

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

(1845 version)

Once upon a time there was great astonishment in Hell because only men – no women – came to Hell, and they wished with all their hearts for women to be there too. Then a very young devil rose up and said, “What do you bet that I’ll bring one here?” While the other devils are pleased to hear this, they do not quite believe what that young one is saying. The devil departs at once and the others wish him the best of luck. So he comes onto the earth and meets a pretty, young woman, and he says to her, “Hey, Miss! Wouldn’t you like to get married?” – “Why not, if you’ve money and bread for me.” – “That have I.” Now the wedding is celebrated, and life up on earth is a bed of roses. But before the honeymoon is over the young wife is demanding money and clothes, and fine ones at that, and the devil can barely earn his bread; he often has to save his jaws and leave his food for his wife, whereby he becomes skinny and scrawny and is not in nearly such high spirits as he used to be. The wife had expected more from this gallant – lots of money, lovely clothes, and so being truly and deeply loved. So she ups and becomes cold towards her devil. He cajoles; – he hits. – But she scolds terribly and threatens him with blows. The devil laughs at this and thinks: “I’ll bend you to my will in the end, you’ll see.” But if he scolds with one word, she scolds with ten, and so it goes on each and every day. What happens? In the end, the devil is dealt hefty thwacks. Then he thinks: “Now, why bother yourself with this wife, just you go on home, and – ” so he went home. When he arrives back in Hell *not* bringing a wife along, the devils hoot with laughter at him, and everywhere they cry, “Stupid devil! Stupid devil!” He replies, “I don’t want a wife again, even if the whole of Hell were

given me. Be happy I didn't bring her here, she would have made Hell all the hotter for every one of us!" Then another, somewhat older, devil speaks: "Now I'll go, I have no doubt I'll bring one back!" He takes his leave, like the first one, and comes to a field of peas, where he meets an old maid. And he thinks, "Stay – she's no spring chicken, she'll do for you." So he says to her, "Hey there, Miss! Wouldn't you like to get married?" – "Oh yes! If you've money and bread for me." – "Oh yes!" says the devil. The wedding is celebrated. The honeymoon passes very well. The newlyweds initially consumed the wife's fortune; because she liked the devil very much, she gladly gave him her money. But when this had been squandered, it was the devil's turn to hand over his money; however, as he did not have any, his wife made him the bitterest reproaches and raised such a riot that the devil's arms and legs trembled. Now she gives him nothing to eat, even though he has a terrific hunger. And his stomach has the very gripes from hunger, and his tongue hangs down a yard from his throat, yet she still takes no pity on him. If the devil wants something to eat, he must go out and scabble for potatoes. If he comes back in the evening without a big sackful, he gets a beating, and so it goes on each and every day. Finally, the poor devil grows tired of this and says to himself: "Now, why should you bother yourself with this woman? I'm leaving, she's a sulphurous beast!" He goes and returns to Hell. Here he is immediately asked where he is keeping his wife – "Aye, wife! Some hope! I don't want one! I'll remember the one I had up there for the rest of my days! Bring *her* back with me into Hell, indeed! I'm happy to be rid of her." –And all around the cry rang out: "Stupid devil! Stupid devil!"

But now a very old devil speaks: “Now I’ll go. I don’t doubt I’ll make women pay!” –The old devil departs and arrives on earth; walking through a young birchwood, he sees a female in the distance. He walks up to the lady, has a long look at her, and finally addresses her very affably: “Hey! Pretty Miss! Wouldn’t you like to get married?” –“Oh yes! If you can pass a test.”



–“What does it involve?” – “Well, it’s a difficult test and a final rehearsal.” – The devil says, “Bring it on, I can do anything!” – “Yes, that’s what my first husband said.” – Quite astonished, the devil asked, “Have you had a husband, then?” – “Indeed!” she said, “I was sadly deceived by him.” – “How come?” asked the devil. She said only, “Oh!” The old devil, being shrewd, asked no further, but undertook the test. What kind of a test this was, we have not been able to discover. But the woman was satisfied with the devil and wedded him. All is a bed of roses – but this woman also was a very miserly Xanthippe. Every piece of the devil’s bread was cut to size, and every drop of his soup was measured out. Little by little, he became as thin as a rake and lost all his strength, and his wife became ever more

dissatisfied with him. She scolds and nags; he begs and beseeches. – All this is no use; he should do his duty in every description of work, and he



just can't do it, from hunger and weakness.

She mistreats him and beats him, and he is too weak even to defend himself – and then his wife even shoves him under the fireside bench, saying to him, “If you want bread, go out and see where you can get some!” Now

the beguiled devil sets out, weak as he is, and drags himself into the forest, where he picks berries and subsists on this meagre diet; in the evening he goes home and crawls back under the fireside bench. His wife kicks him and thumps him, and fear drives him to his wits' end.

One day, this devil was among the berries again when he came upon a charcoal burner, and he poured out all his woes to him then asked for something to eat. The charcoal burner said, “Why, my good old man, I myself have seven children and often not a bite of bread.” The devil replied, “Charcoal burner, you black fellow, give me some advice how I can tame my shrewish wife. I beg you, for God's sake, help me!”

The charcoal burner returned:

“A waspish wife, an albatross,

Woe to the man who bears that cross.”

The devil thinks: oh, if that's the size of it, you'd better go back home. If only I had never left there in the first place! –He thinks of avenging himself on women – and says to the charcoal burner, “Hey! Brother! You are poor too, I'll make you rich, but you must follow me.” The charcoal burner replies,

“Oh yes, I’d like to be rich, and I’ll do whatever you want.” Then the devil says, “Listen, Brother Charcoal Burner, I know of a King who has two daughters. Now I’ll possess the youngest one and you shall be the doctor. After I’ve possessed the Princess, the King will have a proclamation issued for a doctor who can cast out devils just like that. Then you go to this King and say, ‘Lord King! I wish to help the Princess, but I must be quite alone with her in a room; in good faith, it goes without saying.’ When, after that, you are admitted to the Princess, you say to me: ‘Thunder and devil, get out!’ – open a window, and I’ll get me hence. However, you may do this only twice; if you do it a third time, I’ll have to break your neck!” – The charcoal burner asked, “Even if I find you a beautiful, good wife?” The devil replied, “We’ll see.” –One evening when the charcoal burner came home from the forest, his wife said to him: “Husband, the rich King has announced that his Princess is at death’s door, very sick indeed; whoever helps her shall receive from him half the Kingdom or as much gold as the King and the doctor both weigh. If only you, old ’un! knew a good household remedy and could help the Princess, so we could escape our poverty!” –Hereupon the charcoal burner said to his wife, “I’ll have a try, I may be lucky,” and left. When he came to the King, he was asked, “Old man, do you venture to restore my Princess to health?” –“Oh yes, Lord King!” replied the charcoal burner. “First I must have some simples from the apothecary and I must fetch them myself and then I must be quite alone with the Princess.” To which the King said, “Old man! As you ask, so shall it be. If you make my Princess healthy again, you shall receive half of my kingdom or as much gold as you and I weigh.” -The charcoal burner now did as the devil had

enjoined him, and the beautiful Princess got better on the spot. The King left the choice up to the charcoal burner – gold or land – and the charcoal burner took the gold.

In a short space the other Princess was possessed by the devil. The King sends for the charcoal burner him again and says to him, “Old man, you restored my first daughter to health when she was sick, now help this one!” –The charcoal burner said, “I’ll have a go, Lord King!” And behold, he helped the second Princess also, and the King gave him just as much gold as before.

The charcoal burner was now very rich, but he fretted nonetheless at not being allowed to cast out the devil who had resolved to thoroughly torment women a third time. It had been agreed for the first two times, but the third time he would have to leave the devil in the Princess, or the devil would break his neck; and if he could not cast out the devil the third time, he would have to risk the King having him put to death; he wondered if he might not succeed in duping the devil on the third occasion.

Now the first Princess fell ill again, for the devil had possessed her a second time. Once again the King sent for the old charcoal burner and told him, “You, old man, your first cure did not last! If you don’t help my Princess, I’ll have you hanged!” Then the charcoal-burner replied, “My most gracious Lord King! I’ll make the attempt, but it is necessary that every girl in the entire town, dressed in white garments, with red sashes and hair-buckles, and all your priests in their vestments, with the Princess in their midst, assemble before the castle tomorrow morning, and that I, with the Princess at my side, be accompanied up the mountain by the song of

the maidens and the priests. Once we have reached the topmost height, I will make the attempt.” The King at once had all preparations made for these conditions to be met. The next morning the large assembly stood before the castle. The procession moved uphill, and on the topmost height the charcoal burner cried, “Thunder and devil, get out!”

And the devil did indeed get out, but he cried to the charcoal burner: “You villain, is this how you keep your word? Just wait – I’m going to break your neck!” But the charcoal burner defended himself with the words, “Hold on! I made a proviso, don’t you remember that I said to you, ‘And if I find you another wife, a good one?’ You cannot gainsay this, can you? Now here you may choose from all these beautiful, innocent maidens – take whichever one you wish!” – But the devil said, “You rogue! I have no power over these, I may not take any of them! And I’m not going back to my hellhag! So I’ll rather have none at all and go home!”

And so the devil went back home to Hell, and when he arrived all his comrades asked him, was he not bringing a wife back? And when he said: he was not bringing one back, again the cry rang out, “Stupid devil, stupid devil,” and there were high jinks and a hell of a hullabaloo and diabolical laughter, and with all the crashing and thundering, the whole of Hell wobbled and cracked like an old wall. And there are no women in Hell to this day, except for the devil his old grandmother.



(1853 version) – alterations are marked in **bold**.

Once upon a time there was great astonishment in Hell because only men – no women – came to Hell, and they wished with all their hearts for women to be there too. Then a very young devil rose up and said, “What do you bet that I’ll bring one here?” While the other devils are pleased to hear this, they do not quite believe what that young one is saying. The devil departs at once and the others wish him the best of luck. So he comes onto the earth and meets **a young maid**; and he says to her, “Hey, Miss! Wouldn’t you like to get married?” –**“Why not,” she said. “The wedding can be tomorrow, if you want.”** –**“Fine by me,” said the devil. When the next day came, he went to the priest and took the maid to wife.** But before the honeymoon is over the young wife is demanding money and clothes, and fine ones at that, and the devil can barely earn his bread; he often has to save his jaws and leave his food for his wife, whereby he becomes skinny and scrawny and is not in nearly such high spirits as he used to be. The wife had expected more from this gallant – lots of money **and** lovely clothes. So she ups and becomes cold towards her devil. He cajoles;– he **grumbles**. –But she scolds terribly and threatens him with blows. The devil laughs at this and thinks: “I’ll bend you to my will in the end, you’ll see.” But if he scolds with one word, she scolds with ten, and so it goes on each and every day. What happens? In the end, the devil is dealt hefty thwacks. Then he thinks: “Now, why bother yourself with this wife? Just you go on home, and – ” so he went home. When he arrives back in Hell *not* bringing a wife along, the devils hoot with laughter at him, and everywhere they cry, “Stupid devil!

Stupid devil!" He replies, "I don't want a wife again, even if the whole of Hell were given me. Be happy I didn't bring her here, she would have made Hell all the hotter for every one of us!" Then another, somewhat older, devil speaks: "Now I'll go, I have no doubt I'll bring one back!" He takes his leave, like the first one, and comes to a field of peas, where he meets an old maid. And he thinks, "Stay – she's no spring chicken, she'll do for you." So he says to her, "Hey there, Miss! Wouldn't you like to get married?" – "Oh yes! If you've money and bread for me." – "Oh yes!" says the devil. **After they had celebrated their nuptials, the wife noticed that the devil had lied, for he was a poor, penniless devil who did not have anything and could not do anything. This backfired on him, for he had fallen in with a skinflint, who skimped on salt on the potatoes and put a button instead of a farthing into the alms bag on Sundays. She gives the devil much to do and little to chew, but he could have as many curses as he liked, and blows were not uncommon either.** And his stomach has the very gripes from hunger, and his tongue hangs down a yard from his throat, yet she still takes no pity on him. If the devil wants something to eat, he must go out and scrabble for potatoes. If he comes back in the evening without a big sackful, he gets a beating, and so it goes on each and every day. Finally, the poor devil grows tired of this and says to himself: "Now, why should you bother yourself with this woman? I'm leaving, she's a sulphurous beast!" He goes and returns to Hell. Here he is immediately asked where he is keeping his wife – "Aye, wife! Some hope! I don't want one! I'll remember the one I had up there for the rest of my days! Bring *her* back with me into Hell, indeed! I'm happy to be rid of her." –And all around

the cry rang out: “Stupid devil! Stupid devil!”

But now a very old devil speaks: “Now I’ll go. I don’t doubt I’ll make women pay!” –The old devil departs and arrives on earth; walking through a young birchwood, he sees a female in the distance. **It was a widow, who was still a fine figure of a woman. He looks at her, and she looks at him, and with polite speeches and courteous replies they come to an agreement, and the priest nails and rivets them together, as tightly as heart may desire. But after the wedding, the devil saw all too clearly that it is a mistake to buy a pig in a poke and to woo widows on the highway. She knew a trick or two, as holy matrimony was not new to her; slender fare and well-water to drink was the least of it; it was open shop for everyone, and the husband had to sit by and watch, and when it became too much for him – for no devil can bear to see such sights – then she hung him on the wall and went for a beer with her sweethearts. When she returned, she took him down, and he had to learn how to catch mice, saving the need for a cat. But this becomes too much for the devil, he runs way into the forest – for he is too ashamed to go to Hell – and he starts to search for berries, which are at least better than mice.**

One day, this devil was among the berries again when he came upon a charcoal burner, and he poured out all his woes to him then asked for something to eat. The charcoal burner said, “Why, my good old man, I myself have seven children and often not a bite of bread.” The devil replied, “Charcoal burner, you black fellow, give me some advice how I can tame my shrewish wife. I beg you, for God’s sake, help me!”

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poverty!” –Hereupon the charcoal burner said to his wife, “I’ll have a try, I may be lucky,” and left. When he came to the King, he was asked, “Old man, do you venture to restore my Princess to health?” –“Oh yes, Lord King!” replied the charcoal burner. “First I must have some simples from the apothecary and I must fetch them myself and then I must be quite alone with the Princess.” To which the King said, “Old man! As you ask, so shall it be. If you make my Princess healthy again, you shall receive half of my kingdom or as much gold as you and I weigh.” -The charcoal burner now did as the devil had enjoined him, and the beautiful Princess got better on the spot. The King left the choice up to the charcoal burner – gold or land – and the charcoal burner took the gold.

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The charcoal burner was now very rich, but he fretted nonetheless at **no longer** being allowed to cast out the devil who had resolved to thoroughly torment women, **and would certainly not desist just yet**. It had been agreed for the first two times, but the third time he would have to leave the devil in the Princess, or the devil would break his neck; and if he could not cast out the devil the third time, he would have to risk the King having him put to death; he wondered if he might not succeed in duping the devil on the third occasion.

Now the **third** Princess fell ill, for the devil had possessed her. Once again the King sent for the old charcoal burner and told him, “You, old man, **if** you don’t help my Princess, I’ll have you hanged!” Then the charcoal-burner replied, “My most gracious Lord King! I’ll make the attempt, but it is necessary that every **good and fair** girl in the entire town, dressed in white garments, with red sashes and hair-buckles, and all your priests, assemble before the castle tomorrow morning, and that I, with the Princess at my side, be accompanied up the mountain by the song of the maidens and the priests. **But they must not, under any circumstances, include any common wenches, or any old maids who still yearn to marry, or widows who would like to tie the knot again; and you must give your priests strict orders on this point.** Once we have reached the topmost height, I will make the attempt.” The King at once had all preparations made for these conditions to be met. The next morning the large assembly stood before the castle. The procession moved uphill, and on the topmost height the charcoal burner cried, “Thunder and devil, get out!”

And the devil did indeed get out, but he cried to the charcoal burner: “You villain, is this how you keep your word? Just wait – I’m going to break your neck!” But the charcoal burner defended himself with the words, “Hold on! **Our pact has a proviso: you may not lay a finger on me if I show you a beautiful, good wife. Now just look around, look at these.**” Then the devil looked around and he looked at one maiden after the other, and he clearly realised that he had no power over them. And he was ashamed to remain on earth, and he was afraid of his battleaxe, so he crackled and made a stench and went away as he had come.

And so the devil went back home to Hell, and when he arrived all his comrades asked him, was he not bringing a wife back? And when he said: he was not bringing one back, again the cry rang out, “Stupid devil, stupid devil,” and there were high jinks and a hell of a hullabaloo and diabolical laughter, and with all the crashing and thundering, the whole of Hell wobbled and cracked like an old wall. And there are no women in Hell to this day, except for the devil his old grandmother – **because all women are so very good.**