



The Lost Bell

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Intermediate
9 min read

Author's note: This story comes from the Isle of Rugen.

A shepherd's boy, belonging to Patzig, about half a mile from Bergen, where there are great numbers of underground people in the hills, found one morning a little silver bell on the green heath among the giants' graves, and fastened it on him. It happened to be the bell belonging to the cap of one of the little brown ones, who had lost it while he was dancing, and did not immediately miss it or observe that it was no longer tinkling in his cap. He had gone down into the hill without his bell, and, having discovered his loss, was filled with melancholy, for the worst thing that can befall the underground people is to lose their cap, or their shoes; but even to lose the bell from their caps, or the buckle from their belts, is no trifle to them. Whoever loses his bell must pass some sleepless nights, for not a wink of sleep can he get till he has recovered it.

The little fellow was in the greatest trouble, and looked and searched about everywhere. But how could he learn who had the bell? for only on a very few days in the year may they come up to daylight, nor can they then appear in their true form. He had turned himself into every form of birds, beasts, and men, and he had sung and groaned and lamented about his bell, but not the slightest tidings or trace of tidings had he been able to get. Most unfortunately for him, the shepherd's boy had left Patzig the very day he found the little bell, and he was now keeping sheep at Unrich, near Gingst, so that it was not till many a day after, and then by mere chance,

that the little underground fellow recovered his bell, and with it his peace of mind.

He had thought it not unlikely that a raven, or a crow, or a jackdaw, or a magpie, had found his bell, and from its thievish disposition, which attracts it to anything bright and shining, had carried it into its nest. With this thought he turned himself into a beautiful little bird, and searched all the nests in the island, and he'd sang before all kinds of birds to see if they had found what he had lost, and could restore to him his sleep. He had, however, been able to learn nothing from the birds. As he now, one evening, was flying over the waters of Ralov and the fields of Unrich, the shepherd's boy, whose name was John Schlagenteufel (Smite-devil), happened to be keeping his sheep there at the very time. Several of the sheep had bells about their necks, and they tinkled merrily when the boy's dog set them trotting. The little bird who was flying over them thought of his bell, and sang in a melancholy tone—

“Little bell, little bell,
Little ram as well,
You, too, little sheep,
If you've my tingle too,
No sheep's so rich as you,
My rest you keep.”

The boy looked up and listened to this strange song which came out of the sky, and saw the pretty bird, which seemed to him still more strange.

“If one,” said he to himself, “had but that bird that's singing up there, so plain that one of us could hardly match him! What can he mean by that wonderful song? The whole of it is, it must be a feathered witch. My rams have only pinchbeck bells, he calls them rich cattle; but I have a silver bell, and he sings nothing about me.”

With these words he began to fumble in his pocket, took out his bell, and rang it.

The bird in the air instantly saw what it was, and rejoiced beyond measure. He vanished in a second, flew behind the nearest bush, alighted, and drew off his speckled feather dress, and turned himself into an old woman dressed in tattered clothes. The old dame, well supplied with sighs and groans, tottered across the field to the shepherd-boy, who was still ringing his bell and wondering what was become of the beautiful bird. She cleared her throat, and coughing, bid him a kind good evening, and asked him which was the way to Bergen.

Pretending then that she had just seen the little bell, she exclaimed—

“Well now, what a charming pretty little bell! Well, in all my life, I never beheld anything more beautiful. Hark ye, my son, will you sell me that bell? What may be the price of it? I have a little grandson at home, and such a nice plaything as it would make for him!”

“No,” replied the boy, quite short; “the bell is not for sale. It is a bell that there is not such another bell in the whole world. I have only to give it a little tinkle, and my sheep run of themselves wherever I would have them go. And what a delightful sound it has! Only listen, mother,” said he, ringing it; “is there any weariness in the world that can hold out against this bell? I can ring with it away the longest time, so that it will be gone in a second.”

The old woman thought to herself—

“We will see if he can hold out against bright shining money,” and she took out no less than three silver dollars and offered them to him, but he still replied—

“No, I will not sell the bell.”

She then offered him five dollars.

“The bell is still mine,” said he.

She stretched out her hand full of ducats. He replied this third time—

“Gold is dirt, and does not ring.”

The old dame then shifted her ground, and turned the discourse another way. She grew mysterious, and began to entice him by talking of secret arts and of charms by which his cattle might be made to thrive prodigiously, relating to him all kinds of wonders of them. It was then the young shepherd began to long, and he lent a willing ear to her tales.

The end of the matter was, that she said to him—

“Hark ye, my child, give me your bell; and see, here is a white stick for you,” said she, taking out a little white

stick which had Adam and Eve very ingeniously cut upon it as they were feeding their flocks in the Garden, with the fattest sheep and lambs dancing before them. There, too, was the shepherd David, as he stood up with his sling against the giant Goliath. "I will give you," said the woman, "this stick for the bell, and as long as you drive the cattle with it they will be sure to thrive. With this you will become a rich shepherd. Your wethers will be always fat a month sooner than the wethers of other shepherds, and every one of your sheep will have two pounds of wool more than others, and yet no one will ever be able to see it on them."

The old woman handed him the stick. So mysterious was her gesture, and so strange and bewitching her smile, that the lad was at once in her power. He grasped eagerly at the stick, gave her his hand, and cried—

"Done! strike hands! The bell for the stick!"

Cheerfully the old woman took the bell for the stick, and departed like a light breeze over the field and the heath. He saw her vanish, and she seemed to float away before his eyes like a mist, and to go off with a slight whiz and whistle that made the shepherd's hair stand on end.

The underground one, however, who, in the shape of an old woman, had wheedled him out of his bell, had not deceived him. For the underground people dare not lie, but must ever keep their word—a breach of it being followed by their sudden change into the shape of toads, snakes, dunghill beetles, wolves, and apes, forms in which they wander about, objects of fear and aversion, for a long course of years before they are freed. They have, therefore, naturally a great dread of lying. John Schlagenteufel gave close attention and made trial of his new shepherd's staff, and he soon found that the old woman had told him the truth, for his flocks and his work, and all the labour of his hands, prospered with him, and he had wonderful luck, so that there was not a sheep-owner or head shepherd but was desirous of having him in his employment.

It was not long, however, that he remained an underling. Before he was eighteen years of age he had got his own flocks, and in the course of a few years was the richest sheep-master in the whole island of Bergen. At last he was able to buy a knight's estate for himself, and that estate was Grabitz, close by Rambin, which now belongs to the Lords of Sunde. My father knew him there, and how from a shepherd's boy he became a nobleman. He always conducted himself like a prudent, honest, and pious man, who had a good word for every one. He brought up his sons like gentlemen, and his daughters like ladies, some of whom are still alive, and accounted people of great consequence.

Well may people who hear such stories wish that they had met with such an adventure, and had found a little silver bell which the underground people had lost!

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