left their native town to see the world. All three of them had studied music with the same master, and now they wished to stay together and seek their fortune in foreign lands. They wandered happily on from place to place, played for dances at fairs and on feast-days, and their merry melodies won them many a weighty silver coin besides quiet and loud applause. And so one day they arrived in a small town and amused the company with tuneful music that evening. Finally, they laid down their instruments and had a drink instead, answered many toasts, and contributed their share to the guests' conversation. People were chatting about and relating various strange matters at one and the same time. At first the talk was of a magical castle which was located in the proximity of the town, and the tales about it were just as sensational as they were sinister. Now it was said: yes, immense piles of treasure are there, a constant profusion of the most exquisite foods is there, although not a

human soul lives inside – and then it was said: but a dreadful spectre is there. Those who entered with a white back came out with one that was coloured black and blue, without having found the treasure or broken the spell. This, with much more, was bandied back and forth about the enchanted castle. No sooner were the three musicians alone in their bedchamber than they conferred at length, at which time they conceived the idea of taking a closer look at the mysterious castle, indeed, even of venturing inside to possibly find the hidden and bewitched treasure that was there. Now they came to an agreement that each of them should separately venture inside, one after the other according to their age, and each one was to be granted a whole day to come through his adventure. The first attempt at finding fortune fell to the fiddler. With a stout heart, and without delay, he made his way to the castle and found, when he arrived there, the entrance gate standing open, as if he were expected, but when he stepped over the threshold the heavy door slammed shut behind him and an enormous iron bolt shot into place, although there was no living creature to be seen: it was as if a stern gatekeeper were carrying out his duty by keeping watch, and horror crept over the fiddler, whose hair stood up on end from the crown of his head. But he could neither turn back nor tarry, and his spirits were fortified by the thought of the fortune he hoped to find, the thought of gold and treasure. The youth walked upstairs and downstairs, through magnificent rooms, luxurious halls, cosy cabinets – all of them opulently furnished and kept immaculately clean. But everywhere was as silent as the grave; not even the smallest gnat lived and dwelt here. Yet the youth's courage rose anew, particularly when he headed towards the downstairs rooms, kitchens, and vaults, where there were abundant

stores of the rarest and most exquisite foods, wine bottles lay racked up high in the vaults, and there were all kinds of sweet, preserved fruit in rows of large jars. In the lovely, bright kitchen a lambent fire crackled invitingly, and a grill was placed over it by an invisible hand, and a choice cut of venison danced out of the vault into the kitchen and onto the grill; and many other dishes, select vegetables and pies, and exquisite pastries were prepared as quickly as they were sumptuously by invisible hands before being taken to one of the finest rooms, whither the youth had betaken himself, and placed before him on a ready-laid table. The youth first grasped his instrument and let his lovely melodies sound sonorously through the silent rooms, after which he did not hesitate to sit down at the inviting table and begin to feast. But it was not long before the door opened and a mannikin walked in, some three cubits high, attired in a scarlet coat and with a faded little face and a grey beard that reached down to the large silver buckles on his shoes. And the mannikin sat down in silence beside the fiddler and feasted as well. Now when they came to the choice venison roast, the fiddler took the dish and nodded to the mannikin to help himself first, and he skewered a piece of meat on his fork with a smile and nodded in return, at the same time dropping the meat under the table. At once the good fiddler obligingly bent down to pick it up – but in a flash the little bearded man was sitting on his back and hammering away at him so pitilessly as if he wished to snuff out his life. And the fiddler's mouth was clamped shut with a hand until he was finally, under a rain of incessant blows, pushed out through the large entrance-gate. Outside, the half-dead fiddler drew breath afresh and then crept with many groans towards the inn where his comrades were waiting. It was night by the time he reached there,

and they were both already asleep. The following morning, they were astonished to see the fiddler also lying abed, and they soon bombarded him with questions; but he scratched his head and back, gave very curt answers, and said, "Go there and take a look yourselves! It's a ticklish business."

The second musician, a trumpeter, now set out on the path to the enchanted castle, found everything just as the battered fiddler had, and was likewise entertained with pies and buffets, so that he too lay in his bed like a bruised fox the next morning, where he complained that he had been played in a quite peculiar way and in a very discordant key.

Yet the third one, a *flute-player*, still had enough courage to try his luck in the enchanted castle. He was the craftiest of the three. Fearlessly he wandered through the entire castle, and he thought it would be most agreeable to possess these beautiful rooms forever; and there were certainly provisions aplenty in the kitchen and the cellars. Soon a sumptuous table was laid for him too, and when he had wandered around singing and fluting for quite long enough, he took his seat and made himself comfortable. Then the little bearded man entered again and sat down beside the guest. And the undaunted musician entered into a conversation with him, and behaved just as if he had met him here a hundred times before; the mannikin, however, was not very talkative. Finally, it was time for the roast, and the mannikin again purposely let fall his piece of meat; the flautist was just bending over to good-naturedly pick it up when he perceived that the dwarf was going to leap on his back at any instant. So he swiftly turned around, tore the mannikin off, and seized him and shook him by his beard so roughly that he ended up tearing the whole thing out, and the little old man crashed groaning to the ground. But now that the youth

had the beard in his hands, he was possessed with an extraordinary power, and he saw in the castle even more wondrous things than he had seen before; the mannikin, on the other hand, had almost no life left in him. He whimpered and pleaded, "Give me, oh give me my beard back, and I'll reveal to you all the magic that holds this castle, and help you to break the spell so you'll become rich and be happy ever after." But the clever flautist said, "You shall have your beard back, but you must reveal everything to me *first*, otherwise you are a rogue. And I won't let the beard out of my hands before you do that." So the old man had to bring himself to make good his promise first, although he had not exactly been willing to do so, but had rather intended to use guile to regain possession of his beard. Now the youth had to follow him through dark, secret passages, subterranean vaults and dreadful rocky chasms, until they finally came out into open country and a landscape which truly looked like a much more beautiful world than ours. And they came upon a river which roared wildly; but the mannikin pulled out a little staff and struck the flood, whereupon its waters instantly parted and were still until they had both crossed over dry-shod. What splendour was to be seen on the other side! – They walked on through magnificent green avenues of trees, and everywhere there were flowers and birds with silver and gold feathers which sang wondrously; and beetles and butterflies fluttered and danced around, and other pretty little animals frolicked in bushes and hedges; and the sky above them did not look blue, but rather like rays of pure gold, and the stars were much larger and circled one another in intertwining dances.

The youth was amazed; and his amazement increased when the grey dwarf led him into an edifice that was far more majestic than the

enchanted castle. Here too, with all its splendour, there reigned the deepest silence in the apartments, and when they had passed through many of these, they came into one which was hung all over with veils, and in the middle of the room there stood a thickly curtained bed, over which hung a pretty bird-cage with a bird warbling shrill songs through the lonely silence.



The grey mannikin lifted the veils and drew the bedcurtains aside and led the youth closer; and here the young man saw, on soft silk cushions richly decorated with golden tassels, a quite delightful girl lying asleep. She was as beautiful as an angel and was wearing a white dress, and her golden locks fell in waves over her breast and shoulders, and a diamond crown sparkled on her head; but a deep, death-like sleep held the gentle features in thrall and no sound was able to rouse the fair sleeper. Then the little man said to the astonished youth, “You see this sleeping maiden here! She is a Royal Princess. This beautiful castle and this blessed land is her inheritance when she is released; but for centuries she has been sleeping this sound, enchanted sleep, and for centuries no human soul has found the way that leads hither, which I alone walk every day to dine in that castle

which is my home, and peradventure to serve the gold-greedy men who come there with a course of buffets. I am the guardian of this sleeper and have had to carefully ensure that no stranger find their way in here, and that explains the growth of my beard, which is home to such overwhelming powers that I have been able to work this magic for centuries. But now that my beard has been torn from me, I am powerless, and I must reveal and make over to you the inordinate good fortune that will awake with the fair Princess. And so prepare yourself without delay for the execution of the miraculous deliverance. Take this bird, which hangs over the Princess, and which once sang her into her enchanted slumber, and has had to sing those melodies incessantly ever since – take it, slaughter it, and cut out its little heart, then burn this to powder and put it to the Princess's lips, and she will wake up at once, and will favour you with her hand and her heart, with her land and her castle, and all of her treasure." Exhausted, the mannikin fell silent, and the youth did not delay doing what was needful for the Princess to be set free. Everything was carried out quickly and properly, faithful to the instructions given by the little old man, and the powder was prepared. A few minutes later, when it was given to the Princess, she opened her eyes brightly with a smile, raised herself up from her bed, and fell into the fortunate youth's breast, caressed and thanked him, and took him to be her husband. And at the same moment a thundering and crashing passed through the castle, there were sounds on every stair, and there were noises in every room. And finally a throng of servants and maids with friendly faces came into the room where the happy couple were, and everyone rejoiced; then they flew briskly and breezily to their work in the kitchen and cellars, in the rooms and halls and corridors, and they were all as people reborn.

The grey dwarf, however, now sternly demanded his beard from the youth, all the while intending in his spiteful heart to play a prank on the fortunate young man. For when the beard was once sitting on his chin again, he would have the power to overcome all mortals. But the clever flautist continued to exercise caution with the malicious mannikin, saying, "Oh, you shall have your beard back, have no fear, I will hand it to you when we part; but allow that both of us, my fair bride and I, accompany you for a short stretch." The mannikin could not refuse that. They now walked far with the dwarf through beauteous avenues of trees and flowerbeds, and came at last to the tremendously deep, roaring river which flowed for many, many miles around the Princess's land, forming, as it were, the boundary. There was no bridge and no barque nearby with which anyone could reach the opposite bank; furthermore, no bold swimmer could have achieved the crossing, for the current was too turbulent and wild. Then the youth said to the mannikin, "Give me your staff, that I may do you the honour of parting the waters." And the mannikin had to obey because he still did not have the powers of his beard, and he secretly thought with a gloating delight: when he hands me the beard over there, on the other side, then he'll fall under my power, I'll take my staff back from him, and the two of them will never be able to enter their beautiful land again. But things did not turn out according to the dwarf's malevolent intention. The prudent and fortunate youth struck the river with the staff, it swiftly parted and became still, the dwarf went on ahead and crossed over, and the waters quickly roared together behind him; but the youth had remained on the other bank with his beloved bride. He kept the magic staff, flinging only the beard over and across the water, where the dwarf caught it and put it back on; and so the old man was

deprived of his magic staff and was never again able, from that time on, to enter the glorious land. And the fortunate youth returned to the castle with his fair one, to constant joy and bliss; and no longing entered his heart to return to his comrades ever again. They sat in the inn for a long time, and when he did not come back, they said, “He has gone fluting*” – and that later passed into a proverb for when a person or a thing goes astray and does not return.

* A pun on “flöten” which means “to play the flute” and also has the sense, with the verb “gehen” (“go”), of “to fleet away, to get lost, to vanish.” The closest English equivalent of “Der ist flöten gegangen” is “He has gone for a burton.”