



The Hare's Heart

John Theophilus Naaké

Polish

Intermediate
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Many years ago, on an island in the middle of the river Vistula stood a large castle, surrounded by a wall. At each corner was a high tower, from which flags streamed, and there strong guards kept watch. A leathern bridge, hung on chains, joined the island to the banks of the river.

In this castle lived a rich and valiant knight. Whenever a trumpet sounded over the entrance gate, it was a sure sign that the knight had returned victorious, and had brought valuable booty with him.

In the deep and dark dungeons of the castle many prisoners were kept, who were led out daily to work. They were compelled to repair the walls, and dig in the garden. Among them were an old woman and her husband. The old woman was a witch, and she was determined to revenge herself for their sufferings on the knight; she only waited for an opportunity to find him alone.

One day the knight returned as usual to the castle; tired with his exertions, he lay down to rest on the green grass, and soon fell fast asleep. The witch, who had watched him, came out quietly from her hiding-place, and sprinkled some poppy seed over his eyes to make him sleep more soundly. She then struck him on the side of his breast where his heart lay, with a twig of an aspen tree. The knight's breast was immediately opened, and the wicked witch could see his brave heart quietly beating. The malicious old woman chuckled with delight, and with her bony fingers and long nails she took out the heart so dexterously, that the poor knight never awoke. Then she put in its place the heart of a hare, closed the opening, hid herself among the thick bushes,

and awaited impatiently the result of her wickedness.

Before the knight was quite awake he already began to feel his timid heart. He, who once did not know what fear was, now trembled, and tossed his body uneasily about in his sleep. At last he opened his eyes. His coat of mail was too heavy for him. As soon as he got up he heard with terror the barking of the dogs. Formerly he loved to listen to their cry; now, terrified, he ran away like a timid hare. As he fled to his room, the clatter of his own arms and spurs alarmed him so much that he threw them away; and, almost worn out with terror, sank down on his bed.

The time was when the knight would dream only of battles and of rich booty; now he moaned with fear in his sleep. At the barking of the dogs, or the watch-cry of his soldiers, who in the high towers guarded the castle from surprise, he trembled like a child, and hid his face on the pillow.

After a time the knight's enemies besieged his castle. The officers and soldiers waited for their commander, who used to lead them to battle and to victory; but they waited in vain. He, the valiant knight, having heard the clatter of arms, the trampling of horses, and the noise of men, fled to the very top of his castle, whence he could see the numerous forces of the enemy. There he remembered his former battles, his victories, and the glory of his name. He wept bitterly, and called aloud:—

“Oh, Heaven! give me courage! Give me health and strength! My faithful followers are already in the field of battle, and I, their leader, who used to be ever in their front, am now, alas! like a timid maiden, looking down upon them from my castle wall. Give me a fearless heart! Give me strength to bear my arms! Restore me to my former self, and give me victory!”

These recollections of the past awakened him as it were from a dream. He hastened to his room, put on his armour, mounted his horse and galloped out through the gate. The sentries received him joyfully, and sounded their trumpets to announce his arrival. He hastened on, but fear was in his heart and mind. When the army courageously attacked the enemy, the general, terrified, turned his horse round, and flew back to the castle. Though sheltered behind its thick walls, fear did not even then leave him. He dismounted, ran into the deepest vault, and there, fainting away, awaited an inglorious death. His army, however, was victorious, and the watch at the towers received it triumphantly. His soldiers were surprised at the cowardly conduct of their leader. They searched for him a long time in vain; at last they found him in a cellar, half dead from fear and despair.

The unhappy knight did not live long. During the whole of the winter he tried to warm his trembling limbs

before the fire. When the spring came he opened his window that he might breathe the fresh air a little. A martin, which had built its nest near the roof, flying by, struck him on the head with its wing. The blow was fatal; the poor knight fell down as if struck by lightning, and soon afterwards died.

He was deeply deplored by all his followers. They could not comprehend what it was that had so completely changed their master. A year afterwards, when some witches were being “swum” for having stopped the rain, one of them confessed how she had removed the knight’s heart, and had put a hare’s heart in its place. Then they understood how a once courageous knight had become a craven. They wept bitter tears over his cruel fate, and, as a punishment, burnt the wicked witch over his grave.

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