

Select Popular Tales from the German of Musaeus — Legends of Rübezahl: The Countryman and his Family

Legend the Third.

P. 161.

he mountain spirit has not always been so ready to make amends to those upon whom he has played off his pranks, as in the case of honest Benedix: too often he has tormented the people with whom he came in contact, simply for the amusement of doing so, never heeding whether the poor sufferer were a worthy man or a rogue. Sometimes, in the garb of a peasant, he would join himself to a solitary traveller on his way, and, pretending to direct him the shortest way, would send him ever so far out of his road; and then, perhaps, like an ignis fatuus, leading him into a morass, he would reveal himself suddenly in his proper form and vanish, amidst a peal of laughter. Another favourite trick of his was to waylay the countrymen returning from market, and suddenly to appear before them, and chace them in the form of some frightful monster, till the poor creatures were almost terrified out of their wits. However, to the credit of Rübezahl, it may be said, that he was tolerably just in his dealings, and that when he inflicted punishment it was upon those who in reality deserved it.

But there was one crime which never failed to call down the vengeance of the Giant-lord, even if the culprit was in other respects ever so innocent and praiseworthy. This crime was no other than calling the Mountain Spirit by the name of Rübezahl, and there were, of course, good reasons why he had strictly forbidden this cognomen. To have any chance, therefore, of being kindly treated by the gnome, it was necessary, above all things, to avoid this name, and to salute him respectfully as the "Lord of the Mountain."

Tradition tells, that there was once a physician who went to gather herbs on the Riesengebirg, and who was frequently joined by Rübezahl, sometimes in one guise, sometimes in another, and was very courteously assisted by him in his botanical researches. One day he appeared as a woodcutter, and began by professing to instruct the doctor in the properties and uses of various herbs, of which the latter had never before heard. The learned physician, however, did not quite relish the

idea of a poor woodcutter knowing more of these subjects than himself, and he exclaimed, with some warmth, "Sirrah, do you pretend to teach a physician the knowledge of herbs? Well, now, since you are so wise, tell me whether came first—the oak or the acorn?" "The oak," answered the gnome, "for the fruit proceeds from the tree." "Fool," cried the physician, "how then came the first oak if not from an acorn, which is the germ of the tree?" "That," replied the woodcutter, very humbly, "is a question beyond me, and which I leave to wiser heads to resolve. But let me also put a question to you. Who is the proprietor of this piece of ground where we now are? The King of Silesia or the Lord of the Mountain?" "The ground," replied the doctor, "belongs of course to the King of Silesia. As to him you call the Lord of the Mountain, or, as I call him, Rübezahl, the Turnip Counter, there is, I assure you, no such person; he is a mere bugbear; a name to frighten children and ignorant people with, and nothing more." Scarcely had he spoken when the form of the woodcutter rose into gigantic proportions, and the redoubtable spirit himself appeared before the astonished physician, and roared in a furious tone, "Rübezahl! scoundrel—I'll teach thee to talk of Rübezahl;" and with this he laid hold of the unlucky doctor by the neck, shook him and beat him till life was hardly left in him, and then let him find his way home from the Giant Mountains as he best could. The poor fellow never fully recovered the effects of his drubbing, and as long as he lived he was never found botanizing again on the domains of the Lord of the Mountain.

We must give an instance, however, of the benevolent way in which the gnome could conduct himself when he chose. A countryman of Richenberg was once reduced from various causes to a state of great poverty, and even disposed of his farm and his flocks; and, to add to his distress, he had a wife and six children to support. "If we could contrive to borrow," said he one day to his disconsolate wife, "a hundred dollars, we might purchase another farm, and thus retrieve our circumstances. You have wealthy relations on the other side of the mountains, what if I should go to them and ask them for assistance;—perhaps they may LEGENDS OF RUBEZAH. compassionate us, and lend us the money we need, to be repaid with interest."

The dejected wife assented to the proposal, because she knew of nothing better to be done. Whereupon Veit put a dry crust of bread into his pocket, and went his way. Worn and wearied by the heat of the day and the long journey, he reached, in the evening, the village, where the rich cousins dwelt, but none of them would acknowledge him; not one of them would receive him. With burning tears he related to them his misery; but the hard-hearted misers paid no heed to his words, and wounded the feelings of the poor man by reproaches and insulting proverbs. One said, "Young blood, spare your strength;" the second, "Pride comes before a

fall;" the third, "Act well and you will fare well;" the fourth, "Every one forges his own fortune." In this manner they scorned and mocked him; called him a spendthrift and a lazy fellow, and at last drove him out of the house, sending the house dog after him. Such a reception from the rich relations of his wife, the poor cousin had never contemplated; confounded and sad, he slunk away, and as he had nothing to pay for a lodging at the inn, he was obliged to pass the night in a field upon a hay-rick. Here he sleeplessly awaited the return of day, to begin his homeward journey.

As he again approached the mountains, grief and sorrow so overcame him that he was on the brink of despair. Two days' wages lost, thought he to himself, languid and weakened by hunger and grief; without hope, without consolation! When you return home, and the six starving children stretch out their hands to you for bread, asking for food, when you have, instead, only a stone to offer; father-heart! father-heart! how wilt thou endure that? Break in two, poor heart, before thou feelest such anguish! Saying these words, he threw himself beneath a bush to indulge in his gloomy thoughts.

As the mind, however, at the moment of extremity, puts forth its most powerful energy, ransacking every corner of thought to find out some means of preservation, or to delay the coming evil; and as a sailor who sees his vessel fast sinking, quickly climbs the rope-ladder, seeking safety by the tall mast, or laying hold of plank or empty cask, in the hope of keeping himself afloat;—so it occurred to the unhappy Veit, in the midst of a thousand useless plans and projects, to turn for relief from his misery to the Spirit of the Mountain. He had heard many strange tales of him, how he had sometimes lured and tormented travellers, and done them much harm, yet, at the same time, how he had likewise shown kindness to others. It was well known to Veit that the spirit punished all those who called on him by his nickname; but he knew no other way of accosting him, so he therefore ventured at the risk of a cudgelling, and called out as loud as he could, "Rübezahl! Rübezahl!"

There immediately appeared at this call a form like that of a grim collier or charcoal burner, with a red beard reaching down to his waist, fiery, staring eyes, and armed with a huge cudgel like a weaver's beam, now raised in wrath to strike the daring scorner. "Your favour, Master Rübezahl," said Veit, quite undismayed, "pardon me if I do not give you your right title—only hear me, and then do whatever you like. This candid speech and the sorrowful appearance of the man, which betrayed neither insolence nor pertness, softened in some degree the anger of the spirit. "Earthworm," he said, "what tempts you to disturb me? Do you not know that you must pay for your rashness with your neck and skin?" "Sir," replied Veit, "it is trouble which compels me to this. I have a request to make, which you

could easily grant. If you would lend me a hundred dollars I will repay them at the end of three years, with the usual interest, as sure as I am an honest man." "Fool!" said the spirit, "am I a Jew, or an usurer, to lend money upon interest? Away to your brother man and borrow there what you need, but leave me in peace." "Ah," replied Veit, "it is all over with brotherly kindness. There is no brotherhood in mine and thine." Upon this he related his story from the beginning, and painted his deep misery so touchingly, that the gnome could not refuse his petition. And even had the poor fellow been less deserving of compassion, there was something so novel and singular to the spirit in the idea of becoming a capitalist and lending out money, that he was inclined, for the sake of the confidence reposed in him, to grant the prayer of the man. "Come, follow me," he said, leading him through the wood to a remote valley, and stopping at a steep rock, whose base was hid by thick bushes.

When Veit, with no small trouble, had forced his way through the thicket, by the side of his conductor, they reached the mouth of a dark cave. The good Veit was not over-well pleased to be obliged thus to grope in the dark: one cold shiver after another run through him, and his hair stood on end. He very soon, however, saw, to his great joy, a blue flame flickering in the distance; the cavern became enlarged to the size of a spacious hall, the flame burned clear, and floated as a pendant lamp in the centre of the rocky chamber. Upon the floor he espied a brewer's copper, filled to the brim, with hard bright dollars. When Veit saw this treasure, all his fear fled, and his heart leapt for joy. "Take," said the spirit, "what you need, be it little or be it much, only give me an acknowledgment for the sum, provided you are skilled in the art of writing." The debtor assented, and counted out to himself, conscientiously, the hundred dollars, not one more, not one less. The spirit appeared to pay no attention to the counting out of the money, but turned himself away, and sought for his writing materials. Veit wrote the bond, and made it as binding as possible; the gnome then locked it up in an iron box, and said to Veit, on parting, "Go hence, and with diligent hand, make use of the money. Forget not that thou art my debtor, and mark well the entrance into the dell, and the cleft in the rock. As soon as three years are past, pay me back the capital with the interest. I am a stern creditor, and should you break faith, I will come in fury and demand it." The honest Veit promised faithfully to pay on the very day, though without an oath, and without pledging his soul and happiness, as bad payers are accustomed to do, and then departed from his benefactor of the rock with a grateful heart, easily finding his way out of the cavern.

The hundred dollars had such a beneficial influence both on mind and body, that he needed no other strengthening; when he again saw the morning light, he felt as if he had inhaled the balsam of life whilst in the rocky cave. Joyful and strong he

now stepped towards his home, and entered the lonesome hut about nightfall; when the famishing children beheld him, they came all towards him, crying, "Bread, father! a morsel of bread! You have long let us want." The sad mother sat weeping in a corner, fearing the worst, according to the manner of thinking of the weak and timid, and expected her husband to begin a melancholy tale. He, however, shook hands cheerily, commanded a fire to be kindled on the hearth, as he had brought groats and millet from Reichenberg in his wallet, with which the good woman was to make pottage so thick that the spoon could stand in it. Afterwards he gave her an account of the happy consequences of his journey. Your cousins, said he, are excellent people; they did not upbraid me with my poverty, did not misapprehend me, or drive me shamefully from their door; but they kindly took me in, opened to me heart and hand, and counted out to me on the table a hundred dollars in cash, as a loan. Upon this the heavy weight was taken from the heart of the poor woman, which had long oppressed her. Had we applied sooner, she said, to the right smith we might have been spared much misery. She now boasted of the relationship, of which she had never known any good before, and became quite proud of her rich cousins.

Her husband willingly gave her this pleasure, so flattering to her vanity, after the many sorrows she had experienced. As she, however, never ceased speaking of her rich cousins, and passed many days in doing nothing else, Veit at last became worn out with the loud praises of the avaricious churls, and said to his wife, "When I was at the right forge, do you know what the master smith gave me as a piece of good advice?" "What?" asked his wife. "That every one was the smith of his own fortune; and we must strike the iron while it is hot; therefore, let us begin, and diligently set to work, and follow our occupation, so that from our earnings we may be able, in three years, to repay the loan with its interest, and be free from all debt." Veit then bought an acre of land, and a hay-field, then another, and another, until at last he bought a hide of land. There was a blessing in Rubezahl's money, as if a heek dollar were in it. Veit sowed and reaped, and was soon looked up to in the village as a well-doing man, and his purse enabled him, from his small capital, to extend his possessions. The third summer he had added to his fields an estate which brought him much increase: in short, he was one who prospered in all he did.

The day of payment now drew near, and Veit had saved so much, that he was able, without difficulty, to repay his debt. He laid down the money to be ready, and on the appointed day was early astir, awoke his wife, and all his children; ordered them to comb their hair, wash their faces, and put on their Sunday clothes; also their new shoes, and scarlet jackets, and kerchiefs, which they had never yet worn. He himself donned his best, and called out from the window, "Hans, put to the

horses." "Husband, what are you about?" asked his wife; "to-day there is neither festival nor church-going; what has put you in such good spirits, that you are preparing us for a merrymaking; and where are you going to take us?" He answered, "I am going to the rich cousins on the other side of the mountain, to visit the creditor who helped me by his loan, and to repay my debt with interest, for this is the pay day." This pleased the lady very much; she adorned herself and the children in a stately manner, so that the rich cousins might have a good opinion of her circumstances, and that they might not be ashamed of her, she strung a row of crooked ducats round her neck.

Veit shook the heavy bag with the money, took care of it himself, and when all was ready, he set out with his wife and children. Hans whipped on the four steeds, and they drove merrily over the plain towards the Giant mountains.

Before a steep narrow pass, Veit ordered the rumbling vehicle to stop. He came out, and made the others do the same; then told the servant, Hans, to go slowly up the hill, and to wait for them above, under the three linden trees; saying, likewise, that should they be rather long in coming, not to trouble himself, but just to let the horses take breath, and crop a bit of grass, as he knew a footpath which, though somewhat longer, was pleasant to walk upon. He then took the lead of his wife and children through the wood and thick bushes, wandered backwards and forwards, until his wife thought her husband had lost his way, and exhorted him to turn back, and follow the common road. Veit, however, suddenly stood still, gathered his six children around him, and then said, "You fancy, dear wife, that we are on our way to visit your kinsfolk, but that is not my intention. Your rich cousins are niggards and rascals, who, when in my poverty I sought from them comfort and support, ridiculed and scorned me, and drove me with insolence from them. Here dwells the rich cousin to whom we are indebted for our prosperity, and who lent me, on my word, the money which has increased so much in my hands. He appointed this day as the time when I was to return it with interest. Do you now know who our creditor is? The Prince of the Mountain, called Rübezahl!"

At these words his wife was violently affected, bent herself before a large cross, and the children trembled with terror and dread, lest their father should take them to Rübezahl. They had heard a great deal about him in the spinning-room, that he was a horrible giant, a destroyer of men, and so on. Veit related to them his whole adventure—how he had appeared at his call, in the form of a collier, and how he had acted towards him in the cave—praised his benevolence, with a grateful heart, and with such deep emotion, that the warm tears flowed down his sunburnt cheeks. "Wait here," he continued, "whilst I go into the cave to finish my business. Fear nothing; I shall not remain long away; and if I can prevail on the Mountain

Spirit, I will bring him to see you. Shun not to shake hands heartily with your benefactor, though his hands should be black or sooty; he will do you no harm, and will certainly rejoice in his own good deeds, and in our gratitude. Only take courage, he will give you golden apples and spice-nuts."

Although the anxious wife endeavoured to dissuade him from his journey to the cave in the rock, and though the children, sobbing and weeping, strove to keep him back, by surrounding him, and taking hold of the folds of his coat, he nevertheless tore himself from them by force, went into the thicket, and soon reached the well-known rock. He drew forth the heavy bag of money, rattled the hard dollars, and called out as loudly as he could, "Spirit of the Mountain, come and take thine own!" But no Rübezah! appeared; nor, after the most diligent search, could Veit find the cave or the door by which he had formerly entered.

Thus the honest debtor was obliged to return back with his money-bag. As soon as his wife and children caught a glimpse of him, they hastened joyfully to meet him: he was out of humour and much distressed that he could not give the payment to the proper person, and sat down upon a bank to consider what was now to be done. His former venture again occurred to him. "I will call on the Spirit by his nickname. Should it displease him, he may cudgel me, and knock me as he has a mind; at all events, he will certainly hear the call." So he shouted with all his might, "Rübezah! Rübezah!" His anxious wife entreated him to be silent, and tried to shut his mouth; but Veit would not be controlled, and only called out the more. Suddenly, the youngest child rushed to its mother, screaming, "Ah! the black man!" Quite pleased, Veit asked where. "There—he lurks behind that tree:" and all the children crept together, trembling with fear, and crying bitterly. The father looked round, but saw nothing; it was a delusion—a shadow only. In short, Rübezah! never made his appearance, and all Veit's shouting was in vain.

The family caravan now retraced its steps, and father Veit, sad and sorrowful, went towards the high road, which lay before them. A soft rustling sound among the trees came from the wood; the slender birches bent their heads, and the tremulous foliage of the aspen was gently stirred: the sound came nearer; the wind waved the far-spread branches of the oak, and drove before it the withered leaves, raising up on the road small clouds of dust, with which the children amused themselves; thinking no longer of Rübezah!, but chasing the dry leaves with which the wind sported. Among the withering foliage, a piece of paper was blown across their path, which the young spirit seer ran after. Just when about to catch it, the wind raised it up, and whirled it farther away, so that he could not lay hold of it. He, however, threw his hat after it, which at last covered it; it was a beautiful white sheet of paper, and as the economical father was accustomed to take care of the

most trifling thing in his house, the child brought to him what he had found, in the hope of obtaining a little praise. When the paper was unrolled to see what it contained, it was found to be the bond which Veit had drawn up and given to the Spirit of the Mountain, torn in half, and underneath was written—fully discharged. When Veit perceived this, he was deeply affected, and exclaimed, in great joy, “Dear wife and children, rejoice with me; he has seen us, heard our thanks; our benefactor, who invisibly floats around us, knows that Veit is an honest man. I am now free from my promise, so let us return home with glad hearts.” Parents and children wept many tears of joy and gratitude, until they again reached their conveyance. As the mother had a great desire to visit her relations, and to reprove them for their cruelty, they drove quickly down the mountain, and in the evening stopped at the same farm-house from which Veit had been driven away three years before. This time he knocked boldly at the door, and asked for the master. A person who was a total stranger and unknown to them appeared; from whom they learnt that the household of the rich cousins was broken up. The one was dead, the other ruined, and the third had left the place. Their places were no longer to be found in the community.

Veit and his companions remained over the night with the hospitable landlord, who detailed everything to them. The next day Veit returned home to his occupations, increased in wealth and in lands, and continued to be an upright, as well as a prosperous man all the days of his life.

Finis.