

# *The Legend of Rubezahl, or Number-Nip*

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

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15 min read*

Once upon a time a glazier who was travelling across the mountains, feeling very tired from the heavy load of glass which he was carrying, began to look about to discover a place where he might rest it. Rubezahl, who had been watching for some time, no sooner saw this than he changed himself into a little mound, which the glazier not long afterwards discovered in his way, and on which, well pleased, he proposed to seat himself. But his joy was not of long continuance, for he had not sat there many minutes before the heap vanished from under him so rapidly, that the poor glazier fell to the ground with his glass, which was by the fall smashed into a thousand pieces.

The poor fellow arose from the ground and looked around him, but the mound of earth on which he had before seated himself was no longer visible. Then he began bitterly to lament, and to sigh with heartfelt sorrow over his untoward fate. At length he started once more on his journey. Upon this Rubezahl, assuming the appearance of a traveller, accosted him, and inquired why he so lamented, and what was the great sorrow with which he was afflicted. The glazier related to him the whole affair, how that, being weary, he had seated himself upon a mound by the wayside, how this had suddenly overthrown him, and broken to pieces his whole

stock of glass, which was well worth eight dollars, and how, in short, the mound itself had suddenly disappeared. He declared that he knew not in the least how to recover his loss and bring the business to a good ending. The compassionate mountain sprite comforted him, told him who he was, and that he himself had played him the trick, and at the same time bade him be of good cheer, for his losses should be made good to him.

Upon this Rubezahl transformed himself into an ass, and directed the glazier to sell him at the mill which lay at the foot of the mountain, and to be sure to make off with the purchase-money as quickly as possible. The glazier accordingly immediately bestrode the transformed mountain sprite, and rode him down the mountain to the mill, where he offered him for sale to the miller at the price of ten dollars. The miller offered nine, and the glazier, without further haggling, took the money and went his way.

When he was gone the miller sent his newly purchased beast to the stable, and the boy who had charge of him immediately filled his rack with hay. Upon this Rubezahl exclaimed—

“I don’t eat hay. I eat nothing but roasted and boiled, and that of the best.”

The boy’s hair stood on end. He flew to his master, and related to him this wondrous tale, and he no sooner heard it than he hastened to the stable and there found nothing, for his ass and his nine dollars were alike vanished.

But the miller was rightly served, for he had cheated in his time many poor people, therefore Rubezahl punished in this manner the injustice of which he had been guilty.

In the year 1512 a man of noble family, who was a very tyrant and oppressor, had commanded one of his vassals or peasants to carry home with his horses and cart an oak of extraordinary magnitude, and threatened to visit him with the heaviest disgrace and punishment if he neglected to fulfil his desires. The peasant saw that it was impossible for him to execute the command of his lord, and fled to the woods with great sorrow and lamentation.

There he was accosted by Rubezahl, who appeared to him like a man, and inquired of him the cause of his so great sorrow and affliction. Upon this the peasant related to him all the circumstances of the case. When Rubezahl heard it he bade him be of good cheer and care not, but go home to his house again, as he himself

would soon transport the oak, as his lord required, into his courtyard.

Scarcely had the peasant got well home again before Rubezahl took the monstrous oak-tree, with its thick and sturdy boughs, and hurled it into the courtyard of the nobleman, and with its huge stem, and its many thick branches, so choked and blocked up the entrance that no one could get either in or out. And because the oak proved harder than their iron tools, and could in no manner or wise, and with no power which they could apply to it, be hewn or cut in pieces, the nobleman was compelled to break through the walls in another part of the courtyard, and have a new doorway made, which was only done with great labour and expense.

Once upon a time Rubezahl made, from what materials is not known, a quantity of pigs, which he drove to the neighbouring market and sold to a peasant, with a caution that the purchaser should not drive them through any water.

Now, what happened? Why these same swine having chanced to get sadly covered with mire, what must the peasant do, but drive them to the river, which they had no sooner entered than the pigs suddenly became wisps of straw, and were carried away by the stream. The purchaser was, moreover, obliged to put up with the loss, for he could neither find his pigs again, nor could he discover the person from whom he had bought them.

Rubezahl once betook himself to the Hirschberg, which is in the neighbourhood of his forest haunts, and there offered his services as a woodcutter to one of the townsmen, asking for his remuneration nothing more than a bundle of wood. This the man promised him, accepting his offer, and pointed out some cart-loads, intending to give him some assistance. To this offer of help in his labours Rubezahl replied—

“No. It is quite unnecessary. All that is to be done I can very well accomplish by myself.”

Upon this his new master made a few further inquiries, asking him what sort of a hatchet he had got, for he had noticed that his supposed servant was without one.

“Oh,” said Rubezahl, “I’ll soon get a hatchet.”

Accordingly he laid hands upon his left leg, and pulled that and his foot and all off at the thigh, and with it cut, as if he had been raving mad, all the wood into small pieces of proper lengths and sizes in about a quarter of an hour, thus proving that a dismembered foot is a thousand times more effectual for such purposes than the

sharpest axe.

In the meanwhile the owner (who saw plainly that mischief was intended) kept calling upon the wondrous woodcutter to desist and go about his business. Rubezahl, however, kept incessantly answering—"No, I won't stir from this spot until I have hewn the wood as small as I agreed to, and have got my wages for so doing."

In the midst of such quarrelling Rubezahl finished his job, and screwed his leg on again, for while at work he had been standing on one leg, after the fashion of a stork. Then he gathered together into one bundle all he had cut, placed it on his shoulder, and started off with it towards his favourite retreat, heedless of the tears and lamentations of his master.

On this occasion Rubezahl did not appear in the character of a sportive or mischievous spirit, but as an avenger of injustice, for his employer had induced a number of poor men to bring wood to his home upon the promise of paying them wages, which, however, he had never paid them. Rubezahl laid at the door of each of these poor men as much of the wood he carried away as would repay them, and so the business was brought to a proper termination.

It once happened that a messenger vexed or played some trick upon Rubezahl, who thereupon revenged himself in the following manner, and so wiped out the score.

The messenger, in one of his journeys over the mountains, entered an hotel to refresh himself, and placed his spear as usual behind the door. No sooner had he done so than Rubezahl carried off the spear, transformed himself into a similar one, and took its place.

When the messenger, after taking his rest, set forth again with the spear, and had got some little way on his journey, it began slipping about every now and then in such a manner that the messenger began pitching forward into the most intolerable mire, and got himself sadly bespattered. It did this so often that at last he could not tell for the soul of him what had come to the spear, or why he kept slipping forward with it instead of seizing fast hold of the ground.

He looked at it longways and sideways, from above, from underneath, but in spite of all his attempts, no change could he discover.

After this inspection he went forward a little way, when suddenly he was once more plunged into the morass, and commenced crying—

“Woe is me! woe is me!” at his spear, which led him into such scrapes, and did nothing to release him from them. At length he got himself once more to rights, and then he turned the spear the wrong way upwards. No sooner had he done so than he was driven backwards instead of forwards, and so got into a worse plight than ever.

After this he laid the spear across his shoulder like a pikeman, since it was no use to trail it upon the earth, and in this fashion he started on. But Rubezahl continued his tricks by pressing on the messenger as though he had got a yoke on his back. He changed the spear from one shoulder to the other, until at last, from very weariness, he threw away the bewitched weapon, imagining that the Evil One must possess it, and went his way without it.

He had not proceeded above a quarter of a mile, when, looking carelessly about him, he was astounded to find his spear by his side. He was sadly frightened, and little knew what to make of it. At last he boldly ventured to lay hands upon it. He did so, and lifted it up, but he could not conceive how he should carry it. He had no desire to trail it any more on the ground, and the thought of carrying it on his shoulder made him shudder. He decided, however, to give it another trial, carrying it in his hand. Fresh troubles now arose. The spear weighed so heavy that he could not stir it a foot from the spot, and though he tried first one hand and then another, all his efforts were in vain.

At last he bethought him of riding upon the spear, as a child bestrides a stick. A wonderful change now came over the weapon. It ran on as though it had been a fleet horse, and thus mounted the messenger rode on without ceasing until he descended the mountain and came into the city, where he excited the wonder, delight, and laughter of the worthy burghers.

Although he had endured some trouble in the early part of his journey, the messenger thought he had been amply compensated at the close, and he comforted himself by making up his mind that in all future journeys he was destined to perform he would bestride his nimble spear. His good intentions were, however, frustrated. Rubezahl had played his game, and had had all the amusement he desired with the poor knave. Accordingly he

scampered away, leaving in his place the real spear, which never played any more tricks, but, after the old fashion of other spears, accompanied its master in a becoming and orderly style.

A poor woman, who got her living by gathering herbs, once went, accompanied by her two children, to the mountains, carrying with her a basket in which to gather the plants, which she was in the habit of disposing of to the apothecaries. Having chanced to discover a large tract of land covered with such plants as were most esteemed, she busied herself so in filling her basket that she lost her way, and was troubled to find out how to get back to the path from which she had wandered. On a sudden a man dressed like a peasant appeared before her, and said—

“Well, good woman, what is it you are looking for so anxiously? and where do you want to go?”

“Alas!” replied she, “I am a poor woman who has neither bit nor sup, for which reason I am obliged to wander to gather herbs, so that I may buy bread for myself and my hungry children. I have lost my way, and cannot find it. I pray you, good man, take pity on me, and lead me out of the thicket into the right path, so that I may make the best of my way home.”

“Well, my good woman,” replied Rubezahl, for it was he, “make yourself happy. I will show you the way. But what good are those roots to you? They will be of little benefit. Throw away this rubbish, and gather from this tree as many leaves as will fill your basket; you will find them answer your purpose much better.”

“Alas!” said the woman, “who would give a penny for them? They are but common leaves, and good for nothing.”

“Be advised, my good woman,” said Rubezahl; “throw away those you have got, and follow me.”

He repeated his injunction over and over again in vain, until he got tired, for the woman would not be persuaded. At last, he fairly laid hold of the basket, threw the herbs out by main force, and supplied their place with leaves from the surrounding bushes. When he had finished, he told the woman to go home, and led her into the right path.

The woman, with her children and her basket, journeyed on some distance; but they had not gone far before she saw some valuable herbs growing by the wayside. No sooner did she perceive them than she longed to

gather them, for she hoped that she should obtain something for them, while the leaves with which her basket was crammed were, she thought, good for nothing. She accordingly emptied her basket, throwing away the rubbish, as she esteemed it, and having filled it once more with roots, journeyed on to her dwelling at Kirschdorf.

As soon as she arrived at her home she cleansed the roots she had gathered from the earth which clung around them, tied them neatly together, and emptied everything out of the basket. Upon doing this, something glittering caught her eye, and she commenced to make a careful examination of the basket. She was surprised to discover several ducats sticking to the wickerwork, and these were clearly such of the leaves as remained of those which she had so thoughtlessly thrown away on the mountains.

She rejoiced at having preserved what she had, but she was again sorely vexed that she had not taken care of all that the mountain spirit had gathered for her. She hastened back to the spot where she had emptied the basket, in hopes of finding some of the leaves there; but her search was in vain—they had all vanished.

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