

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Herbert Eulenberg (1876-1949)

The Weathercock

The whole village was in a terrible commotion. Something quite extraordinary and unprecedented had happened. On Christmas Night, the large copper weathercock had been stolen from the church spire. It was as if the entire community had lost its head. The sexton, who had gone with the barber at the usual early hour to ring the bells, had discovered this first.

“Lord alive,” he said, when he stepped out of his house to cast a satisfied eye over his church, as he did every morning, “look, the cockerel has flown away from the church tower!” The barber, who had a slight squint, blinked up towards the sky and confirmed the fearful fact, speechless and open-mouthed. They ran and they walked, scouring the black ground, three times around the church. Then the barber took himself off, without being noticed, for ringing the bells did not matter any more in the face of such an event, and in a quarter of an hour the whole village knew about it. And everyone, old and young alike, came out of their houses and stared at the sky, high up at the spot where, yesterday, seen by no-one, the copper cockerel had stood. It was amazing that now, when it was no longer to be found, everybody looked up and sought it with their eyes. Suddenly it had become the chief person in all the village, and now that it had disappeared, everyone cut a sad face, as if the King had died. The most distressing thing of all was nobody having any idea where the lovely copper animal, perched high over every house and head, had got to. Some pious hearts wondered

if the dear Lord had not called the cockerel to Him on Holy Christmas Night, for he was old and infirm by this time and must have stood up there in wind and storm and sunshine from time immemorial. Other sly souls asked if, in these days when people had begun to fly, someone had not been able to come rushing through the air overnight and purloin their lovely copper cockerel from the church spire. And they would dearly have liked to bring an action against all flying people on account of the lost cockerel.

But this going badly, the whole village soon unanimously found another scapegoat, namely the nightwatchman. This eye, which the community had open at night, like a hare, had without doubt fallen asleep on the terrible night of the atrocity.

Now, he claimed that, at the hour when the theft took place, he had flushed a couple of tramps at the very opposite end of the village.

But closer investigation revealed that, ever since he began to administer his office, he had not spent a night outside the tavern, where he drank until two o'clock as a rule, and from then on until morning he slept off his hangover with the same regularity on the palliasse beside the St. Bernard's. He was therefore dismissed from his post in disgrace, and from that time on the smallest children looked at him, if not down from above, then up from below, with contempt.

Only two in all the village knew who had stolen the cockerel from its high perch on the steeple: the moon and Proll the tailor, the perpetrator in person. The moon, who had not risen until late on that dreadful night because she did not care to show her waning, tilted face to the world, was quite astonished to suddenly see the tiny tailor already high up the tower

and clambering towards its spire. The fellow must have climbed up the church door and high up the masonry around the church windows, leaning on their mullions, as far as the fire-ladder which led up to the tower. Now he was strenuously scrambling, bathed in sweat, along the gutter, and then, his feet on the rafters and hooks which the roofers use for their trade, up the slate roof of the tower, holding fast to the wire of the lightning conductor and pulling himself up with his hands. The moon almost had a giddy fit to see the stick-like little man, who was wearing only checked trousers with green embroidered braces over his nightshirt, clambering up the window of the high and broad tower, in grey woollen socks, like a fly. "I just hope he doesn't break his neck!" she thought, as the tailor struggled ever higher with his spider's legs spread far apart. "That hook there is rotten in its framework! I'll shine a little light for the foolish daredevil, as I am, after all, the Patron Saint of thieves. Hold tight, Longfinger! Now for one last big leap!"

In the meantime, Proll the tailor, standing on the very highest hook, had reached the top. His heart beat like a hammer on the anvil, and his hair, soaked with sweat, stuck to his head, as if he were fresh out the bath. He did not dare look down into the depths, or he would have tumbled down, shadow and all, from terror. Now he anxiously clung to the spire with his left arm and held on to it, all trembles, as on to a loved one, while with his right hand he pulled a file from his trouser pocket and set to work, with many a groan, taking down the dumb copper cockerel which was fastened to the top of the tower by two of its claws. During this exacting and slow-going work, a piece of slate under the tailor came loose from its nail and scraped

down the roof into the depths. Proll could well have whizzed down with it from horror had the cockerel not been broken off by his file at the same moment, to hang with its head down, as in death, in his left hand, which had quickly caught it up.

“Thank God!” said the moon, almost out loud, having watched this singular stroke of thievery with tremendous excitement, and she now lit the trembling tailor as the wheezing little man climbed down the same way with his booty. A gentle, warm west wind had arisen and was blowing in fits and starts, like a snoring man, around the tower. Proll could see every slate, every hook and nail as clear as day in the moonlight, while his shadow aped him, being now over him, now under him, now long, now short. Cautiously he climbed down, holding tight to the wire of the lightning conductor with his hot left hand and chafing his skin, while his right hand proudly bore the heavy stolen cockerel. In the light of the moon the church’s grey slate tower looked all gold. The wind softly blew the stalks of the bird’s nests on the tower, which had been abandoned in the winter, playfully back and forth like the wan hairs of a dead man. Along the ridge, where neither sun nor wind could penetrate, a strip of snow from the last snowfall still lay, like sugar thinly strewn, on the roof which the half-sweating, half-shivering little tailor was climbing down hook by hook.

When he finally reached the bottom and felt the broad, solid ground under his legs, which shook with exhaustion, he looked up one more time with admiring eyes at the tall mass before him, which he had deprived of its head, like a man who has fought a victorious battle. Then he ran post-haste with the giant copper cockerel, its head and comb woefully drooping,

clamped fast inside his arm, through the empty echoing streets to his house and bed. He hid the large old animal under the wide palliasse on which he lay, stretched himself out, dressed as he was, well-nigh shattered from excitement, and no hero ever followed a victory by falling more blissfully asleep in his bed over his spoils than did Proll the tailor over the copper steeple-cock which he had conquered.

How on earth did this poor, weak, timid Master Snip¹ come up with this great and mighty idea of depriving the parish, in which he had lived as a respectable, peaceable member for over sixty years since his birth, of its silent peak, the weathercock? He had, to be sure, been a not-quite-normal child of man throughout his life, because he had followed politics closely ever since learning to read. Thus did it come about that he was sometimes seen standing on a street corner and heard saying to himself, "It's not entirely certain that Bismarck handled the matter quite correctly!" or "One can't get a clear view of the situation in Africa from here!"

Especially since the death of his wife in the previous year, who had been for him what Parliament is for a minister by listening to his political speeches and revelations for hours without contradiction, he had become completely noddled. After work, he could brood for hours, by his lamp and with his pipe, over the newspapers he had been able to lay his hands on. When he went bowling on Sunday afternoons, he was now heard to make such utterances as, "One would have made rather more of oneself, if one hadn't crawled into the world in this village!" or "When one reads about all

¹ "Schneiderseele" (literally, "Tailor's soul") is an old word for a coward.

that happens in the big cities, one can feel that one's life has been wasted!" This feeling that he had not really lived in the more than sixty years he had tailored around on the earth, grew ever stronger inside him. Shears, nails and iron – he had hardly seen more of the world than this, it often seemed to him. Out there, all around him, deeds occurred, noble and horrible ones, which he read about in the newspapers every day. People were murdered over there, mines caved in here, livestock suffocated there. Today, houses burned down; yesterday, ships sank to the bottom; the day before yesterday, railway trains collided. Tomorrow there would be an earthquake in some place or other, and the day after tomorrow some kind of major robbery might take place again, or a bill of exchange would be forged, and be in the newspaper. But absolutely nothing happened to him. He lived quietly and worthily apart from events; his name would appear in the newspaper only as an obituary notice. There was nothing to be said about him except that he had been an honest soul from his schooldays to his death, and that was not, as everybody knows, worth printing.

If his life could show but a single deed which was not boring, which could be spoken and written about! –

If there were an exploit in his sartorial existence which could be boasted about! If he could, only the once, carry out something great and out-of-the-ordinary which people in Berlin and Paris would talk about! If he could swing himself up, through some heroic deed, to become the first man in the parish overnight, over the stupid mayor, whom he had seen through long before, over the Reverend Father himself!

Thus did it come about that, on Holy Christmas Night, Proll the tailor

fetches himself down the handsome, copper, heavy cockerel which shone up on the steeple-spire as the first and the last in the village to behold the day, and on whose comb sunset and sunrise had spent their blood. - - For the first hours and days after this, Proll kept as quiet as he, an acknowledged politician, possibly could. An unutterable fear seized him when he heard, everywhere he came, this blasphemous church robbery spoken of with horror and disgust. He had not at all imagined his deed to be so terrible and violent as people made it. In their mouths, the matter became something completely different, much less glorious, great and daring, than it had been up there in the moonlight hanging between life and death. They seemed to entirely overlook the greatness of his action for the forbidden aspect which it just happened to have.

Only when the indignation gradually died down did happier days begin for Proll. People began not to take the case so sadly, and to concern themselves more, for a short while, and deeply intrigued, with the peculiar nature of the affair.

Those were the most blissful days in the life of Proll, when one townsman or another would occasionally stop him in the street and, pointing a finger at the empty steeple-spire, say to him: "Mustn't it just have been a devilish fellow who dared to do the like at midnight! I couldn't go up and come back down alive in broad daylight!" Then the tailor would titter to himself with delight and declare:

"Why, Master! That's really something else!" And at night, when he stretched himself out over the stolen animal, which lost all its lustre from grief under the palliasse, and lost ever more of its eyesight like a prisoner in

the darkness, he thought himself to rightly be the top man in the parish, of whom all the world spoke with admiration, and he fell asleep as radiantly happy as an Emperor with his crown.

But this happy, short period in his life was to pass just as quickly as the long, empty years preceding. Gradually, the people in the village grew accustomed to the new steeple-spire. The copper cockerel had been only a pretty but dispensable decoration up there. Yes, if it had crowed, or been useful in any other way! But in the end it had been only a piece of art, which one could perfectly well do without. The lightning conductor was still up there; that was enough for the heavens. And people did not need to stare up at the sky. There was enough for them to do on earth. Proll the tailor became dejected at this change in popular opinion. He would have liked to take everyone to court who did not talk about the missing weathercock any longer. Now he was the one who stopped people in the street and pointed to the bare steeple-spire with both hands and cried as loudly as possible, so that everyone who came by would hear: "Wherever could that cockerel have flown to? Mustn't it just have been a hell of a chap who wrung his neck, if it wasn't the Devil himself?! Is there no trace of the culprit yet?" he asked further, "in spite of the warrant of caption? Great God! The things that happen in the world nowadays!"

These last words he usually said to himself, for nobody had any desire to think about the old, dead, pointless weathercock any more, and they took themselves off to work with a shrug of their shoulders, away from the tailor who talked about it eternally. That the respectable, upright master tailor, whose grandfather had been a resident in the village, was unable to

talk about anything other than the stolen cockerel, which the priest himself had forgotten, was taken to be a geriatric disorder. As one still respectfully lets old invalids tell their stories of Sedan, so did one fall into the habit of lending an indifferent ear when he talked about the marvellous bird which had shone like gold high in the sky over the whole village and made the maddest conjectures about whom this tremendous piece of devilry could have been executed by.

Only the nightwatchman, who had not much money for drinking ever since his dismissal and had consequently become spiteful, grew mistrustful at this eternal talk about the bewitched cockerel, whose loss nobody but he still felt.

And one Sunday afternoon, when Proll the tailor had gone to the bowling alley as usual, where he now rather looked on so he could exclusively talk about the enchanted cockerel, the watchman secretly forced Proll's door open with a picklock, and a few minutes later he came out in triumph, brandishing the cockerel which verdigris had given the disfigured look of a cadaver.

On the following morning, when Proll the tailor was taken to prison, the cockerel, which had in the meantime been polished till it shone again, and the sun could look at his reflection in it, was put back on the spire by roofers to the jubilation of the village, and the nightwatchman was quietly reinstated in his old office by the mayor.

Now the copper cockerel, while Proll serves his sentence, has been shining forth in the skies for weeks, high over all the parish. And already nobody looks up to see it any more!