

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

In the days when the good Lord would visibly wander around the world every now and then to test mankind – and no one knows if He does not still do this today – He once came, in the form of a poor, old, and infirm man, to a village, and before the house of a rich man, and He asked for a little food and drink and a place to sleep, for evening had come and night was not far off, and it was wild and stormy weather.

Then the rich man came scornfully out of his stately house and said to the dear Lord: “You’re not stupid, old man? You’ve studied at a university, perhaps? You think this is an inn, or I keep a cook-shop, or do you think this is a poor-house? Perhaps you think this is a hostel for beggarmen? No, let me tell you, this is where beggarmen turn back. Allons, be off with you! Get out of my courtyard this instant, or I’ll whistle my dog here, you old wastrel, you rogue, you vagabond, and don’t ever dare set foot in my courtyard again!”

With a sigh the poor man turned away from the house of the rich, miserly, and hard-hearted man, and tottered on. Then a man’s voice called to him from a little house on the other side of the road, “Now, old one! Where are you heading?” asked the cottager in a tone full of compassion, and the poor man answered, “Oh, to Nohome! I have no home to go to! And I’m hungry and I’m thirsty, and I am weary to death!”

“Then come over here, old man, to me!” the cottager cried. “What my neighbour over yonder has given you will not be heavy to carry. I’m a poor fellow, admittedly, but I still have a bit of bread, and you can have a drop of schnaps as well, and a sack filled with wood-moss as your bed for the night, if you’ll be content with that!”

“That’s very kind of you! I accept, and God bless you for it!” said the good Lord, and he crept over to the cottager and ate with him, and drank with him, and rested, and because it was not yet time to sleep both men sat down in front of the house; for the good Lord had made the wild weather quickly blow over and had created a clear, mild, moonlit night, and made the firmament shine and his hosts of stars, which praise him to eternity, wander in resplendence over the dark Earth.

And so the two men, the old one and the young one, the good, bountiful Lord and the poor cottager, sat together on the stone bench before the little house, talking to one another.



But over the way, in shadow, the rich man looked out of his window, gave a puff from an immense tobacco-pipe, and muttered peevishly, “So the rogue over there, my neighbour, really has taken the old rascal in and

given him quarters, even though he himself doesn't know where his next meal is coming from. Did you ever see such a fool? But as I always say: Birds of a feather flock together; six of the one, half a dozen of the other. Actually, it's simply not done, taking in a vagrant who foots his way to you, for one never knows he's up to, or if such a tramp might not set the village aflame so his gang can burst out of the forest and plunder it. How they are chattering, those two good-for-nothings! I think I'll listen in, just a little."

"You are such a good, pious man," the good Lord said to his host, "you deserve that it be your lot, as it was that of many a pious man in ages past, to be allowed to make three wishes for your own good and for the good of your soul. But you must by no means forget the latter, or you will fare like the Smith of Juterbog."

"And how did he fare?" asked the cottager.

"Don't you know the fairy-tale?" the good Lord asked back. "The Holy Apostle Peter came riding to this smith and asked him to shoe his donkey with new iron, and in return he would be able to make three wishes. So the smith wished that his schnaps-bottle would never be empty; further, what whoever sat up his pear-tree would have to sit there until such time as the smith allowed him to climb down; and finally, that no one might enter his parlour, without permission, any other way than through the keyhole. With these, the smith did win a long life from Death, because he tricked him into sitting up his pear-tree, and he did make the Devil suffer when the Evil One whisked through the keyhole into the smith's room – but the best wish, that for eternal bliss, the smith had failed to make; and so he did not die, and Saint Peter would not let him into Heaven, and the Devil was afraid of him

and snapped the gates of Hell shut in his face and bolted them on the inside – and now the smith must wander around on his ill-starred way for all eternity.”

“Oh, my Lord!” cried the cottager, not knowing who was sitting beside him. “That is bad – that was a mistake – I’m sure I would have wished more sensibly – if so holy a Helper or apostle came to me! But that will never be!”

“One cannot know that,” the guest replied. “Only the person must not wish foolishly, like that married couple who were visited by the Angel of God and granted three wishes.”

“What happened there?” asked the cottager.

“A husband and wife,” the guest narrated, “lived in great poverty and implored God night and day to relieve their poverty and help them. Now, because they were pious and honest, God was willing to hear their pleas, and He sent them His angel. The angel said: ‘You may make three wishes for your own good, but they must not include a wish for money and property, for if these were destined for you, and were useful and beneficial to you, you would have possessed them a long time ago; and so this wish is denied you, according to the wise will of God.’ The man said, ‘What help will three wishes be to me if I may not wish for that which seems to promote my happiness? What is a man without money? It is said that he is just like a bad penny: worthless.’ To which the angel replied, “Well then, make your wishes in God’s name, but be ready to shoulder the blame if you wish disaster on yourself.’ Now the man discussed with his wife how the two of them should properly consider their wishes. ‘What shall we wish for?’ he

asked his wife. 'What do we need first? I'd say a whole mountain of gold, with a thick wall around it so no cattle graze on it and no thief burrows after it – or rather an Inexhaustible Chest, which we can continually take money out of, just as much as we need.' – 'I thought,' his wife began, 'that first and foremost you would be so kind as to give or leave one of the three wishes to *me*, for I have sighed for this often enough and my knees are sore with praying; then you will still be free to wish for whatever you want.' – 'Very well,' answered the husband, 'Women are often cleverer than men, so make your wish.'

'I wish,' said the wife, 'for myself, the most beautiful of dresses, the like of which no woman in the world has ever worn, more beautiful than the dress of the greatest Empress!' No sooner had the wife expressed this wish than she was attired in the most magnificent dress, which was so lavishly studded with diamonds and pearls and trimmed with gold and silver that the material itself was quite covered.

'Isn't that a stupid, rash wish!' the husband cried in deep displeasure. 'With that, you could have wished for garments for *all* women, then the needy would have called down blessings from Heaven on your head thousandfold, but you just made a wish out of haughty and arrogant self-interest!'

'That for you!' shouted the wife. 'Fie upon you, husband, for scolding me so! If you don't like me in this lovely dress, then I daresay that other men will like me all the better! Run along, you tomfool!'

'Buffoon!' yelled the enraged husband. 'May the dress go into your haughty body!'

‘Woe is me!’ screamed the wife – for in an instant the dress that had covered her disappeared and moved into her body, hurting her so that she howled and ran through the village, telling her grievance to every peasant, how she had to suffer so terribly on account of her husband. Thereupon the peasants ran to the husband in their dozens and shouted menacingly to him that he must deliver his wife from her pain or they would kill him on the spot. And then they drew their knives and swords at him.

When the man saw the great and ferocious fury of the peasants, and saw how his wife was suffering, he said: ‘I wish in God’s name that she be released from her pain.’

The wife was delighted and all her pain was gone, the third wish having now been made; but the dress never appeared again, and the husband never spent another happy hour on Earth, and was the laughing-stock of all the world, and died soon enough from grief and sorrow. So take careful note, my worthy host, when you make wishes, that you do not walk the ways of fools.”

“And what ways do you mean?” asked the cottager.

“The custom of fools,” said the cottager’s guest, “is to desire what is wrong, to strive for what is wrong, and to lament the loss of what is wrong. There are three kinds of fool. Fools, who know nothing and can do nothing; fools, who do not want to know anything, who despise knowledge and skill; and fools, who are knowing and capable and yet do not do the right thing, even though they should know what it is, and save their souls.”

“Well then, if I were able to wish,” said the cottager, “then I would wish for myself first, before all other treasures, eternal bliss; afterwards,

health and contentment until my dying day; and then – if it did not go against God’s will – I would like to wish that my little house, which is threatened with collapse, be restored to a good condition.” “These wishes of yours are pleasing to God,” said the guest, “and I shall add for you the chief wish that all three be fulfilled!”

After this pleasant conversation, both men, the poor old man and the poor cottager, left their stone seat and went into the cottage, said their bedtime prayers, and laid them down to rest.

The rich man over the way had heard every word they had spoken, and he made snide comments about them. “One would not think,” he grumbled to himself, “that so old a man would still bring up such childish nonsense, such silly fairy-tale poppycock, but of course, old age makes us childish, and old age is no protection against stupidity. O you wish-worshipping fools!”

Now the rich man was just about to retire to his bed when he perceived a strange shimmering light flooding around the poor man’s house, while all the other houses lay there in darkness; and yet it was not firelight, nor the effect of moonlight, but a pure ethereal lustre – then it seemed that bright figures were hovering around the house, and there were more and more of them, moving in a wondrous manner, up and down, as if floating on invisible ladders; they glided around the roof and the walls, and a deep, solemn silence reigned.

This gave the rich man the creeps – thinking they were ghosts, he crossed himself and sought his bed, but he found precious little sleep that night; and early the next morning, at the very crack of dawn, an inner

restlessness drove him back to the window – where he saw the poor old man walking past his house, clearly having made an early start.

“Hmm!” the rich man muttered, “He’s up and about very early – this is a mysterious business. And he’s carrying a sack – he didn’t have one yesterday. No doubt he has swiped some things from over yonder and is absconding whilst my neighbour still sleeps. And it serves my neighbour right! What do I care?”

In the course of these observations it became lighter outside, and the rich man’s wife had also got up and was looking out the window at the weather; the mist dispersed, and the two of them could not believe their eyes when they saw a splendid new farmhouse standing opposite, which certainly had the same form as the old house but was larger and finer in all its parts. “Am I dreaming or am I waking?” the rich man asked. “Has his wish really been fulfilled... So who was the old man? Heaven help us! It was surely Saint Peter, or even the good Lord Himself. Idiot that I was, to turn him away so disdainfully yesterday!”

“You’re right – you’re an idiot!” cried his wife. “Make haste, ride after him, beg his pardon, speak fair to him. O Heaven, what a bad way we are in, all those of us who have so stupid a husband!”

“Hey! Groom! Saddle the horse! I’m going riding!” the rich man shouted impetuously, and filling his pockets with money and provisions, he galloped through the village and along the road, and he caught up with the old man soon enough, but gave no indication of having seen him the day before.

He called down from his horse very affably, “God be with you, old



man! How are you? Do you still have a spring in your step? Where are you off to so early? What are you carrying in that sack?"

"Thanks for the greeting! To God's End!" the wanderer answered.

"You must be a really poor devil. Here's some money for you!"

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"But I'd like to know what you're carrying in that sack!"

"Oh," said the old man in seeming jest, "It is a load of cares, dear Sir; I took it from a poor devil."

"Indeed, indeed!" the rider laughed. "I do not want to know what's inside – I just wish –"

"Aha! You too are a wishing-man," the poor man interrupted. "That is most convenient – in this sack I am carrying precisely three wishes, which will be fulfilled for the man who makes them. But he must take the sack with him."

"Give it here! Give it here!" the rich man greedily cried, and he reached for the sack. "Here – there's a piece of bread for you, and a whole sausage! You see that I am no miser, as my enemies and enviers proclaim me to be. I am an upstanding man who cares about order and is careful with his money, but I readily give to those poor who are deserving of gifts. One certainly cannot help everyone!"

"Everyone? – No, that is impossible, even for God!" said the old man.

"Yet I have always heard it said," countered the rich man, who already had the sack in his hand, "that nothing is impossible for God, and it is His will that everyone be helped."

“O my dear sir,” the poor man replied, “that is to be understood in a spiritual sense, not a material one!”

The rich man wheeled his horse around and thundered back home. His head was filled with thoughts of wishes which whirled around like windmill sails. What things should he wish for? He did not actually need money, he had quite enough of that, and could consequently live the good life in abundance; he was likewise healthy and contented – oh, wishing contentment for himself did not seem to him to be worth the trouble, for man is *never* contented – so he thought, riding headlong all the while and spurring his horse, which had begun to pant; and now it stumbled, almost throwing its rider.

“Oh, I wish you’d break your neck! You cursed carrion!” the rich man angrily cried – and alas, the horse’s legs doubled up beneath it and it crashed down and broke its neck. One wish was gone, and the rich man was furious. He unbuckled the saddle and gear from the dead animal, and carried it for a distance, but not a long one by any means, for it grew too heavy for him, and he became terribly hot, and he wished again: If only this damned baggage were at home and my wife, who advised me to go on this ride, were sitting in the saddle!”

Two wishes were done; the saddle and bridle with the bit and stirrup and saddlecloth – everything had gone – and the miser breathed more freely; and it was fortunate, both that he did not make another wish and that his wife was no wish-maiden, for there she was at home, sitting stuck fast in the saddle with the riding-whip in her hand, not knowing what was going on, and wishing her husband, his nag, and his saddlery, to the Devil.

Whether the rich man wanted to or not, he had to wish his wife at liberty, and so the third wish was done.

His neighbour's brand-new house stood over the way brightly shining in the sunlight, and it was the finest in the village.

In his curiosity, the rich man opened the sack – if only he had not. In the sack there was – his neighbour's *poverty*, which now came upon him as an armed man.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 6:11.