

Sample Translation

The Revenge of the Master Thief

(De wraak van de meesterdief)

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pages 7–18

I'm going to tell you the story of my life. It's the most remarkable tale you could ever imagine, full of strange coincidences, exceptional valour and extraordinary skulduggery.

If you don't want to believe it, then you can just shut the book now. Because anyone who doesn't believe me can't be my friend. And I only tell the story of my life to my friends.

That life began seventy years ago in one of the poor quarters in the centre of Thumb. I was not from a rich or important family, but even from my birth it was obvious that I was going to be an exceptional individual. My birth was so extraordinary that it sounds like something in a fairytale. If I hadn't been there, I wouldn't believe it myself.

This is what happened.

My father was a bird-seller. Our house was filled with cages. They hung from the ceilings, were nailed onto the walls, stood all over the floors, beside and upon and beneath the tables and the chairs and the cupboards and the bed. And the spaces without cages were packed with heavy sacks of birdseed.

So, all in all, there wasn't much room left for my mother.

She complained to my father: "What are we going to do when we have a baby? Where are we going to put the cradle?"

"Don't nag on to me about babies," growled my father. "I don't want a baby. Children are ugly and far too pedestrian. They don't sing, they don't whistle, they don't even say cheep. They're a dull colour. And they can't fly."

"Pah!" snorted my mother. "Those birds of yours, they're real highfliers, aren't they? Except they can't fly any higher than the top of their cages."

My father started to cry, because even though he behaved in a grumpy and heartless way, he actually had a very sensitive heart and he thought it was terrible that he had to keep all of his birds in cages. But he had no choice, because you can't sell a bird that has flown away. He sobbed to my mother: "You're so mean, Luscinia! You know very well how sorry I feel for those poor little creatures."

An aside

Luscinia is an old-fashioned word for “nightingale”. That’s the only reason why my father married my mother – because he thought her name was so beautiful. He really did love her very much, but he loved her name even more. His name, by the way, was Anser, and that’s an old-fashioned word for “goose”.

“You’re the mean one,” hissed my mother. “I want to have a baby. The sooner, the better.”

“Out of the question. Anything that does not come out of an egg has no place in my house. And what I say goes.”

Oh, thought my mother, *is that right? What you say goes, does it? Fine, we’ll see which one of us gets our own way*. She immediately started to hatch a plan. And it was such a simple and cunning plan! First she decided that she definitely would have a baby. Her stomach grew bigger and bigger. Anser looked at it suspiciously.

“What’s in that stomach of yours? I hope it’s not one of those ugly, pink, non-singing, non-flying...”

“A baby? No, of course not, my love. Never you fear,” smiled my mother, and she went for a walk through the city. A walk – as if! It was all part of her secret plan. She went to visit her uncle, who was a sculptor. Looking furtively all around, she sneaked into his studio and whispered in his ear to tell him what she wanted.

“Oh,” said her uncle. “Is that all? That shouldn’t be a problem.” And he set to work.

Time passed and her stomach grew as big as could be. So big that my mother could hardly walk. *My baby’s going to arrive today*, she thought. At breakfast she looked at my father with huge, innocent eyes and said: “I had *such* a peculiar dream last night!”

An aside

People who put on huge, innocent eyes when they say something are lying. You should never believe that kind of person. I once met a girl who always had huge, innocent eyes – all day, every day. It was actually because she really was innocent; she didn't even know what lying was. But nobody trusted her, because of those eyes. She had a miserable, lonely life. Fortunately, she met a man who never trusted anyone, no matter what kind of eyes they had. So her eyes made no difference to him. They got married and were very happy together.

“A dream? Why should I care about that?” growled my father.

“I dreamt about a bird, a magnificent bird with feathers of more than a thousand different colours,” said Luscinia, and suddenly my father started to pay attention.

“Oh,” sighed my mother, “that bird whistled so wonderfully! The sound was so beautiful that it filled my eyes with tears. It was almost as if it was whistling words: ‘I’m in Baron Falco’s garden! In the garden, in the garden! The baron’s garden!’ What do you think that might mean, my dear Anser?”

Anser had already leapt up from the table. “What do I think that might mean?” he whooped. “It seems perfectly obvious to me! There’s a magnificent bird in the baron’s garden, that’s what it means. And I’m going to catch it!”

He frantically gathered together all of his equipment. His nets and birdlime and snares and birdcalls and binoculars and cages, and everything else that you need for catching birds. He ran and ran, down lanes and alleyways, up streets and avenues, across squares and promenades. He ran for two whole hours before he arrived at the baron’s palace. When he got there, he sneaked over the wall, then over a hedge, and another wall, until, finally, he stood in the garden. It was a very big garden, with a whole forest in it and a small river instead of a pond. Anser searched in every tree and every shrub. He found sparrows and swallows, peewits

and parakeets, and even a broad-billed sandpiper that had lost its way, but he didn't find the beautiful bird.

Of course he didn't. My mother had invented the bird in the dream to make sure that Anser left the house for a while. Because that was an important part of her plan.

Anser trudged home disappointed that evening.

My mother was waiting for him. She was sitting beside a cradle, with a blissful, dreamy look on her face. Her stomach was flat.

“My dear, dear Anser,” she whispered. “It's a miracle. Just take a look in the cradle! You'll never believe your eyes, Anser!”

My father bent over the cradle. And indeed – what he saw was absolutely unbelievable.

second chapter

in which I am born

In the cradle lay an egg. A huge egg, smooth and dull and white. With grey speckles.

“Heavens above, Luscinia!” cried my father. “I've never seen an egg like that before! What kind of bird laid that?”

“It wasn't a bird at all,” said my mother calmly. “I did it myself.”

“Y... you?” Anser almost collapsed with surprise. “But that's impossible. Humans can't lay eggs!”

“Except for me,” my mother said firmly. She fluttered the lashes of her huge, innocent eyes, blushed and said: “I can do the impossible, because I love you so much.”

“Well,” pondered my father. “I am a most extraordinary man. I'm handsome and clever and kind. I'm positively brimming over with jokes and plans – much

more so than other men. So of course you love me very much. So much that you can do the impossible. Yes, in fact, there's nothing strange about it at all."

An aside

Some people think that women are vain. Because they look in the mirror so often. But men are far more vain than women. Because deep in their hearts they think that they don't need a mirror, because they know that they're the best-looking man around. Anser wasn't an extraordinary man at all; he was ugly and stupid and unkind and he couldn't come up with a joke or a plan if you paid him. It was my mother who was beautiful and clever and so on. I take after her.

"Come on," said my mother. "Let's open up the egg."

"Open it? Are you out of your mind? You should never, never, never do that! The chick has to find its own way out, otherwise... I mean... you're not a bird, of course, so... I don't actually know whether there's really a baby bird in there or not..."

"Exactly," said my mother, and she broke open the eggshell.

"Well, h- how about that!" stuttered my father. "There's a baby in the egg!"

"Yes," said my mother. "Who would have thought it?" And she smiled to herself. Because it wasn't a real egg, but a plaster-of-Paris one made by her uncle, the sculptor, in two halves that had been whipped around the baby and glued together. The grey speckles ingeniously concealed air holes that allowed the baby to breathe.

And the baby was me.

That's how I came to be born twice. The first time when I came out of my mother's stomach, while my father was sneaking around the baron's garden, looking for the made-up bird. And the second time from an egg. It was only a fake plaster-of-Paris egg, but still... no other human being has ever come out of an egg. So, ever since my birth I've been a most exceptional individual. If only

my father had understood! Then he could have given me the upbringing that I needed. An upbringing fit for a baron. Or an emperor. But all my father thought about was eggs. And birds.

“Luscinia,” he said, “this child was born to fly!”

Oh no, thought Luscinia, any moment now the idiot will be throwing my baby out of the window!

But my father didn't do that.

In fact, he took the very best care of me.

He carefully plucked the very softest of feathers from his favourite birds to make a bed of down for me; he gave me the most delicious eggs to eat; and later he even used to roast one of his very own birds for me every day (although he often tried to feed me birdseed and worms as well when my mother wasn't watching). He had his best nightingale sing me to sleep.

My mother did her utmost for me as well. She played with me all day long, told me all kinds of stories and taught me everything she knew about the world. As she did so, she sewed the most beautiful clothes you could imagine. And so I grew up as a happy, clever, handsome and merry child. As soon as I could walk, I would totter through the streets, holding onto my mother's hand, and everyone we saw would cry out: “What an adorable child!”

All of the men who lived in our street were bird-sellers, just like my father. And so they all loved me, because I came from an egg. They said to their wives: “Why won't you lay an egg?”

But their poor wives couldn't do that. Of course they couldn't.

“You can't?” squawked their husbands. “Why not? Is it because you don't love me enough? Do you love me less than Luscinia loves *her* husband?”

And so the street became full of arguments, dreadful arguments with lots of cursing and scratching and hitting. With plates and dishes smashing. With bitter tears and angry silence. To cut a long story short, all of the women in the neighbourhood moved out, because they no longer wanted to live with their husbands.

An aside

And so, ultimately, an entire street became deeply unhappy because my mother got her own way. This shows the terrible consequences of lying. And it's why I solemnly swore that I would never, ever tell one single lie. I've always kept this promise, with one or two small exceptions.

The only woman who stayed in our street lived in the house to the left of ours. She was called Tringa and she was almost eighty. Her husband, Totanus, understood that she was too old to lay eggs, so he simply carried on loving her.

Except for Tringa, all of the women had left. And a street without women is a street without children, so I was the only child around. I had no friends to play with. It was a shame, but I didn't think it was too bad. Because all of the men in the street doted on me, as though I were their own child. They ruffled my hair and gave me sweets. Given the chance, they would have cuddled me and tickled me all day long, but I only let them if they gave me particularly nice sweets. And even then, not for very long.

The only ones who were always allowed to pick me up were my parents and old Tringa.

Tringa was the best cook in the neighbourhood. Her kitchen was always lovely and warm, and it smelled delicious. She made such wonderful casseroles that the scent alone was enough to feed you for a day. She made soups that were so tasty they almost made you faint. When she baked bread, the crust was so crispy that it seemed to be made of steel. When you first bit into the crust, for a moment you'd think: I'm not going to get my teeth through this. But just as you were about to give up, the crust would break open with a glorious cracking sound, and your teeth sank into the butter-soft insides, and the scent of fresh, warm bread wound its way into your nostrils and filled your head.

Best of all was her pudding: the pudding that later became famous as the Devilish Damson Delight. Master chefs came from all over the city, sometimes

from hundreds of miles away, to beg Tringa for the secret of that pudding. But she wouldn't tell it to anybody.

Except for me.

She was mad about children, and I was the only child in the neighbourhood. That's why she taught me the recipe. And she let me practise for as long as it took for me to learn how to make it by myself.

In actual fact, I was far too young to work with razor-sharp knives and red-hot ovens. I was only three. So I was never allowed to put the pudding in the oven, or to slice up the lumps of butter. But one day, when Tringa was practising the recipe with me, one of the neighbours came to the door to ask her exactly how you go about washing up dishes.

An aside

This neighbour's wife had recently run away, and he had never done the washing-up, not even once. He just kept on using his plates and pans, and they just kept on getting dirtier and dirtier, until finally even he didn't dare to touch them.

"I'll just pop round and show you," said Tringa, who was in the middle of slicing the butter. "Don't you go touching anything," she warned me. But I couldn't wait for the wonderful pudding. I'd never learnt how to wait, because I always got whatever I asked for straightaway. So I decided to slice the butter myself, and I took hold of the glistening, razor-sharp knives. I realised how soft butter was. You can slice through it just like that. Faster and faster, I slashed the knives through the butter. I was having so much fun that I did it far more and far faster than was necessary.

And suddenly: chop! Ow, the pain! I'd sliced off both of my little fingers! I roared, louder than any other child has ever cried. Totanus came running out of his shop and took me to hospital. They stitched up the wounds, so that I wouldn't bleed to death. But my little fingers were gone for good.

After that, I was always very careful.

I turned out to have little talent for cooking. Fortunately, Tringa had the patience of a saint, and we practised and practised until I could make the masterful pudding with my eyes shut and one hand tied behind my back: the pudding envied by all of the master chefs.

This is just one of the many, many examples I could give to illustrate how spoiled I was as a child.

An aside

You really shouldn't spoil children. It makes them greedy, selfish and arrogant. Fortunately, I have an excellent character, but I'm an exception. And all that pampering had disastrous consequences for me too, as we shall see.

I was completely accustomed to people picking me up, cuddling me and giving me sweets. So I didn't think it was at all strange when, one day just before my fourth birthday, a man came up to me when I was playing out in the street. He was a friendly, well-dressed man, with a kind face. He was holding a bar of chocolate and he beckoned me over with a smile.

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sixteenth chapter

in which I am received at the emperor's court

In Thumb, there is only one person who can make somebody a baron, and that's the emperor. So after my father died, I had to make my way to the court of Emperor Pandion the Fifth. It was quite a journey, over six weeks to the north on horseback and in a carriage. I took thick, warm clothes, because the emperor's

halls are cold, hair-raisingly cold. His palace garden has sculptures made not of marble, but of the clearest ice. These sculptures are hundreds of years old, and in all that time not one single drop of water has melted from them. The gardens are guarded not by dogs, but by polar bears.

I set off, followed by a long procession. My faithful friend Aegolius rode beside me, in a magnificent coach.

An aside

Aegolius's coach was the very latest, most fashionable model you could buy. And evidently the same applies to coaches as to clothes: the more expensive, the more useless they are. The thing was lavishly decorated. It was covered with gold, silver and precious stones. But not covered by a roof. As a result, Aegolius arrived at the emperor's court with pneumonia. And that was not the only problem: the coach kept on breaking every other minute. The wheels fell apart, the shafts snapped and one of the beautiful, thoroughbred horses suddenly dropped down dead. If Aegolius had had a less fashionable coach, we'd probably have arrived at the emperor's court a week sooner.

I was riding my jet-black horse Sparrowhawk. Behind us came my mother's coach, and beside her rode the inimitable warrior Willem Warhorse on his huge nag. Another three coaches of footmen brought up the rear.

We rode through the north of the city, where the wind whistles along wide, empty streets and the houses are as high as mountains. These houses have no windows, because otherwise the wind would whip the snow into the bedrooms and the children would freeze in their sleep.

It is so cold there that you mustn't stop on the road, or your horses could freeze to death on the spot. Or you could. Everyone in Thumb knows that. But you don't often hear about the kind of thing that happened to us. It was the harshest winter for years, so it was even colder than usual. However, there was no

snow lying on the road; it had all been blown away by the terrible wind. So our coaches were able to travel without any difficulty. Except, that is, for Aegolius's fashionable carriage. The axles froze and the wheels stood still and would not budge. We had to light a fire and heat up oil in a pan. We poured the hot oil over the axles, and managed to thaw them out. But still we couldn't get away. We were stuck firmly to the ground. At first, I was scared that our feet had become frozen to the road surface, but no, I could lift my feet without any difficulty. I was baffled, so I looked at Aegolius... But he didn't understand what was going on either. We were completely at our wits' end and our horses were starting to panic. It was my swift, strong Sparrowhawk who finally managed to pull himself free. He pranced and reared and thrashed about, flaring his nostrils as wide as frying pans, and then he braced himself. A horrifying crack rang out as he jumped forward. For a moment we were scared that bits and pieces of horse would be left all over the road, but Sparrowhawk was still in one piece. I had to take a good, hard look to find out what had happened. There, on the road, frozen upon the cobbles, lay the shadow of my horse.

We were frozen to the road by our shadows!

Fortunately, we still had some hot oil left over from the axles and we rubbed it into our shadows. But, unfortunately, as soon as I'd rubbed the oil into Sparrowhawk's shadow, it galloped away. It disappeared in a southerly direction and there was no way we could catch up.

It was years before I finally found the shadow again, purely by chance. Until then, Sparrowhawk had to make do without a shadow. He always attracted a lot of attention, particularly in sunny climes.

Not long after this delay, we arrived at the emperor's palace. Even from a distance we could hear the growling of the polar bears that guarded the imperial gardens.

An aside

Polar bears are extremely well suited as guard animals. There's not a thief who can get past them. The only problem is that polar bears attach little importance to the difference between thieves, palace guards and visitors. They'll just as soon eat up their own keepers as burglars and assassins. And so Keeper of the Imperial Polar Bears was one of the least popular jobs in the whole of Thumb.

The gates of the imperial gardens were made of snow-white marble. The gardens themselves were entirely covered in snow. There was not the tiniest sprout of green to be seen. But there were lots of ice sculptures of trees, flowers and bushes. And of hedgehogs, birds and reed-fringed ponds, of leaping frogs and fountains.

The imperial palace glittered in the distance.

We were no more than a few yards inside the garden when two giant polar bears came racing towards us with furious growls. I went straight for my gun, even though I was very well aware that it's impolite to shoot your host's animals to bits. Luckily, it didn't come to that, because a terrified, trembling voice called out: "Brutus! Killer! Down, boys! Heel! Come to your master!" A puny, nervous little man appeared from behind an ice tree. He wore the uniform of the bear-keepers. "Down!" he cried again. "Bad bears! Heel! Come to your master."

The two white monsters turned about and ran at the little man with slaving maws. He took to his heels and raced away from the beasts. As he ran, we could hear him yelling: "Down! Heel! Don't come to your master! Scram! Clear off!" Just as the animals were about to get their paws on him, we heard the anxious voice of the other keeper calling out: "Brutus! Killer! Down! Heel! Come to your other master!"

The bears stopped, looked around with puzzled expressions on their faces, and then disappeared in the direction of the other keeper.

The first man stood there puffing and panting. Once he'd got his breath back, he shouted over to us: "Quick, quick! Ride on to the palace! We'll keep the bears busy for a while."

I spurred on Sparrowhawk and galloped away. The rest of the procession followed behind me as quickly as they could. Behind us we heard a third voice call out: "Brutus! Killer! Down! Heel! Come to your other other master!"

The keepers did their job excellently, because we reached the palace without any further hold-ups. We were received by a footman wearing livery trimmed with rabbit fur. He was standing bolt upright, and not one single hair on his livery was out of place. He was very, very refined.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, how may I help you?" he asked with a polite bow. I didn't like his tone of voice. He was being far too friendly, so excessively polite that it felt as though he was making fun of us. You might have thought he was a prince who had disguised himself as a footman for a joke and was now welcoming a pack of mangy beggars to his palace.

An aside

The footman was no more a prince than we were mangy beggars. But still his attitude made us uncomfortable. I discovered later that all of the emperor's footmen are just as snooty. On the emperor's orders. Emperor Pandion the Fifth thinks he's so incredibly important that even his footmen are above any nobleman – because they are the footmen of the emperor.

"I am Milord Falco of Birdsville, the son of Baron Falco the Twelfth. I have come to ask the emperor to appoint me as the successor to my father, who is deceased."

The footman gave an impeccable bow. "We are most honoured by your visit, Milord Falco," he said, and I thought I saw a brief twinkle in his eye – as though he was struggling not to burst out laughing. "Would you be so kind as to follow

me? I shall show you to the guest apartments. You can recover from your strenuous journey, whilst I pass on the happy news of your arrival to the emperor.”

He led us through countless corridors and halls. They were absolutely huge. Some of the ceilings were so high that we could barely make them out through the clouds. And some of the rooms were so vast that it took us over half an hour to walk through them.

It was already getting on for evening by the time we arrived at the guest apartments. The rooms were so lavishly furnished, so elegant and refined that even I, the son of a mighty baron, the filthy rich fashion tsar of Thumb, was impressed. I really didn't know where to look: at the magnificent paintings on the walls or at the wallpaper, which looked just as valuable as the most expensive paintings that I had on the walls at home. Or at the carpets, which were so soft that you felt as though you were walking on clouds, or at the four-poster beds that were made of gold.

“I do hope that you are not offended by the simplicity of these rooms. I'm sure this must be a very sorry affair, in comparison with the opulence to which you are accustomed at home,” said the footman, and once again his eyes seemed to twinkle. It was driving me mad. What I really wanted to do was give him a thump on his pompous nose.

An aside

There was once a baron, Otis the Incredible, who did actually find it impossible to restrain himself. He kicked an arrogant footman in the shins, as hard as he could. The footman nodded politely as though it was no surprise, and then he hobbled off to tell the emperor. Otis was fed to the polar bears the very next day. Since then, he has been known as Otis the Edible.

Instead of thumping the footman, I said: “Please don’t concern yourself. I’ve stayed in all kinds of places. And besides, these are actually very nice rooms. I can see that the emperor really has done his best.” I tried to make it sound as though I felt sorry for the poor footman for having to spend his days surrounded by such wretched squalor. And would you believe it? It worked! The footman stared at me in astonishment.

“Um... yes, indeed,” he said. “Very good. I shall tell the emperor that you are here.” He disappeared. An hour later he returned to inform me that it was too late for today.

“It will please the emperor to receive you tomorrow.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Until tomorrow then.”

seventeenth chapter

in which I become a baron

The next day I was taken before the emperor, together with my friends and loyal retainers.

The emperor’s throne was in a room that surpassed all of the others. The ceiling was supported by a thousand brass pillars. Footmen stood at the door, handing out picnic baskets, so that we could have a little rest on our way to the throne and a bite to eat. We did precisely that, halfway down the throne room, or in other words: after a walk of forty-five minutes. In the distance, we could see a green glimmer.

When we reached the throne, we realised where the glimmer was coming from. The emperor’s seat was cut from a giant green jewel. The throne was as high as a house, and the emperor looked like a tiny sparrow perched on the roof. Around the throne were low stools. Upon these stools sat his ministers and footmen, and twelve gentlemen with writing materials, diligently noting down every word the emperor said.

“Good morning,” cried the emperor, who had to speak very loudly because he was sitting so high up. “What are you doing here?”

“This is Milord Falco, Your Majesty,” one of the ministers shouted up to him. “He wants to become Baron of Birdsville, just like his father.”

“He does, does he?” boomed the emperor, with a frown on his face. “That’s fine by me, but isn’t it going to cause trouble? Two barons in one barony? Father and son?”

“You have misunderstood me, Your Majesty. The father is deceased.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” said the emperor, as the penny dropped. “Well then, that’s definitely fine by me. You may go ahead and become baron, young man.”

“One moment!” cried another of the ministers. “It’s not that simple! There are rules for this kind of thing. Very old rules, to which we must adhere.”

“Oh! Is that so?” asked the emperor with interest. “How jolly splendid that you ministers know all about such matters. Now, my little ministers, do tell me. What are these rules?”

An aside

Anyone reading this might think that Emperor Pandion was a complete idiot. And he was. It ran in his family; his father, Pandion the Fourth, had been far worse. He couldn’t even read. Except for the letter P, because that was the first letter of his own name and he used it to sign important documents. He was also unable to control his bladder; if you looked closely, you could still see yellow stains on the throne. Yes, the family that ruled Thumb was a bunch of simpletons. Some empires simply have bad luck. Fortunately, however, we have good ministers.

The eldest of the ministers cleared his throat and mumbled: “Firstly, the prospective baron must swear fealty to the emperor, and secondly he must perform a deed of derring-do.”

“Who? Me?” asked the emperor anxiously. “Do I have to perform a deed...”

“No, Your Majesty, the prospective baron. He has to.”

“Oh, thank goodness! Jolly good. I would even go so far as to say that it’s spiffing. What a wonderful word that is: spiffing. Is it not a wonderful word, ministers?”

“Indeed it is, Your Majesty,” bleated the ministers. “Shall we begin? The prospective baron must swear fealty to you.”

“Oh yes. Please do so, my good man.”

Solemnly, I held up my right hand. “To you, Emperor Pandion the Fifth,” I intoned, “I owe more than to my own parents. You are wise, benevolent and reign supreme. All the good that happens in Thumb is thanks to you. I am your humble servant, and I swear fealty to you until the day I die.”

“That sounds good,” said the emperor. “What do we think of that, ministers? Will that do?”

“That is a fine oath, Your Majesty,” said the ministers. “It doesn’t get any better. Very polite indeed. The prospective baron has an exceptional grasp of how things should be done.”

Aegolius stood beside me, glowing with pride. He was about to say something, but then exploded in a dreadful fit of coughing. It was a result of the pneumonia that he’d developed when travelling in his open coach.

“Bless you, dear fellow,” said the emperor graciously. Then he looked back at me. “So, you heard it, my good man, the oath’s a good one. And now for the deed of derring-do.”

“Might I make a suggestion, Your Majesty?” asked a bald-headed minister with the scrawny neck of a vulture. “I propose that the task should be: bring me three chests of gold!”

“How very dull,” grouched the emperor. “Any well-heeled fellow could do that. There’s nothing daring about it.”

“Well, that is the custom, Your Majesty. And besides, our coffers are empty.”

An aside

The rule about the deed of derring-do dates back to the days when the title of baron was given as a reward to the most daring knights of all, when they'd done something like defeating a dragon. Heroes of that kind no longer exist; but then neither do dragons. So the deeds no longer have to be really daring. It's little more than an old custom, a useless relic from the olden days. Just like the imperial family, in fact.

“Pah,” said the emperor. He was pouting like a toddler. I felt a bit sorry for him, the way he had to sit there on his throne, day in, day out, without ever having any fun. He seemed like the kind of person who would rather be playing outside, throwing snowballs or making snowmen. Instead, he had to sit there in that ice-cold throne room all day, just listening to his ministers, who were so much cleverer than him that he never had any idea what they were talking about – no, that was no place for him. I wanted to bring a little jollity into his life.

And besides, my innate courage and my own ambition were beginning to stir within me. A deed of derring-do – that was just my kind of thing. Then everyone would be able to see just how extraordinary I was. I certainly liked the sound of that.

So I said: “Your Majesty, you're absolutely right. A baron without a deed of derring-do does not amount to anything. He's a nobody. A nonentity. A nitwit. I don't want to be that kind of baron. So I would beg of you: Please make it nice and difficult.”