

The Little Glass Shoe

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Advanced
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A peasant, named John Wilde, who lived in Rodenkirchen, found, one time, a little glass shoe on one of the hills, where the little people used to dance. He clapped it instantly in his pocket, and ran away with it, keeping his hand as close on his pocket as if he had a dove in it, for he knew he had found a treasure which the underground people must redeem at any price.

Others say that John Wilde lay in ambush one night for the underground people, and snatched an opportunity to pull off one of their shoes by stretching himself there with a brandy bottle beside him, and acting like one that was dead drunk, for he was a very cunning man, not over scrupulous in his morals, and had taken in many a one by his craftiness, and, on this account, his name was in no good repute among his neighbours, who, to say the truth, were willing to have as little to do with him as possible. Many hold, too, that he was acquainted with forbidden acts, and used to carry on an intercourse with the fiends and old women that raised storms, and such like.

However, be this as it may, when John had got the shoe he lost no time in letting the folk that dwell under the ground know that he had it. At midnight he went to the Nine-hills, and cried with all his might—

“John Wilde of Rodenkirchen has got a beautiful glass shoe. Who will buy it? who will buy it?” for he knew that the little one who had lost the shoe must go barefoot till he got it again; and that is no trifle, for the little people have generally to walk upon very hard and stony ground.

John’s advertisement was speedily attended to. The little fellow who had lost the shoe made no delay in setting about redeeming it. The first free day he got that he might come out in the daylight, he came as a respectable merchant, knocked at John Wilde’s door, and asked if John had not got a glass shoe to sell:

“For,” says he, “they are an article now in great demand, and are sought for in every market.”

John replied that it was true that he had a very pretty little glass shoe; but it was so small that even a dwarf’s foot would be squeezed in it, and that a person must be made on purpose to suit it before it could be of use. For all that, it was an extraordinary shoe, a valuable shoe, and a dear shoe, and it was not every merchant that could afford to pay for it.

The merchant asked to see it, and when he had examined it—

“Glass shoes,” said he, “are not by any means such rare articles, my good friend, as you think here in Rodenkirchen, because you do not happen to go much into the world. However,” said he, after humming a little, “I will give you a good price for it, because I happen to have the very fellow of it.”

He bid the countryman a thousand dollars for it.

“A thousand dollars are money, my father used to say when he drove fat oxen to market,” replied John Wilde, in a mocking tone; “but it will not leave my hands for that shabby price, and, for my own part, it may ornament the foot of my daughter’s doll! Hark ye, my friend, I have heard a sort of little song sung about the glass shoe, and it is not for a parcel of dirt it will go out of my hands. Tell me now, my good fellow, should you happen to know the knack of it, how in every furrow I make when I am ploughing I may find a ducat? If not, the shoe is still mine; and you may inquire for glass shoes at those other markets.”

The merchant made still a great many attempts, and twisted and turned in every direction to get the shoe; but when he found the farmer inflexible, he agreed to what John desired, and swore to the performance of it. Cunning John believed him, and gave him up the glass shoe, for he knew right well with whom he had to do. So, the business being ended, away went the merchant with his glass shoe.

Without a moment's delay John repaired to his stable, got ready his horses and his plough, and went out to the field. He selected a piece of ground where he would have the shortest turns possible, and began to plough. Hardly had the plough turned up the first sod when up sprang a ducat out of the ground, and it was the same with every fresh furrow he made. There was now no end of his ploughing, and John Wilde soon bought eight new horses, and put them into the stable to the eight he already had, and their mangers were never without plenty of oats in them, that he might be able every two hours to yoke two fresh horses, and so be enabled to drive them the faster.

John was now insatiable in ploughing. Every morning he was out before sunrise, and many a time he ploughed on till after midnight. Summer and winter it was plough, plough with him ever-more, except when the ground was frozen as hard as a stone. He always ploughed by himself, and never suffered any one to go out with him, or to come to him when he was at work, for John understood too well the nature of his crop to let people see for what it was he ploughed so constantly.

However, it fared far worse with him than with his horses, who ate good oats, and were regularly changed and relieved, for he grew pale and meagre by reason of his continual working and toiling. His wife and children had no longer any comfort for him. He never went to the ale-house or to the club. He withdrew himself from every one, and scarcely ever spoke a single word, but went about silent and wrapped up in his own thoughts. All the day long he toiled for his ducats, and at night he had to count them, and to plan and meditate how he might find out a still swifter kind of plough.

His wife and the neighbours lamented over his strange conduct, his dulness and melancholy, and began to think he was grown foolish. Everybody pitied his wife and children, for they imagined the numerous horses that he kept in his stable, and the preposterous mode of agriculture he pursued, with his unnecessary and superfluous ploughing, must soon leave him without house or land.

Their anticipations, however, were not fulfilled. True it is, the poor man never enjoyed a happy or contented hour since he began to plough the ducats up out of the ground. The old saying held good in his case, that he

who gives himself up to the pursuit of gold is half-way in the claws of the evil one. Flesh and blood cannot bear perpetual labour, and John Wilde did not long hold out against his running through the furrows day and night. He got through the first spring; but one day in the second he dropped down at the tail of the plough like an exhausted November fly. Out of the pure thirst for gold he was wasted away and dried up to nothing, whereas he had been a very strong and hearty man the day the shoe of the little underground man fell into his hands.

His wife, however, found he had left a great treasure—two great nailed-up chests full of good new ducats; and his sons purchased large estates for themselves, and became lords and noblemen.

But what good did all that to poor John Wilde?

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