



The Baker of Munich

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Fable, Magic

There was once a man, who was a baker. His name was William, which sounds different in German, or Prussian as it was called at the time. This story you see, is from olden days. Nations and languages may change, but men and baking are much the same.

But not exactly the same. For example, William would never have dreamed to follow a recipe from a book – and not only because he could not read. He had been apprenticed for ten years to a master baker, and his master knew everything worth knowing about baking – or at least, he said so. And besides, much as butchery in those days involved not just slicing meat, but raising or hunting animals as well, so William needed to know how to light a fire in his kiln, and how to watch for when the heat was right for baking. He relied on touch, smell, and constant vigilance when the dough lay in the glowing furnace.

He lived above the bakery in a single room overlooking the main street of a hamlet in the German countryside, not far from the city of Munchen, which we call Munich. His neighbours would knock on his door very early to buy pastries and bread and little twists of sweet dough to eat with their morning coffee – often before the sun was up – so William Baker had to wake up even earlier to bake the bread. All through the morning he would be in the front of the bakery, taking money and passing the time of day with his patrons, and in the afternoon he would mix fresh dough and knead it and leave it in the oven, which was always warm even when the fire was out, and knock it back (which took the big air pockets out of the dough), and ice his cakes, and sweep the floor, and before he knew it, night had fallen and the time had come again to light the fire in the oven.

He was a lonely man who smiled sometimes out of politeness, but never in joy. Every waking hour was spent in the bakery. He never had time to go anywhere, unless it was to buy flour, or dried peel; and all he knew to talk about was yeast and oats and molasses. He didn't realise he was lonely, but only because he never thought of himself at all.

As is often the case with such people though, everybody thought him a tremendous success. His expertise as a baker was known far and wide, and his dedication to his craft was preached at the pulpit as an example to young children. William was not lacking for pretty young women to court, either; but he only saw them as customers, or else he had no idea what to say, unless they were discussing cream buns, in which case he could be quite boring.

There were many noblemen and aristocrats scattered around Europe, and one day a rather horse-faced prince asked for the hand in marriage of a young lady. She didn't think much of the idea, but he was a prince, and so her mother and father made arrangements. They had made a lot of money selling underwear – which people always need – but they were rather embarrassed about it, and covered their embarrassment by planning an especially extravagant wedding. They approached William Baker and asked him to provide a cake.

“An enormous cake,” said the father.

“The biggest!” cried the mother. “It must have unicorns upon it -“

“And geese, I like geese,” said the father.

“It must taste like heavenly butter -“

“It must glow, it must dazzle, it must be a seven-course feast in itself -“

“And,” they said together, “it must have absolutely nothing to do with underpants!”

William Baker accepted their commission. After all, they were paying an awful lot of money, and cakes generally didn't have much to do with underpants. But he was troubled.

“How can I bake a cake like that?” he wondered aloud in bed that night. “They will never be satisfied, no matter what I do. If I make it ten feet tall, they will say it should be twelve. If I give it goose-feet, they will say it ought

to walk. What am I to do?”

Fairies, Pixies and Gnomes often attend to questions of this sort, and indeed a rather unpleasant little Goblin lay upon a rafter of William Baker’s little room, watching him sleep and chewing a crumb. You see, the Little Folk are awash with all kinds of magic but they may only use it for others. This is why the Djinni does not simply wish himself out of his lamp, and why Fairies always offer three wishes – the more wishes, the more opportunities for mischief.

This Goblin was named Pungust, and he saw an opportunity for himself with William Baker. He lowered himself carefully to the ground, and whispered in the baker’s ear while he slept:

“Pungust I am,
A goblin friend,
I’ll make your cake,
If an ear you’ll lend.”

It wasn’t strictly necessary to talk in rhyme, but Pungust hadn’t spent twelve years in Goblin Night School for nothing. “I’m listening,” mumbled the baker. Pungust grinned evilly.

“A magical cake,
A wondrous confection,
But to make it I’ll need
A young maiden’s affection.”

Pungust, you see, was quite repellent. Ugly just didn’t cover it, and, really, something had to.

“Bring her to me,” he whispered.

“Bring her to me,
And lock the door.
I’ll take her to fairyland,
Evermore, evermore,
A lass for a cake,

That's the deal we'll make.

One will be eaten,

The other -“

“Well,” he laughed quietly, “maybe they'll both be eaten, at that! Fairyland isn't all cotton-candy and unicorns, you know.”

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The next morning, William Baker awoke refreshed and happy. He didn't know how he was going to bake the cake, but he was going to make a start anyway, which is a terrible idea for a baker. “It'll be alright,” he said to himself. “I just know it.”

At a quarter-past-ten, a milkmaid popped in. “Lardy cakes, please,” she said, with a grin.

“Come up to my bedroom,” replied William Baker instantly. The maid gasped, slapped his face, and stalked out.

“Now, why did I say that?” he wondered, rubbing his pink cheek. “That's no way to treat a customer.”

At ten-to-eleven, a newly-wed couple dropped by.

“Two croissants,” said the husband.

“Certainly,” replied William Baker. “And anything for you ma'am?”

“These gingerbreads look good,” she said. “Do you use molasses in them, or treacle?”

“Come up to my bedroom,” he replied. The husband punched his nose, and would have done worse if the wife hadn't dragged him back out into the street.

“What od earth is the batter with be?” mumbled the dazed baker. At that moment, a young lady stepped through the doorway. “Stop!” yelled William Baker. “We're closed!”

“No, you aren't,” she said. “I just saw those people come out. Anyway, I'm here about a cake for my – ”

“Come up to my bedroom!” he yelled. “Oh, I’m so sorry! I don’t mean to say it, but I just can’t help it!”

The young woman regarded him coolly. “What’s in your bedroom?” she asked.

“Come up to my bedroom,” he wailed. “Oh,” he added, “I swear I’m bewitched! Please, don’t speak again! Or I will insult your honour, and I really don’t mean to, Miss.”

Now, this young lady was not a milkmaid, or a newly-wed. She was a Witch. And she thought to herself: Something isn’t right here.

So she smiled at William Baker and said, “of course I will come up to your bedroom. Lead the way, Mr. Baker!”

“Oh, thank you,” he said. “Wait! I didn’t say it that time!”

The Witch laughed. “Someone has cursed you, you poor man. We must find out who it was. I’ve an idea we’ll find him up in your room.”

“Him?”

“Definitely a him.”

She followed him up the narrow stair, but motioned him to stop at the door.

“Do you remember anything?” she whispered. “What is supposed to happen to me, when I go inside in the room?”

William Baker frowned, and thought hard. “Well,” he said at length, “I can’t say as I recall anything as such; that is, there’s a rhyme going round my head, but I can’t think why.”

“What is it?” she asked.

William Baker blushed. “Please don’t think ill of me, miss,” he said. “It begins, ‘bring her to me and lock the door . . .’”

After he had recited the goblin's poem, the Witch stood in silence a moment. "A lass for a cake?" she said. "And you agreed to this?"

"No!" cried William. "It was a dream! I woke up with this poem in my head, and all morning I've been so rude to the ladies as 'ave been coming in the shop!"

"I see," said the Witch. She thought for a moment. "Let me do the talking," she said at last, and pushed open the door.

There was nobody to be seen. Until, that is, they had crept cautiously in – and then the door slammed closed behind them. A greasy rope dropped from the rafter and a hideous Goblin swarmed down it like a rat and leered at the Witch, whose name, it should be said, was Louise.

"At last!" crowed Pungust. "I have you now! Oh, wait til I get you back to Fairyland -"

"Just a moment," interrupted Louise. "Did you bewitch this poor man?"

"I did," replied Pungust with pride.

"Well, can you stop it?"

"Why should I?"

"You got what you wanted," said Louise. "But is there anything else you want? Perhaps we could negotiate?"

Pungust cackled, for indeed there was something else. And, since he was a traditional Goblin, and since she was a Witch, Louise knew what it was.

"Three wishes!" he cried. "The accursed may lift the curse, if he can guess the name of the one who cursed him – if you can guess my name! Three guesses!"

"And if the guess is right . . ."

"Then you shall have three wishes, upon my word as a fiend. But if not – if not, then the baker remains cursed for ever, you come with me to fairyland, AND you must wish for three things of my choosing! Do you accept?"

This is a time-limited offer, by the way. You have five seconds.”

“I accept,” said Louise. “My first guess is Rumpelstitskin.”

“Wrong!” cried Pungust. “That’s my middle name.”

“Is it Brian?”

“No! Last guess!”

“Mr. Tickles?”

Pungust blazed suddenly in a blue fire and looked most demoniacal. “All wrong!” he cried. “Pungust I am! Soon to be the greatest of all Goblins, for that is my first wish!”

Louise held up a finger. “One moment,” she said. She turned to the bewildered baker, who was still goggling at finding a Goblin in his bedroom. “Mr. Baker? What do you think his name is?”

William Baker scratched his head. “Pungust, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Louise. “Isn’t that right, Pungust? Or did you forget which of us was cursed?”

Pungust’s brow creased, and his fingers moved silently. Then, with a scream of rage, he leapt into the rafters and bounced around hooting and yelling in a black mood.

“Well,” said Louise, with a smile, “you now have three wishes, Mr. Baker. What’s it to be?”

William Baker thought quickly. He wasn’t sure that wishing for time to think about it was an option.

“Well, firstly,” he said, “I’d like the goose-cake done as per the customer’s specification. But it should have plenty to do with underwear. I don’t see as why they should be ashamed of their business.”

“Done!” screeched Pungust from the rafters.

In the blink of an eye, an enormous fifteen-tiered white cake in the shape of a goose materialised, wobbling upon William Baker’s bed. It almost scraped the ceiling. The goose wore red underpants.

“Cherry-flavoured,” sneered Pungust. “What else?”

“And, er -“ said William Baker, “I’d like this Goblin to go away for ever. Once he’s given me my third wish that is.”

“With pleasure,” sneered Pungust. “Anything else?”

“And, and I’d like to be married,” said William. “To a woman who doesn’t mind early mornings, and likes the smell of bread, and can help out with the kneading.”

Pungust clicked his fingers and a gold ring appeared on the finger of the Witch.

Pungust laughed one last time, clicked his fingers again, and disappeared for ever.

William and the Witch looked at each other.

William wrung his hands. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I messed it up, didn’t I?”

But Louise smiled. “I do love the smell of bread,” she said. “And early mornings, when it is all quiet and calm. And, you know, I can do the kneading with magic.” She smiled some more. “I never liked that prince anyway, and although I really didn’t want a goose-cake at our wedding, I quite like it now I see it.”

And so it was that Louise the Witch did not marry the horse-faced prince, and instead became Louise Baker. The goose-cake was consumed at their wedding-day to the last crumb, and everybody, even Louise’s parents, agreed that the cherry-flavoured underpants was the best bit.

And they all lived happily ever after, even the prince, who found a mulish duchess and married her instead. All except Pungust; but some people are never happy.

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