

The Waits of Bremen

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

Intermediate

8 min read

An honest farmer had once an ass that had been a faithful hard-working slave to him for a great many years, but was now growing old, and every day more and more unfit for work. His master therefore was tired of keeping him to live at ease like a gentleman, and so began to think of putting an end to him. The ass, who was a shrewd hand, saw that some mischief was in the wind, so he took himself slyly off, and began his journey towards Bremen.

“There,” thought he to himself, “as I have a good voice, I may chance to be chosen town musician.”

After he had travelled a little way, he spied a dog lying by the roadside, and panting as if very tired.

“What makes you pant so, my friend?” said the ass.

“Alas!” said the dog, “my master was going to knock me on the head, because I am old and weak, and can no longer make myself useful to him in hunting, so I ran away. But what can I do to earn my livelihood?”

“Hark ye,” said the ass, “I am going to Bremen to turn musician. Come with me, and try what you can do in the same way.”

The dog said he was willing, and on they went.

They had not gone far before they saw a cat sitting in the middle of the road, with tears in her eyes, and making

a most rueful face.

“Pray, my good lady,” said the ass, “what’s the matter with you? You look quite out of spirits.”

“Ah, me!” said the cat. “How can a body be in good spirits when one’s life is in danger? Because I am beginning to grow old, and had rather lie at my ease before the fire than run about the house after the mice, my mistress laid hold of me, and was going to drown me, and though I have been lucky enough to get away from her, I know not how I am to live.”

“Oh!” said the ass, “by all means go with us to Bremen. You are a good night-singer, and may make your fortune as one of the waits.”

The cat was pleased with the thought, and joined the party. Soon afterwards, as they were passing by a farmyard, they saw a cock perched upon a gate, screaming out with all his might and main.

“Bravo!” said the ass. “Upon my word, you make a famous noise. Pray, what is all this about?”

“Why,” said the cock, “I was just now telling all our neighbours that we were to have fine weather for our washing-day; and yet my mistress and the cook don’t thank me for my pains, but threaten to cut my head off to-morrow, and make broth of me for the guests that are coming on Sunday.”

“Heaven forbid!” said the ass. “Come with us. Anything will be better than staying here. Besides, who knows, if we take care to sing in tune, we may get up a concert of our own, so come along with us.”

“With all my heart,” replied the cock; so they all four went on jollily together towards Bremen.

They could not, however, reach the town the first day, so when night came on they turned off the high-road into a wood to sleep. The ass and the dog laid themselves down under a great tree, and the cat climbed up into the branches; while the cock, thinking that the higher he sat the safer he should be, flew up to the very top of the tree, and then, according to his custom, before he sounded his trumpet and went to sleep, looked out on all sides to see that everything was well. In doing this he saw afar off something bright, and calling to his companions, said—

“There must be a house no great way off, for I see a light.”

“If that be the case,” replied the ass, “we had better change our quarters, for our lodging here is not the best in

the world.”

“Besides,” said the dog, “I should not be the worse for a bone or two.”

“And may be,” remarked the cat, “a stray mouse will be found somewhere about the premises.”

So they walked off together towards the spot where the cock had seen the light; and as they drew near, it became larger and brighter, till they came at last to a lonely house, in which was a gang of robbers.

The ass, being the tallest of the company, marched up to the window and peeped in.

“Well,” said the cock, “what do you see?”

“What do I see?” replied the ass. “Why, I see a table spread with all kinds of good things, and robbers sitting round it making merry.”

“That would be a noble lodging for us,” said the cock.

“Yes,” rejoined the ass, “if we could only get in.”

They laid their heads together to see how they could get the robbers out, and at last they hit upon a plan. The ass set himself upright on his hind-legs, with his fore-feet resting on the window; the dog got upon his back; the cat scrambled up to the dog’s shoulders, and the cock flew up and sat upon the cat. When all were ready the cock gave the signal, and up struck the whole band of music. The ass brayed, the dog barked, the cat mewed, and the cock crew. Then they all broke through the window at once, and came tumbling into the room amongst the broken glass, with a hideous clatter. The robbers, who had been not a little frightened by the opening concert, had now no doubt that some frightful hobgoblins had broken in upon them, and scampered away as fast as they could.

The coast once clear, the travellers soon sat down and despatched what the robbers had left, with as much eagerness as if they had not hoped to eat again for a month. As soon as they had had enough they put out the lights, and each once more sought out a resting-place to his liking. The donkey laid himself down upon a heap of straw in the yard; the dog stretched himself upon a mat behind the door; the cat rolled herself up on the hearth before the warm ashes; the cock perched upon a beam on the top of the house; and as all were rather tired with their journey, they soon fell fast asleep.

About midnight, however, when the robbers saw from afar that the lights were out and that all was quiet, they began to think that they had been in too great a hurry to run away; and one of them, who was bolder than the rest, went to see what was going on. Finding everything still, he marched into the kitchen, and groped about till he found a match in order to light a candle. Espying the glittering fiery eyes of the cat, he mistook them for live coals, and held the match to them to light it. The cat, however, not understanding such a joke, sprang at his face, and spat, and scratched him. This frightened him dreadfully, and away he ran to the back door, where the dog jumped up and bit him in the leg. As he was crossing over the yard the ass kicked him; and the cock, who had been awakened by the noise, crew with all his might.

At this the robber ran back as fast as he could to his comrades, and told the captain that a horrid witch had got into the house, and had scratched his face with her long bony fingers—that a man with a knife in his hand had hidden himself behind the door, and stabbed him in the leg—that a black monster stood in the yard and struck him with a club—and that the devil sat upon the top of the house, and cried out—

“Throw the rascal up here!”

After this the robbers never dared to go back to the house; but the musicians were so pleased with their quarters, that they never found their way to Bremen, but took up their abode in the wood. And there they live, I dare say, to this very day.

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