



South Tyrol – Land of Myths and Legends

Hapschlüssel the Warlock

In ancient times there was a sorcerer – known amongst the people of Bressanone (Brixen) and Chiusa (Klausen) as Hapschlüssel (lit: Master Key) because he knew how to open locked doors – wreaking havoc up and down the Isarco (Eisack) Valley and in and around Val Passiria (Pustertal) Valley. He had several accomplices, all of whom he instructed in the black arts. The authorities were often on his trail. They did not succeed in capturing him, though, because he was like Satan when it came to performing magic. Even if one of his cronies was brought in, the master was there and set him free with the help of his magic. He also had a very old book with strange symbols and little spells. With this book, he performed magic and brought in storms and hail.

One time, just after the slaughter had taken place at Villpeder in Lüsen, the meat was being stored in the cellar. Hapschlüssel smelled the meat, and neither lock nor hinge could keep him out: he made his way into the cellar and ate to his heart's content. The people, however, had noticed him and came running with pitchforks, scythes and flails to get the glutton out of the cellar and into the courtroom instead. As they entered the basement, a black cat jumped out of the basement window, and there was nobody to take to court! At another farm, Hapschlüssel was seen going down the road just above the house. The field hands ran quickly outside to catch him, brandishing all kinds of weapons. The farmer said, "He'll certainly never get away from us now." A coal-black weasel scampered into the next woodpile, and Hapschlüssel disappeared without a trace. They sorted carefully through the wood, but there was nothing there.

At one point, the authorities were back on his trail. It was at Vintl, and Hapschlüssel was sitting in the pub having a drink or two. Suddenly, the bailiffs stumbled through the door of the Stube parlour to have a drink too, since stalking the magician was a thirsty business. They spoke, of course, about none other than Hapschlüssel and about how better to catch him. They did not know what he looked like, however, or they would have had him there now. One said: "Let's approach him like I said, otherwise he'll get away again!" Hapschlüssel smiled and crept – he could transform himself into anything, you see – into his empty wine jug. After some time, as the others were still talking about him, the lid of the wine jar of wine raised up, and the magician's head emerged from the bottom of the little jar, and began to speak: "Are you looking for Hapschlüssel? Here I am!" All of the bailiffs, scared to death, ran out of the door as fast as they could.

Finally, the bailiffs did manage to take him into custody. They put him in chains on a wagon and went on their way to the courthouse. Along the road, they stopped at an inn, for they were tired and thirsty. They did drink quite a bit, actually, for they thought that the wizard was in irons and couldn't get away. While they were drinking inside, a little boy came along.

Hapschlüssel said, "Hey, little boy, throw a handful of earth onto the trolley!" The little boy did, and the magician – having regained his black art through contact with the earth – got away. When the bailiffs came out, the prisoner in chains had been replaced by nothing but straw.

The cat eventually spent his seventh life, though. The authorities dealt with the wizard in earnest and finally managed to deliver him into the hands of the court. They made sure that he did not come into contact with the soil, and brought him in successfully. The judge sentenced him to death at the stake. The news of his execution spread rapidly among the people and everyone went to the execution site, where the pile had already been prepared. They proceeded as quickly as possible: they threw him, heavily chained, onto the pile, from which black smoke was already swirling upwards. His spell book was thrown onto the pile with him. The flames shot up and set the wood and twigs full afire. How strange! The warlock burned to powder and dust, but the book rose up and hovered in the air for a while. Only then did the fire take it: it sank slowly down, not burning all at once but only page by page. Then, when the last page was going out, the burned book fell back onto the fire.