

Select Popular Tales from the German of Musaeus — Legends of Rübezahl: The Rescued Lover

Legend the Second.

P. 155.

Scarcely were these words pronounced, when he heard in the distance human voices. Three young journeymen were passing over the mountain, the boldest among them incessantly crying out, "Rübezahl, come down! Rübezahl, thou maiden stealer, come hither."

From time immemorial gossip had faithfully preserved, by oral tradition, the love adventure of the spirit of the Mountain; embellished, as is usual in such cases, with many lying additions, and the tale had become the subject with which all travellers amused themselves as they passed over the mountains. Innumerable were the dreadful stories of things which had never happened, yet were sufficient to frighten the timid; whilst the stronger-minded wits, and philosophers, who, in broad daylight and in company, had no faith whatever in spectres, and, indeed, ridiculed the idea, were in the habit, in order to prove their courage, of citing the spirit to appear; calling him in their folly by his nickname, and even at times abusing him. The peaceful Mountain Spirit had never been known to take any notice of such liberties; for, indeed, in the depths of his abode he had never heard one word of this audacious mockery. The more, therefore, was he astonished when he now heard the whole chronicle of his misfortunes thus briefly and convincingly shouted out.

As the storm wind he flew through the dark pine forest, with the intention of strangling the unhappy wight who, without meaning any harm, had amused himself at his expense. But it occurred all at once to the spirit that such a cruel revenge would excite much disturbance in the country, banish all visitors from the mountains, and deprive him of the opportunity of having his sport with them. He, therefore, permitted the trespasser and his companions to continue their way unmolested, reserving him for some marked and more appropriate punishment.

The offender parted with his friends at the next crossway, and reached, for the present, his native town, Hirschberg, with a whole skin. But Rübezahl had followed him unperceived to the inn, in order to know where again, at a convenient time, to

find him. He now returned to his mountains, meditating how he best could avenge himself. By accident, he met on the road a rich Jew, whose steps were bent towards Hirschberg, and it struck him at once to make him the instrument of accomplishing his end. He took the form and dress of the merry fellow who had mocked him, entered into friendly conversation with the Jew, and imperceptibly led him into a bye-path, where he seized him furiously by his beard, knocked him down, beat him, and robbed him of his purse, which contained a great deal of money and many jewels. After having kicked him with his feet, and beaten him with his hands by way of addition, he then left the poor plundered Jew half dead and despairing of life, in the midst of the bushes.

When the Israelite had somewhat recovered from his fright, and felt that life was still in him, he began to lament, and call loudly for assistance, fearing he would perish in the solitude. A very respectable-looking man now came up to him, a citizen apparently from one of the neighbouring towns; asked the reason of the clamour, and when he found him tied, loosened the bands from his hands and feet, and acted in every way the part of the Samaritan. He then led him to the high road, and accompanied him courteously until they reached Hirschberg; and at the door of an inn, the stranger parted with him, after giving him sufficient money to defray the expense of a meal. What was the astonishment of the Jew when he entered the parlour of the inn, and beheld the very person who had robbed him sitting at the table as free and easy as a person only can be who is unconscious of having done any evil. There stood before him a pint of the wine of the country, and he amused himself in all manner of ways with a few other merry companions beside him. Beside him was the identical wallet into which he had seen him thrust the stolen purse. The amazed Jew could scarcely trust his eyes; he withdrew into a corner, and took counsel with himself how to recover his lost property. It seemed impossible to be mistaken as to the person; he, therefore, quietly slipped out at the door, went to the magistrate, and offered his thief-salutation, (*Diebesgruss*).

The Hirschberg magistrates and officials were at that time famed for their speedy administration of justice, when they were assured of their fees, and there was something to defray expenses; but, when they were to do their duty "*ex officio*," and no perquisites were to be had, here, as elsewhere, they went at a snail's pace. The experienced Israelite was well aware of this, and when he saw the magistrate hesitating to make out the warrant he alluded to the glittering "*corpus delicti*," and this golden hope soon expedited the matter. Policemen, armed with halberts and spears, surrounded the inn, seized the guiltless criminal, and brought him to the bar of justice, where the wise administrators had in the interim assembled.

"Who art thou?" asked the severe judge, when the defendant was brought in; "and from whence dost thou come?"

"I am an honest tailor by trade," answered the youth, freely, and undismayed: "my name is Benedix; I come from Liebenau and am now at work here with my master."

"Hast thou not murderously attacked this Jew in the wood; beaten, bound him, and robbed him of his purse?"

"I have never seen this Jew with my eyes," answered the tailor; "neither have I beaten him, bound him, or robbed him of his purse: I belong to an honest guild, and ran no highwayman."

"How canst thou prove thy respectability?"

"By my passport, and the testimony of my good conscience."

"Bring forth thy passport."

Benedix cheerfully opened the wallet, well knowing that it contained nothing but what he had honestly earned. But as he emptied it, alas! underneath the trifles which fell out was heard the rattling of gold. The policemen quickly laid hold of it, and drew forth the heavy purse, which the Jew, with great delight, claimed as his own, "deductis deducendis;" that is, with the exception of what was to go into the pockets of the magistrate and other officials.

Poor Benedix stood as if thunderstruck, almost sinking with horror; his face became pale, his lips quivered, his knees shook; to speak was impossible. The judge's brow darkened; his threatening countenance foreboded a severe sentence.

"How now, criminal," thundered the high-bailiff; "art thou still daring enough to deny the robbery?"

"Be merciful, dread judge!" whined the unhappy culprit on his knees, and with up-raised hands. "I take all the Saints to witness that I am innocent of the robbery; neither do I know how the purse of the Jew came into my wallet. Heaven only knows."

"Thou art convicted," resumed the judge; "the purse is sufficient proof; and now, in honour to God and to justice, confess openly the truth, before the torturer comes to wring it from your lips."

The terrified Benedix could do nothing except insist that he was innocent; but he preached to deaf ears. He was thought a hardened thief, who denied his crime in order to save his neck. Master Hammerling, the stern investigator of truth, was

called in, to induce our poor tailor, by the eloquence of his iron argument, to confess, for the honour of God and the law, that he deserved death. The joyful support of a good conscience now entirely forsook the unfortunate youth, and he trembled before the torments which awaited him. As the torturer was on the point of applying the thumb-screw, he reflected that this operation would for ever incapacitate him from handling his needle with honour; and rather than be a mere quack in his trade all his life, he thought it would be as well to be done with it at once; and thus he confessed himself guilty of a horrible crime, of which his heart knew nothing. The trial was immediately brought to an end; the culprit condemned to be hanged; and the sentence to be carried into execution early next morning, for the sake of rendering speedy justice as well as to spare the expense of keeping the prisoner.

All the spectators, who had been allured by the sittings of the high tribunal, found the sentence most wise and just; but none exceeded the merciful Samaritan in his applause, who had likewise found his way into the court. He seemed at a loss for words wherewith to extol the love of justice exhibited by the Lords of Hirschberg. In fact, no one had taken such deep interest in the affair as this friend of humanity, who had himself put the Jew's purse into the wallet of the journeyman, and was none other than our friend Rübezahl.

Early next morning he waited, in the shape of a raven, near the gallows, for the funeral procession which was to accompany the victim of his revenge. Already he felt the ravenous desire to pick out his eyes; but for this time he was disappointed. A worthy Monk who was employed to prepare Benedix for death, in order the better to effect his pious design, petitioned the court for three days' delay, and at length succeeded in obtaining it from the magistrate, though not without great trouble, and after many threats of excommunication. When Rübezahl heard this he flew to the mountains there to await the time of the execution.

In passing through the forests, as was his custom, he discovered a young girl resting underneath a shady tree. Her head supported by a snow-white arm, drooped heavily on her bosom; her dress was not rich, but neat, and in the fashion patronized by citizens' daughters. From time to time she wiped a tear from her cheek, and sighed deeply. The gnome had once before felt the mighty effect of a maiden's tears: even now he was so much touched by them that he deviated, for the first time, from the law he had laid down to himself, to annoy and torment all the children of Adam who came near the mountains. The softening feelings of compassion awakened in him the desire to comfort the distressed beauty. He again took the form of a respectable citizen; approached the young girl, and said.

"Maiden, why dost thou mourn so lonely in this desolate place? Hide not thy grief from me, that I may know how thou canst be helped."

The maiden, absorbed in sadness, was startled at the sound of these words, and looked up. Her soft blue eyes, with their half-broken light, might have melted a heart of steel; clear tears shone in them like diamonds; her fair, pure, nunlike countenance, wore an expression of sorrow and grief which seemed to impart an additional charm to her natural loveliness. When she saw the respectable citizen standing before her, she opened her ruby lips, and said: "What is my grief to you, good sir, since nothing can help me? I am a wretch, a murderess; I have destroyed the one I most love, and must expiate my crime in tears and sorrow until death shall break my heart."

At this the honourable man was astonished. "Thou a murderess!" he exclaimed; "with such a heavenly face, does wickedness dwell in thy heart? Impossible! Mankind are, indeed, capable of all sorts of deceit and evil; but this is a riddle to me."

"I will solve it for you, if you wish," replied the disconsolate maiden.

"Do so," answered Rübezahl.

"From my early childhood I had a playfellow, the son of a virtuous widow, a neighbour of ours, who, when he grew up, wooed me for his bride. He was so good and kind, so faithful and true, his love so constant and pure, that he won my heart, and I vowed perpetual faith. Alas! the mind of the beloved youth I have poisoned, adder-like; I made him forget the virtuous precepts of his good mother, and have induced him to commit a crime for which he has forfeited his life."

The gnome exclaimed, emphatically, "Thou!"

"Yes," she replied, "I am his murderess; I have caused him to commit highway robbery; to plunder some knavish Jew: the Lords of Hirschberg have laid hold of him, tried him; and, alas! alas! to-morrow is the day appointed for his execution."

"And this has been caused by thee?" asked Rübezahl, wonderingly.

"Yes, sir; his young blood lies on my conscience."

"How so?"

"When his apprenticeship was done, in order to improve in his trade, he went over the mountains to visit the towns; at the hour of parting, when taking the last farewell, he said, 'Sweet love, be true to me. When the apple-tree shall blossom for the third time, and the swallow prepare its nest, I shall return from my

wanderings, to bring thee home as my young bride.’ And I faithfully promised to keep my vow. Now the apple-tree blossoms for the third time, the swallow is building its nest, and Benedix did return, reminded me of my promise, and sought to lead me to the altar. But I teasingly mocked him, as sometimes maidens do their lovers. I said, ‘I cannot be thy bride, for thou hast neither house nor money; and my little chamber is too small for two. First get bright coins, and then come and ask again.’ At these words the poor youth became very sad. ‘Ah, Clara!’ he sighed, with tears in his eyes, ‘carest thou for nothing but riches and gold? then art thou no longer the faithful maiden thou wert wont to be! Didst thou not grasp this hand, and pledge thy word to be true and faithful? And what had I then more than this hand, wherewith to support thee? From what proceeds thy pride and vain desires? Alas, Clara! I understand; a richer wooer has turned thy heart away from me. Is it thus that thou rewardest me, thou faithless one! Three such years have I spent in tedious languor for this hour, when I was to come and claim thee as my bride! How were my steps winged with joy and hope as I came over the mountains; and now thou rejectest me!’ He earnestly entreated more and more; but I was firm in my determination.

“‘My heart does not reject thee, Benedix,’ I replied; ‘it is only my hand which for the present I withhold. Away! make more money! and when thou hast been successful, return, and then I shall become thy wife.’

“‘Well,’ said he in anger, ‘since this is thy will, I go into the world. I shall run, beg, borrow, become a miser, steal, or do any thing; so that thou shalt not again see me until I have obtained the vain price, without which I am not to have thee. Farewell! I go.’

“In this way did I bewilder the poor Benedix; he departed in wrath; his good angel left him; he did what was not right; and what his heart, I am certain, abhorred.”

The worthy citizen shook his head at this speech; and after a pause, with a thoughtful look, he exclaimed, “Wonderful!” and turned towards the maiden. “But why,” he asked, “dost thou fill the forest with thy lamentations, which can be of no avail either to thy lover or to thyself?”

“Good sir,” she replied, “I was on my way to Hirschberg, but sorrow so oppressed me, that I was obliged to rest for a time under this tree.”

“And what wilt thou do in Hirschberg?”

“I will fall at the feet of the judge, fill the town with my lamentations, and the daughters of the city will aid me in imploring the judge to be merciful, to have

compassion, and spare the life of the innocent youth. Should I not succeed in saving my betrothed from ignominious death, then will I gladly die with him."

The spirit was so much touched by these words, that he forgot all at once his revenge, and resolved to give the young sorrowing girl her lover again. "Dry up thy tears," he said, with a look of sympathy, "and banish thy grief. Before the sun sinks to rest thy lover shall be free. To-morrow morning, when the first cock crows, be awake and watchful, and when a finger taps at thy window, open the door of thy little chamber, for it will be Benedix who stands there; but, beware of bewildering him again by thy folly: know, likewise, that he has not committed the crime of which thou believest him guilty, and thou, too, art free from sin, for thy wilfulness did not induce him to perpetrate so foul a deed."

The maiden, astonished at this speech, gazed earnestly at the speaker, but as his countenance bore neither the expression of deceit, nor of waggishness, she gained confidence, her clouded brow brightened up, and she said, with a kind of cheerful hesitation, "Good sir, if you do not mock me, and it be as you say, then must you be a seer, or the guardian angel of my poor lover, to know all this so well."

"His guardian angel!" said Rübezahl, somewhat confused, "truly I am not; but I may become so, and thou shalt hear how. I am a citizen of Hirschberg, and was one of the council when the poor fellow was convicted; but his innocence has been brought to light, and fear not for his life. I shall go and free him from his bonds, for I have much influence in the town. Be comforted, and return home in peace."

The maiden did as she was bidden, though fear and hope still struggled in her heart.

The pious Monk was just leaving the dungeon, and for the last time had wished the inconsolable criminal good night, when Rübezahl met him at the entrance, invisible of course, and still quite undecided how he should restore the poor tailor to liberty, without depriving the great ones of Hirschberg of the pleasure of exercising their ancient prerogatives of criminal jurisdiction; for the magistrates had won from Rübezahl golden opinions, by their prompt administration of justice. Suddenly, he hit upon a plan which was quite to his mind. He quietly followed the monk to his cloister, took a robe, and appeared again with a grey cassock at the door of the prison, which the jailer most respectfully opened to him.

"My anxiety for thy welfare," he began, "brings me once more here, though I had but scarcely left thee. Say on, my son, does there yet remain any thing burthening thy breast, for which I maybe able to comfort thee? Dost thou still think of Clara? dost thou still love her as thy bride? If thou hast any message to send her before thy death, confide it to me."

Benedix was still more astonished when he heard that name. The memory of his love, which he had most conscientiously laboured to suppress, now rushed so impetuously into his heart, that he wept and sobbed aloud, and was utterly incapable of pronouncing a single word. This heart-rending sight excited the compassion of our kind monk to such a degree, that he was resolved to bring the matter at once to an end.

"Poor Benedix," he said, "be calm and undismayed; thou shalt not die. I have been informed that thou art guiltless of the robbery, and that thy hand is unsoiled by crime; I am, therefore, come to deliver thee from prison, and to free thee from thy chains." He then took a key from his pocket. "Let us see whether it can unlock these doors." The attempt was successful; the prisoner was unchained; the fetters had fallen from his hands and feet. The good-natured seeming Monk then exchanged dresses with him, and said, "Go, and walk through the crowd of jailers and turnkeys, and along the streets, demurely as a monk; then, when thou hast left the town and its jurisdiction behind thee, hasten towards the mountains, and do not rest until thou readiest Liebenau, and Clara's door: knock softly,—there thy bride anxiously awaits thy coming."

Our honest Benedix fancied it was all a dream; he rubbed his eyes, pinched his legs and arms, to see whether he was awake or asleep, and when he saw how matters really were, he embraced the knees of his deliverer, and rested in mute joy, for not a word could he say. The good-hearted monk forced him away, giving him, for his journey, a loaf of bread and a sausage. With tottering steps the youth passed the threshold of the melancholy prison, dreading every moment to be recognised.

Clara in the meanwhile sat sadly thinking in her little chamber, listening to every movement caused by the wind, and watching the footsteps of every passer by. It often seemed to her as if the window shutters were rattling, or as if she heard a knock; her heart beat; she looked out, but was disappointed.

The cocks in the neighbourhood already shook their feathers, and announced by their crowing the coming day. The bell of the monastery sounded for early matins, which was to her like a death-knell.

The watchman blew his horn for the last time to awaken the sleeping housemaids to their early day's work. Clara's lamp began to burn dimly, now deficient in oil; her anxiety increased every moment, and did not permit her to perceive the beautiful rose which, as a propitious omen, gleamed up from the glimmering wick. She sat on her bedstead, wept bitterly, and sighed, "Benedix, Benedix, what a sorrowful day for thee and for me is now dawning." She ran towards the window:—alas, blood-red seemed the sky in the direction of Hirschberg, and dark

clouds like crape and mournful drapery floated over the horizon. She shuddered at this ominous sight, and fell into a gloomy reverie: the silence of death was around her.

From this she was aroused by three soft taps at the window; a shiver ran through her veins; she jumped up, gave a loud cry, for a voice whispered through the opening, "Dearest love, art thou awake?" "Ah, Benedix! is it thyself or thy spirit?" she exclaimed, rushing quickly to the door; but when she saw the friar, she sunk down, almost dying with horror. His faithful arm, however, soon raised her up, and the kiss of affection (that great remedy for all sorts of hysterics) brought her speedily back to life again.

When the surprise was over, and the first effusion of feeling had somewhat subsided, Benedix related his wonderful escape from the prison; but his tongue clove to his mouth from thirst and fatigue. Clara brought him some fresh water, after drinking which he felt hungry. She had nothing to give him, save the usual panacea of lovers, bread and salt, with which they at times too hastily make a vow to be contented and happy all the days of their life. Benedix now thought of his sausage, took it from his pocket, amazed to find it heavier than a horse's shoe. He broke it open, and behold pure gold pieces fell out of it, at which Clara was much frightened, thinking it was a shameless relic of the shocking robbery of the Jew, and that Benedix, after all, was not so innocent as the respectable citizen, who met her on the mountain, had made her believe.

But when the honest fellow assured her that the good Monk had given him the secret treasure, probably as a marriage gift, she was satisfied.

Both blessed with grateful hearts their generous benefactor, left the place and went to Prague, where Master Benedix lived much respected with his wife Clara, and many sons and daughters.

The dread of punishment, however, had taken such deep root within him, that he always dealt fairly with his customers, and quite against the nature and the practice of his companions in the trade, he never clipped off the smallest piece of cloth entrusted to his care.

Early that same morning, when Clara shivering with joy, heard the knock of her lover at the window, a finger knocked likewise at the door of the jail at Hirschberg.

It was the worthy father himself, who came to accompany the criminal in his last hours. Rübezahl had undertaken to play the part of the culprit, and was determined to uphold that character throughout, in honour of the administration of justice.

And now the fatal sign was given, and Rübezahl subjected himself quietly to all the formalities which had to be gone through. By and by, however, he began to shake the rope about at such a rate that the executioner was frightened beyond measure; and the populace were becoming noisy, and some expressed a wish to stone him, for making the poor fellow suffer more than was needful. To prevent this, Rübezahl feigned to be dead. When the crowd had dispersed and only a few persons remained near to look on, the merry spirit began his play again, and terrified the beholders by making the most hideous grimaces. In consequence, a rumour was spread abroad towards evening that the criminal could not die, and was dancing on the place of execution.

The Senate was then induced to inquire into the matter, and early next morning commissioned a deputation for that purpose. When the commissioners arrived at the place of execution, they found nothing but a small bundle of straw covered with rags, such as people are wont to place in the fields or gardens to scare away dainty sparrows. At this, the officials of Hirschberg were greatly amazed; they thought it best, however, to burn the man of straw privately and bury his memory, at the same time spreading a report, that the strong wind during the night had blown the slender tailor far away over the boundaries of the town.