

# *The Water Spirit*

Folk-Lore And Legends: German

German

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*Intermediate*

*12 min read*

About the middle of the sixteenth century, when Zündorf was no larger than it is at present, there lived at the end of the village, hard by the church, one of that useful class of women termed midwives. She was an honest, industrious creature, and what with ushering the new-born into life, and then assisting in making garments for them, she contrived to creep through the world in comfort, if not in complete happiness.

The summer had been one of unusual drought, and the winter, of a necessity, one of uncommon scarcity, so that when the spring arrived the good woman had less to do than at any period in the preceding seven years. In fact she was totally unemployed. As she mused one night, lying abed, on the matter, she was startled by a sharp, quick knock at the door of her cottage. She hesitated for a moment to answer the call, but the knocking was repeated with more violence than before. This caused her to spring out of bed without more delay, and hasten to ascertain the wish of her impatient visitor. She opened the door in the twinkling of an eye, and a man, tall of stature, enveloped in a large dark cloak, stood before her.

“My wife is in need of thee,” he said to her abruptly; “her time is come. Follow me.”

“Nay, but the night is dark, sir,” replied she. “Whither do you desire me to follow?”

“Close at hand,” he answered, as abruptly as before. “Be ye quick and follow me.”

“I will but light my lamp and place it in the lantern,” said the woman. “It will not cost me more than a moment’s delay.”

“It needs not, it needs not,” repeated the stranger; “the spot is close by. I know every foot of ground. Follow, follow!”

There was something so imperative, and at the same time so irresistible, in the manner of the man that she said not another word, but drawing her warm cloak about her head followed him at once. Ere she was aware of the course he had taken, so dark was the night, and so wrapt up was she in the cloak and in her meditations, she found herself on the bank of the Rhine, just opposite to the low fertile islet which bears the same name as the village, and lies at a little distance from the shore.

“How is this, good sir?” she exclaimed, in a tone of surprise and alarm. “You have missed the way—you have left your road. Here is no further path.”

“Silence, and follow,” were the only words he spoke in reply; but they were uttered in such a manner as to show her at once that her best course was obedience.

They were now at the edge of the mighty stream; the rushing waters washed their feet. The poor woman would fain have drawn back, but she could not, such was the preternatural power exercised over her by her companion.

“Fear not; follow!” he spoke again, in a kinder tone, as the current kissed the hem of her garments.

He took the lead of her. The waters opened to receive him. A wall of crystal seemed built up on either side of the vista. He plunged into its depths; she followed. The wild wave gurgled over them, and they were walking over the shiny pebbles and glittering sands which strewed the bed of the river.

And now a change came over her indeed. She had left all on earth in the thick darkness of a starless spring night, yet all around her was lighted up like a mellow harvest eve, when the sun shines refulgent through masses of golden clouds on the smiling pastures and emerald meadows of the west. She looked up, but she

could see no cause for this illumination. She looked down, and her search was equally unsuccessful. She seemed to herself to traverse a great hall of surpassing transparency, lighted up by a light resembling that given out by a huge globe of ground glass. Her conductor still preceded her. They approached a little door. The chamber within it contained the object of their solicitude. On a couch of mother-of-pearl, surrounded by sleeping fishes and drowsy syrens, who could evidently afford her no assistance, lay the sick lady.

“Here is my wife,” spake the stranger, as they entered this chamber. “Take her in hand at once, and hark ye, mother, heed that she has no injury through thee, or——”

With these words he waved his hand, and, preceded by the obedient inhabitants of the river, who had until then occupied the chamber, left the apartment.

The midwife approached her patient with fear and trembling; she knew not what to anticipate. What was her surprise to perceive that the stranger was like any other lady. The business in hand was soon finished, and midwife and patient began to talk together, as women will when an opportunity is afforded them.

“It surprises me much,” quoth the former, “to see such a handsome young lady as you are buried down here in the bottom of the river. Do you never visit the land? What a loss it is to you!”

“Hush, hush!” interposed the Triton’s lady, placing her forefinger significantly on her lips; “you peril your life by talking thus without guard. [Pg 25]Go to the door; look out, that you may see if there be any listeners, then I will tell something to surprise you.”

The midwife did as she was directed. There was no living being within earshot.

“Now, listen,” said the lady.

The midwife was all ear.

“I am a woman; a Christian woman like yourself,” she continued, “though I am here now in the home of my husband, who is the spirit of these mighty waters.”

“God be praised!” ejaculated her auditor.

“My father was the lord of the hamlet of Rheidt, a little above Lülldorf, and I lived there in peace and happiness

during my girlish days. I had nothing to desire, as every wish was gratified by him as soon as it was formed. However, as I grew to womanhood I felt that my happiness had departed. I knew not whither it had gone, or why, but gone it was. I felt restless, melancholy, wretched. I wanted, in short, something to love, but that I found out since. Well, one day a merry-making took place in the village, and every one was present at it. We danced on the green sward which stretches to the margin of the river; for that day I forgot my secret grief, and was among the gayest of the gay. They made me the queen of the feast, and I had the homage of all. As the sun was going down in glory in the far west, melting the masses of clouds into liquid gold, a stranger of a noble mien appeared in the midst of our merry circle. He was garbed in green from head to heel, and seemed to have crossed the river, for the hem of his rich riding-cloak was dripping with wet. No one knew him, no one cared to inquire who he was, and his presence rather awed than rejoiced us. He was, however, a stranger, and he was welcome. When I tell you that stranger is my husband, you may imagine the rest. When the dance then on foot was ended, he asked my hand. I could not refuse it if I would, but I would not if I could. He was irresistible. We danced and danced until the earth seemed to reel around us. I could perceive, however, even in the whirl of tumultuous delight which forced me onward, that we neared the water's edge in every successive figure. We stood at length on the verge of the stream. The current caught my dress, the villagers shrieked aloud, and rushed to rescue me from the river.

“Follow!” said my partner, plunging as he spoke into the foaming flood.

“I followed. Since then I have lived with him here. It is now a century since, but he has communicated to me a portion of his own immortality, and I know not age, neither do I dread death any longer. He is good and kind to me, though fearful to others. The only cause of complaint I have is his invariable custom of destroying every [Pg 27]babe to which I give birth on the third day after my delivery. He says it is for my sake, and for their sakes, that he does so, and he knows best.”

She sighed heavily as she said this.

“And now,” resumed the lady, “I must give you one piece of advice, which, if you would keep your life, you must implicitly adopt. My husband will return. Be on your guard, I bid you. He will offer you gold, he will pour out the countless treasures he possesses before you, he will proffer you diamonds and pearls and priceless gems, but—heed well what I say to you—take nothing more from him than you would from any other person. Take

the exact sum you are wont to receive on earth, and take not a kreutzer more, or your life is not worth a moment's purchase. It is forfeit."

"He must be a cruel being, indeed," ejaculated the midwife. "God deliver me from this dread and great danger."

"See you yon sealed vessels?" spake the lady, without seeming to heed her fright, or hear her ejaculations.

The midwife looked, and saw ranged on an upper shelf of the apartment about a dozen small pots, like pipkins, all fast sealed, and labelled in unknown characters.

"These pots," pursued she, "contain the souls of those who have been, like you, my attendants in [Pg 28] childbirth, but who, for slighting the advice I gave them, as I now give you, and permitting a spirit of unjust gain to take possession of their hearts, were deprived of life by my husband. Heed well what I say. He comes. Be silent and discreet."

As she spake the water spirit entered. He first asked his wife how she did, and his tones were like the rushing sound of a current heard far off. Learning from her own lips that all was well with her, he turned to the midwife and thanked her most graciously.

"Now, come with me," he said, "I must pay thee for thy services."

She followed him from the sick-chamber to the treasury of the palace. It was a spacious crystal vault, lighted up, like the rest of the palace, from without, but within it was resplendent with treasures of all kinds. He led her to a huge heap of shining gold which ran the whole length of the chamber.

"Here," said he, "take what you will. I put no stint upon you."

The trembling woman picked up a single piece of the smallest coin she could find upon the heap.

"This is my fee," she spake. "I ask no more than a fair remuneration for my labour."

The water spirit's brow blackened like a tempestuous night, and he showed his green teeth for a moment as if in great ire, but the feeling, whatever it was, appeared to pass away as quickly as it came, and he led her to a huge heap of pearls.

“Here,” he said, “take what you will. Perhaps you like these better? They are all pearls of great price, or may be you would wish for some memento of me. Take what you will.”

But she still declined to take anything more, although he tempted her with all his treasures. She had not forgotten the advice of her patient.

“I desire nothing more from you, great prince as you are, than I receive from one of my own condition.” This was her uniform answer to his entreaties—

“I thank you, but I may not take aught beside my due.”

“If,” said he, after a short pause, “you had taken more than your due, you would have perished at my hands. And now,” proceeded the spirit, “you shall home, but first take this. Fear not.”

As he spake he dipped his hand in the heap of gold and poured forth a handful into her lap.

“Use that,” he continued, “use it without fear. It is my gift. No evil will come of it; I give you my royal word.”

He beckoned her onward without waiting for her reply, and they were walking once again through the corridors of the palace.

“Adieu!” he said, waving his hand to her, “adieu!”

Darkness fell around her in a moment. In a moment more she awoke, as from a dream, in her warm bed.

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