



The Arch Rogue

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Intermediate

13 min read

There once lived, years ago, a man known only by the name of the Arch Rogue. By dint of skill in the black art, and all arts of imposition, he drove a more flourishing trade than all the rest of the sorcerers of the age. It was his delight to travel from one country to another merely to play upon mankind, and no living soul was secure, either in house or field, nor could properly call them his own.

Now his great reputation for these speedy methods of possessing himself of others' property excited the envy of a certain king of a certain country, who considered them as no less than an invasion of his royal prerogative. He could not sleep a wink for thinking about it, and he despatched troops of soldiers, one after another, with strict orders to arrest him, but all their search was in vain. At length, after long meditation, the king said to himself—

“Only wait a little, thou villain cutpurse, and yet I will have thee.”

Forthwith he issued a manifesto, stating that the royal mercy would be extended to so light-fingered a genius, upon condition that he consented to appear at court and give specimens of his dexterity for his majesty's amusement.

One afternoon, as the king was standing at his palace window enjoying the fine prospect of woods and dales,

over which a tempest appeared to be then just gathering, some one suddenly clapped him upon the shoulder, and on looking round he discovered a very tall, stout, dark-whiskered man close behind him, who said—

“Here I am.”

“Who are you?” inquired the king.

“He whom you look for.”

The king uttered an exclamation of surprise, not unmixed with fear, at such amazing assurance. The stranger continued, “Don’t be alarmed. Only keep your word with me, and I will prove myself quite obedient to your orders.”

This being agreed on, the king acquainted his royal consort and the whole court that the great sleight-of-hand genius had discovered himself, and soon, in a full assembly, his majesty proceeded to question him, and lay on him his commands.

“Mark what I say,” he said, “nor venture to dispute my orders. To begin, do you see yon rustic, not far from the wood, busy ploughing?”

The conjurer nodded assent.

“Then go,” continued the king,—“go and rob him of his plough and oxen without his knowing anything about it.”

The king flattered himself that this was impossible, for he did not conceive how the conjurer could perform such a task in the face of open day,—and if he fail, thought he, I have him in my power, and will make him smart.

The conjurer proceeded to the spot, and as the storm appeared to increase, the rain beginning to pour down in torrents, the countryman, letting his oxen rest, ran under a tree for shelter, until the rain should have ceased. Just then he heard some one singing in the wood. Such a glorious song he had never heard before in all his life. He felt wonderfully enlivened, and, as the weather continued dull, he said to himself—

“Well, there’s no harm in taking a look. Yes; I’ll see what sport is stirring,” and away he slipped into the wood,

still further and further, in search of the songster.

In the meanwhile the conjurer was not idle. He changed places with the rustic, taking care of the oxen while their master went searching through the wood. Darting out of the thicket, in a few moments he had slashed off the oxen's horns and tails, and stuck them, half hid, in the ploughman's last furrow. He then drove off the beasts pretty sharply towards the palace. In a short time the rustic found his way back, and looking towards the spot for his oxen could see nothing of them. Searching on all sides, he came at last to examine the furrow, and beheld, to his horror, the horns and tails of his poor beasts sticking out of the ground. Imagining that a thunderbolt must have struck the beasts, and the earth swallowed them up, he poured forth a most dismal lamentation over his lot, roaring aloud until the woods echoed to the sound. When he was tired of this, he bethought him of running home to find a pick and a spade to dig his unlucky oxen out of the earth as soon as possible.

As he went he was met by the king and the conjurer, who inquired the occasion of his piteous lamentation.

"My oxen! my poor oxen!" cried the boor, and then he related all that had happened to him, entreating them to go with him to the place. The conjurer said—

"Why don't you see if you cannot pull the oxen out again by the horns or by the tail?"

With this the rustic, running back, seized one of the tails, and, pulling with all his might, it gave way and he fell backward.

"Thou hast pulled thy beast's tail off," said the conjurer. "Try if thou canst succeed better with his horns. If not, thou must even dig them out."

Again the rustic tried with the same result, while the king laughed very heartily at the sight. As the worthy man now appeared excessively troubled at his misfortunes, the king promised him another pair of oxen, and the rustic was content.

“You have made good your boast,” said the king to the conjurer, as they returned to the palace; “but now you will have to deal with a more difficult matter, so muster your wit and courage. To-night you must steal my favourite charger out of his stable, and let nobody know who does it.”

Now, thought the king, I have trapped him at last, for he will never be able to outwit my master of the horse, and all my grooms to boot. To make the matter sure, he ordered a strong guard under one of his most careful officers to be placed round the stable court. They were armed with stout battle-axes, and were enjoined every half-hour to give the word, and pace alternately through the court. In the royal stables others had the like duty to perform, while the master of the horse himself was to ride the favourite steed the whole time, having been presented by the king with a gold snuff-box, from which he was to take ample pinches in order to keep himself awake, and give signal by a loud sneeze. He was also armed with a heavy sword, with which he was to knock the thief on the head if he approached.

The rogue first arrayed himself in the master of the bedchamber’s clothes, without his leave. About midnight he proceeded to join the guards, furnished with different kinds of wine, and told them that the king had sent him to thank them for so cheerfully complying with his orders. He also informed them that the impostor had been already caught and secured, and added that the king had given permission for the guards to have a glass or two, and requested that they would not give the word quite so loudly, as her majesty had not been able to close her eyes. He then marched into the stables, where he found the master of the horse astride the royal charger, busily taking snuff and sneezing at intervals. The master of the bedchamber poured him out a sparkling glass to drink to the health of his majesty, who had sent it, and it looked too excellent to resist. Both master and guards then began to jest over the Arch Rogue’s fate, taking, like good subjects, repeated draughts—all to his majesty’s health. At length they began to experience their effects. They gaped and stretched, sank gradually upon the ground, and fell asleep. The master, by dint of fresh pinches, was the last to yield, but he too blinked, stopped the horse, which he had kept at a walk, and said—

“I am so confoundedly sleepy I can hold it no longer. Take you care of the charger for a moment. Bind him fast to the stall—and just keep watch.”

Having uttered these words, he fell like a heavy sack upon the floor and snored aloud. The conjurer took his place upon the horse, gave it whip and spur, and galloped away through the sleeping guards, through the court

gates, and whistled as he went.

Early in the morning the king, eager to learn the result, hastened to his royal mews, and was not a little surprised to find the whole of his guards fast asleep upon the ground, but he saw nothing of his charger.

“What is to do here?” he cried in a loud voice. “Get up; rouse, you idle varlets!”

At last one of them, opening his eyes, cried out—

“The king! the king!”

“Ay, true enough, I am here,” replied his majesty, “but my favourite horse is not. Speak, answer on the instant.”

While the affrighted wretches, calling one to another, rubbed their heavy eyes, the king was examining the stalls once more, and, stumbling over his master of the horse, turned and gave him some hearty cuffs about the ears. But the master only turned upon the other side, and grumbled—

“Let me alone, you rascal, my royal master’s horse is not for the like of you.”

“Rascal!” exclaimed the king, “do you know who it is?” and he was just about to call his attendants, when he heard hasty footsteps, and the conjurer stood before him.

“My liege,” he said, “I have just returned from an airing on your noble horse. He is, indeed, a fine animal, but once or so I was obliged to give him the switch.”

The king felt excessively vexed at the rogue’s success, but he was the more resolved to hit upon something that should bring his fox skin into jeopardy at last. So he thought, and the next day he addressed the conjurer thus—

“Thy third trial is now about to take place, and if you are clever enough to carry it through, you shall not only have your life and liberty, but a handsome allowance to boot. In the other case you know your fate. Now listen. This very night I command you to rob my queen consort of her bridal ring, to steal it from her finger, and let no one know the thief or the way of thieving.”

When night approached, his majesty caused all the doors in the palace to be fast closed, and a guard to be set at each. He himself, instead of retiring to rest, took his station, well armed, in an easy chair close to the queen’s

couch.

It was a moonlight night, and about two in the morning the king plainly heard a ladder reared up against the window, and the soft step of a man mounting it. When the king thought the conjurer must have reached the top, he called out from the window—

“Let fall.”

The next moment the ladder was dashed away, and something fell with a terrible crash to the ground. The king uttered an exclamation of alarm, and ran down into the court, telling the queen, who was half asleep, that he was going to see if the conjurer were dead. But the rogue had borrowed a dead body from the gallows, and having dressed it in his own clothes, had placed it on the ladder. Hardly had the king left the chamber before the conjurer entered it and said to the queen in the king’s voice—

“Yes, he is stone dead, so you may now go quietly to sleep, only hand me here your ring. It is too costly and precious to trust it in bed while you sleep.”

The queen, imagining it was her royal consort, instantly gave him the ring, and in a moment the conjurer was off with it on his finger. Directly afterwards the king came back.

“At last,” he said, “I have indeed carried the joke too far. I have repaid him. He is lying there as dead as a door nail. He will plague us no more.”

“I know that already,” replied the queen. “You have told me exactly the same thing twice over.”

“How came you to know anything about it?” inquired his majesty.

“How? From yourself to be sure,” replied his consort. “You informed me that the conjurer was dead, and then you asked me for my ring.”

“I ask for the ring!” exclaimed the king. “Then I suppose you must have given it to him,” continued his majesty, in a tone of great indignation; “and is it even so at last? By all the saints, this is one of the most confounded, unmanageable knaves in existence. I never knew anything to equal it.”

Then he informed the queen of the whole affair, though before he arrived at the conclusion of his tale she was

fast asleep.

Soon after it was light in the morning the wily conjurer made his appearance. He bowed to the earth three times before the queen and presented her with the treasure he had stolen. The king, though excessively chagrined, could not forbear laughing at the sight.

“Now hear,” said he, “thou king of arch rogues. Had I only caught a sight of you through my fingers as you were coming, you would never have come off so well. As it is, let what is past be forgiven and forgotten. Take up your residence at my court, and take care that you do not carry your jokes too far, for in such a case I may find myself compelled to withdraw my favour from you if nothing worse ensue.”

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