

Hans Churban

In a certain village there stood an old manor, and its owner, an old man, had two sons, so clever that half as much would have been more than enough. They intended to woo the princess; this was permissible, for she herself had declared that she would choose as her husband the man who could best stand up for himself in conversation.

Both brothers prepared for the trial a whole week—they had no more time, yet that was quite sufficient: they possessed knowledge, after all, and that is the most important thing. One knew by heart the entire Latin dictionary and the local newspaper for three years—he could recite it equally well from beginning to end or from end to beginning. The other had thoroughly studied all the guild regulations and everything a guild master ought to know; thus, he believed it cost him nothing to discourse even on matters of state. Moreover, he could embroider suspenders—such a craftsman he was!

"I shall certainly win the king's daughter!" said each of them.

So their father gave each a fine horse: to the one who knew the dictionary and newspapers by heart, a black one; to the one endowed with political wisdom and who embroidered suspenders, a white one. Then the brothers greased the corners of their mouths with fish oil so their mouths might open quicker and easier, and set out on their journey. All the servants rushed into the courtyard to watch the young masters mount their horses. Suddenly a third brother appeared—there were only three of them altogether, yet nobody ever counted the third: he fell far short of his learned brothers, and they simply called him Hans Clod.

"Where are you off to, all dressed up like that?" he asked.

"We are riding to court to 'speak ourselves' a princess! Haven't you heard what has been drummed all over the country?"

And they told him what it was about.

"Aha! Then I'm coming with you!" said Hans Clod.

But the brothers merely laughed and rode away.

"Father, give me a horse!" shouted Hans Clod. "I'm seized with a terrible desire to marry! If the princess takes me, well and good; if not, I'll take her myself!"

"Nonsense!" said the father. "I won't give you a horse. You don't even know how to talk! Your brothers now—they're the real fellows!"

"If you won't give me a horse, I'll take the billy-goat! He's my own and will carry me splendidly!" And Hans Clod mounted the goat, dug his heels into its sides, and galloped down the road. Oh, how he sped along!

"Just see what we're made of!" he cried, singing at the top of his voice.

Meanwhile the brothers rode quietly and silently; they needed to ponder carefully all the witty remarks they intended to sprinkle into their conversation with the princess—for here one truly had to keep one's ears sharp.

"Ho-ho!" shouted Hans Clod. "Here I am too! Just look what I found on the road!"

And he showed them a dead crow.

"Clod!" they said. "Where are you dragging that?"

"As a gift for the princess!"

"There, there!" they said, burst out laughing, and rode on ahead.

"Ho-ho! Here I am again! Just look what else I found! Such things aren't found lying on the road every day!" The brothers turned around once more to look.

"Clod!" they said. "Why, that's an old wooden shoe, and without an upper part at all! Are you going to give that to the princess too?"

"I shall give that as well!" answered Hans Clod.

The brothers laughed and rode on ahead of him.

"Ho-ho! Here I am again!" Hans Clod shouted once more. "No, the farther I go, the more I find! Ho-ho!"

"Well, what have you found now?" asked the brothers.

"Ah, no, I won't tell! How delighted the princess will be!"

"Pah!" spat the brothers. "Why, that's just mud from the ditch!"

"And what mud!" replied Hans Clod. "The very finest sort—you can't hold it in your hands, it just runs through!"

And he stuffed his pocket full of mud.

Then the brothers spurred their horses and left him behind by a whole hour. At the city gates they procured, like all the suitors, numbered tickets and lined up in rows. Each row held six men, and they were placed so close together that they could not even move. And it was just as well, otherwise they would have torn each other's backs open merely because one stood in front of another.

All the other inhabitants of the country gathered around the palace. Many peered right into the windows—it was curious to see how the princess received the suitors. The suitors entered the hall one by one, and as soon as anyone stepped inside, his tongue immediately failed him!

"Not suitable!" said the princess. "Out with him!"

The elder brother entered—the one who knew the entire dictionary by heart. But after standing in the rows, he forgot absolutely everything; moreover, the floorboards creaked, the ceiling was mirrored so that one saw oneself upside down, at each window sat three clerks, plus one councilor, and all were writing down every word of the conversation in order to print it immediately in the newspaper and sell it on the corner for two shillings—simply horrifying. Besides, the stove had been heated so fiercely that it glowed red-hot.

"What heat there is here!" the suitor finally said.

"Yes, today father fancied roasting some chickens!" said the princess.

The suitor gaped; he had expected no such conversation and could think of nothing wittier to reply, though he very much wished to say something amusing.

"Er-er!" he stammered.

"Not suitable!" said the princess. "Out!"

He had to depart whence he came. After him, the second brother appeared before the princess.

"It's terribly hot in here!" he began.

"Yes, we are roasting chickens today!" replied the princess.

"How, what, wh..?" he mumbled, and all the clerks wrote down: "how, what, wh..?"

"Not suitable!" said the princess. "Out!"

Then came Hans Clod. He rode straight into the hall on his goat.

"Now that's some heat!" he said.

"Yes, I am roasting chickens!" replied the princess.

"What luck!" said Hans Clod. "Then may I roast my crow too?"

"You may!" said the princess. "But do you have anything to roast it in? I have neither a pot nor a frying pan!"

"I have something!" said Hans Clod. "Here's a little vessel, complete with a handle!"

And he pulled the old wooden shoe from his pocket and placed the crow inside it.

"Why, that's a whole dinner!" said the princess. "But where shall we get the gravy?"

"Oh, I have it in my pocket!" answered Hans Clod. "I have so much of it I don't know what to do with it—I could throw it away!" And he scooped a handful of mud from his pocket.

"That's what I like!" said the princess. "You're quick with answers, you don't have to dig in your pocket for a word—I'll take you for my husband! But do you know that every word we speak is being written down and will appear in tomorrow's newspapers? See, at each window stand three clerks, and besides them one councilor? And the councilor is the worst of all—he understands nothing!"

She said all this to frighten Hans. But the clerks snorted and dropped inkblots on the floor.

"Just look at these gentlemen!" said Hans Clod. "Now I'll treat him properly!"

Without further thought, he turned his pocket inside out and plastered the councilor's entire face with mud.

"That was clever!" said the princess. "I couldn't have done that myself, but now I shall learn!"

Thus Hans Clod became king, married, put on the crown, and seated himself upon the throne.

We learned all this from the newspaper published by the municipal council, which one ought not to trust.