

The Folk- and Fairy-Tales of Ludwig Bechstein: **The Wandering Staff**

Into an inn on a desolate northern heath there walked one day a man of solemn appearance. His face was wan and ashen-grey, and his garb was the brown of soil from a freshly-dug grave. In his hand he bore a staff of solid dark wood. He laid this staff in a corner of the common room. In the inn there lived only an old woman with a boy of around fourteen years of age, together with a serving-lad and a maid. These two were busy outside; there was no one in the lounge but the innkeeper and her young son.

The sombre wanderer called for a light refreshment, and the landlady went to bring it. The wanderer was left alone with the boy but he took no notice of him, walking instead to a window that faced the east, and he sighed, and stood there a long time, staring out over the dreary expanse of heathland.

Meanwhile the boy was looking, intrigued, at the stranger's staff. On the handle of this staff silver pins had been hammered in to form the figure of a cross:



These pins gleamed very brightly, like new, and this stick attracted the boy; his inquisitiveness changed into acquisitiveness. Cautiously, he threw a glance at the stranger, who was standing motionless at the window – cautiously, Jacob, as the landlady's young son was called, reached out his hand for the staff. Directly beside it stood a tall old wall clock with a carved brown case. Softly, Jacob turned the door-handle of the clock-case; softly,

he opened its door; softly, he took hold of the staff, and it made his hand tremble when he touched it – but he took it, and put it inside the clock-case, and closed the door again. The staff was gone.



Now the innkeeper, Jacob's mother, came in, bringing what the stranger had requested. Jacob slipped out of the room behind her.

"So – here it is!" the innkeeper said to her only guest. "God bless you! Do sit down!" – The stranger inclined his head in token of gratitude, took the glass, wet his pallid lips, but he did not sit down. Dread of the man crept over the old woman; outside, dusk had already begun to fall.

The innkeeper did not want the stranger to tarry under her roof, nevertheless she asked: "Do you wish to pass the night here? It's nearly evening! You do not sit down – are you not tired?"

"Cannot stay, must go on, must wander – who asks if I am *tired*? Oh!" came the gloomy answer.

The innkeeper's dread deepened. The stranger laid a coin on the table – the innkeeper did not reach for it.

Now he walked towards the door, reached into the corner and asked: "Where is my walking staff?"

"Did you have a staff?" the innkeeper asked.

"I had a staff, and I put it in this corner!" the tall dark man replied in a hollow voice.

"My God! Then where could it have gone?" cried the startled woman. "Look for it – perhaps you are mistaken? You put the staff somewhere else?"

"It has gone. It will bring no happiness to the hand that took it!" replied the man in a dull, choked voice. "Took?" the innkeeper vehemently exclaimed. "Who could have taken it? Why, there was no one here except you and I and –" here she broke off.

"And your son!" the stranger completed.

"God in Heaven!" the woman cried out – and she instantly ran out the room, crying in a voice that rang through the whole house: "Jacob! Jacob!"

Jacob did not answer – he had concealed himself; he knew why his mother was calling for him and he was afraid.

She returned out of breath and said: “There is neither sight nor sound of the boy – I don’t know, did he do it or didn’t he? But stay just a moment more!”

The innkeeper went into her chamber and came back straight afterwards with a staff that was old, indeed, but beautiful, and she handed it to the stranger. “There – take, in the meantime, the walking-stick of my late husband – you will no doubt call here again one day! If yours is found, then return this to me in exchange.”

“Thank you, hostess!” the stranger said, and he left. It was already very dark and mist hung over the stretches of heath – the pale wanderer strode into it.

The innkeeper’s heart felt lighter once this uncanny guest had left her house. She took the money he had left behind – it was a small, ancient silver coin. The woman knew neither the writing nor the stamp; she *could* not know that the coin had been struck during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, the same Emperor who destroyed Jerusalem.¹

Now the door quietly opened – Jacob shyly sidled into the room. “Ill-starred son!” his mother shrieked at him. “Speak, did you take the stranger’s staff?”

Jacob was silent – half from defiance, and half from fear of his mother’s anger and her severe punishment.

“You’re silent – so you did take it, you godless rogue!” the innkeeper scolded. “Where is the stick? Where did you drag it to? Take it this instant and run with it after the stranger, and have him return to you your late

¹ It was Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian, who destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, not Tiberius (d. AD 37).

father's Sunday stick which he went to church with, and which I lent to the stranger so he would not say he had been *robbed* in my house, robbed by *my child!*"

Jacob was a stubborn boy – he stayed silent, he did not move a muscle, he did not say a word, let his mother scold as much as she wished, and at last she lost her temper, beat him soundly, and sent him to bed without supper.

The next day, when the innkeeper was busy in the kitchen, Jacob turned the bolt-handle of the clock-case, opened the door, and reached in and pulled out the staff. He regarded it with pleasure but with fear also, for the seven silver pins twinkled so very oddly, and the staff was as icy-cold as a rigid snake, and yet it was as if the staff were *alive*. Jacob was drawn, against his will, to walk with this staff, and he walked with it and walked – and walked – far, far away – out over the moors – it was long since he had last seen his parental home. The staff stirred restlessly in Jacob's hand – against his will – and deadly shudders crept over his body. Whither, whither was the staff leading him, whither was it compelling him? He had to *walk*, *walk* on and on, for he could neither rest nor relax, at no spot, at no spring.

Finally, when the day was drawing to a close, when mist once again hung over the bleak, desolate moors, there stood before Jacob's eyes, almost ghostly in the grey misty twilight, a dismal farmstead; he walked towards it and at length became aware, to his great astonishment, that he was back home.

His mother received him badly and in an ill-humour; she had thought he had run away, had been deeply alarmed, and had sent out the

serving-lad and the maid to look for him, and almost a whole day's work had been lost. In an industrious household, no one likes to see such a waste. But Jacob was so tired, oh so tired; he staggered to his bed and fell down on it, half-fainting; the staff slipped from his hand without Jacob noticing, but his mother did not pick the staff up – she had a horror of it.

A week passed; the staff stood still in the case of the old wall-clock. Jacob could not recollect having hidden it in there a second time, and he took especial care not to touch it again; yet he looked at it from time to time, and shivers ran down his spine at the sight. In the darkness of the brown casing the seven points that formed the cross shone as brightly as diamonds.

It was a Friday, like that day on which Jacob had secretly taken and hidden the strange wanderer's staff, and behold – all of a sudden, the staff was in Jacob's hand, without his having stretched out for it, and Jacob had to wander again, wander like the previous time, without rest, without repose, until the stars began to shine in the sky. And then Jacob came back home dead on his feet, weak and shaking, and pale of visage; and he did not speak. And when he did speak, his words chilled the spine. He had passed through villages, and just by looking at the people he met in them, he could instantly tell whether they would die or no that same year; he could tell that houses would be consumed by conflagrations sometime soon; that meadows would be battered by hail.

Every Friday Jacob had to wander – the staff compelled him – he had to see all the impending woe and misfortune in every place to which the staff took him, and then at home he disclosed it to his mother, the maid, and

the serving-lad, and they disclosed it to the guests who stopped in.

Jacob stood by a rushing stream. Ha, now I've got it! Jacob thought, delighted – and the staff flew from the path into the rolling water. It seemed to wriggle in the stream like a brown snake.

"It won't be running after me again!" cried Jacob, and he returned home with a lightened heart.

Jacob's heart was not light for long; only until he saw, in the darkness of the clock-case, the seven stars of the cross uncannily flashing and twinkling.

Now the maid – for Jacob's misfortune was discussed more and more – gave a piece of advice. "*Nail* up that shabby old case," she advised, "then the spook'll be scuppered. It's all one whether the clock works or not."

That was a really good piece of advice; it's just a pity that it was in vain. When the next Friday arrived, the staff was in Jacob's hand, and he simply did not know how. But he had to wander – wander – wander – from morning until evening – and came back home, more tired and more wretched than ever before.

"If such a witch's trick befell me," said Walt, the clever serving-lad, "I know what I'd do, all right. I'd chop the stick into smithereens, and that's flat!"

This advice was also attempted, in case it might pass the test. Unfortunately, it did not – something certainly shattered into pieces, however it was not the staff, but rather the axe with which Jacob struck blows upon the former; and his hand fell as if paralysed, feebly letting the axe-handle drop to the ground.

To wander, to wander! Every and every Friday which God brought into being – weak in body, sick at soul, close to despair. To wander and foresee the full excess of human misery, which an all-wise divinity beneficently keeps otherwise hidden from mortal eyes. Bands of warriors who devastated the towns, rivers which inundated them, herds whose corpses the plague left to fertilise the meadows – every atrocity the very near future was to bring, Jacob foresaw. One day he came to a village in which a fire was blazing; house after house was engulfed in the flames, which leapt from one roof to the next. Once again, an idea flashed through Jacob's mind. Into the blazing flames with the staff! And then the staff flew through the air – it caught on a burning rafter and became red-hot, then white-hot, and the silver pins of the cross blazed with a bluish light. Jacob went home without the staff.

And the wall-clock creaked, and the door opened by itself, making mock of the nails with which it was fastened shut – there was the staff – unscathed. Jacob sank unconscious into his mother's arms – he was utterly crushed; and the dear burden, which she was unable to keep upright, made her sink down onto her knees, and she prayed fervently and ardently, and screamed and wailed to the heavens.

Jacob wandered, *had to* wander, but he could no longer wander far – his strength was exhausted, the feeble spring of his life began to languish.

Fifty-two times had Jacob had to wander – *had to*, whether he was standing up or lying down, the staff tore him from thence; if he was weary to death, unable to move a muscle the whole week through – on Friday wandering ensued. Yet the staff was merciful, taking him on shorter and

ever shorter ways around his parental home; in the end, Jacob was so utterly exhausted that he needed a whole day for a walk of one hour, for dragging himself along more quickly was impossible for him. He was like a trembling geriatric of ninety years of age, and the colour of his countenance was like ash.

Jacob believed that he would die in the end, and his mother and all who saw him believed the same; and Jacob hoped so.

Then, on the day before the fifty-third Friday, a dream came to Jacob. He saw most vividly, as if it were really happening, the door of the old wall-clock open, the staff come out, and walk to the bed where Jacob lay.

And then the staff began to speak.

“Jacob,” it said, “I am a very old staff. The patriarch whom you are named after passed over the Jordan with me in his hand. I lay in the hand of Moses when Moses spoke with God, and became a snake, then a staff again. I lay in Aaron’s hand and became a snake once more and devoured the serpent-staves of Pharaoh’s sorcerers. And I was raised again by the hand of Moses and the Red Sea parted beneath me. Twice did Moses strike the barren rock with me, and a stream burst out of the rock in the desert, giving water to all who were dying of thirst, both men and beasts. Whose staff I am now, you, boy, cannot understand. You committed a great sin when you secretly purloined from the poor wanderer his staff and his support, and for that you have had to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and taste of the bitterness of life. But henceforth the Lord shall refresh your soul and lead you on in the paths of righteousness, for the sake of His name. The stick and staff of the *Lord* shall comfort you.”

When the staff had spoken thus, it was as if angels' wings fanned Jacob with heavenly peace. He felt no more fatigue, he fell into a slumber, and he awoke as one reborn.

Then Friday morning dawned – it was a *Good Friday*. Jacob thought he would have to begin wandering again at any moment, but the staff did not come into his hand.

Towards evening Jacob spoke softly and piously with his mother of exalted and divine things which children are too young to understand. Then the door opened and a tall dark wanderer walked in and gave the greeting: "Peace be with you!"

Shudders ran through mother and son; they both knew this wanderer. And then the door of the house-clock case opened, and the staff floated out and into the stranger's hand. The cross on the staff shone brightly through the evening gloom. The stranger said once more, "Peace be with you!", turned, and departed. A holy peace passed into the souls of mother and son. The woes of the staff had been taken from them.