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THE MASTER THIEF.

ONCE upon a time there was a poor cottager who had three sons. He had nothing to leave them when he died, and no money with which to put them at any trade, so that he did not know what to make of them.

So it felt out one night as he was going through a great wood that bad weather overtook him. It blew and drizzled so that he could scarce keep his eyes open; and in a trice, before he knew how it was, he got bewildered, and could not find either road or path.

"Good evening," said the youth. "Good evening," said the old dame. "Hutetu! it's such foul weather out doors to-night," said he.

"So it is," said she. "Can I get leave to have a bed and shelter here to-night?" asked the youth.

"You'll get no good by sleeping here," said the old dame; "for if the folks come home and find you here they will kill both me and you."

"What sort of folks, then, are they who live here?" asked the youth.

"Oh, robbers! And such a bad lot of them too," said the old dame. They stole me away when I was little, and have kept me as their housekeeper ever since."

"Well, for all that, I think I'll just go to bed," said the youth. "Come what may, I'll not stir out to-night in such weather."

"Very well," said the old dame; "but if you stay it will be the worse for you."

With that the youth got into a bed which stood there, but he dared not go to sleep, and very soon after in came the robbers; so the old dame told them how a strange fellow had come in whom she had not been able to get out of the house again.

"Did you see if he had any money?" said the robbers.

"Such a one as he money?" said the old dame. "The trampler. Why if he had clothes to his back, it was as much as he had."

Then the robbers began to talk among themselves what they should do with him; if they should kill him outright, or what else they should do. Meantime the youth got up and began to talk to them, and to ask if they did not want a servant, for it might be that he would be glad to enter into their service.

"Oh," said they, "if you have a mind to follow the trade that we follow, you can very well get a place here."

"It's all one to me what trade I follow," said the youth, "for when I left home, my father gave me leave to take to any trade I chose."

"Well, have you a mind to steal?" asked the robbers.

"I don't care," said the youth, for he

thought it would not take long to learn that trade.

Now there lived a man a little way off who had three oxen. One of these he was to take to town to sell, and the robbers had heard what he was going to do, so they said to the youth, that if he were good to steal the ox from the man by the way without his knowing it, and without doing any harm, they would give him leave to be their serving man.

Well! the youth set off, and took with him a pretty shoe, with a silver buckle on it, which lay about the house; and he put the shoe in the road along which the man was going with the ox; and when he had done that, he went into the wood and hid himself under a bush. So when the man came by he saw the shoe at once.

"That's a nice shoe," said he. "If I only had the fellow to it, I'd take it home with me, and perhaps I'd put my old dame into a good humor for once."

For you must know that he had an old wife, so cross and snappish that it was not long between each time that she boxed his ears. But then he bethought him that he could do nothing with the odd shoe unless he had the fellow to it; so he went on his way and let the shoe lie on the road.

Then the youth took up the shoe, and made all the haste he could to get before the man by a short cut through the wood and laid it down before him in the road again.

When the man came along with his ox he got quite angry with himself for being so stupid as to leave the fellow to the shoe lying in the road instead of taking it with him; so he tied the ox to the fence, and said to himself:

"I may just as well run back and pick up the other, and then I'll have a pair of good shoes for my old dame, and so, perhaps I'll get a kind word from her for once."

So he set off, and hunted and hunted up and down for the shoe, but no shoe did he find; and at length he had to go back with the shoe he had. But, meanwhile the youth had taken the ox and gone off with it; and when the man came and saw that his ox was gone, he began to bewail, for he was afraid that his old dame would kill him outright when she came to know that the ox was lost. But just then it came across his mind that he would go home and take the second ox and drive it to the town, and not let the old dame know anything about the matter. So he did this, and went home and took the ox without his dame's knowing it, and set off with it to the town. But the robbers knew all about it, and they said to the youth, if he could get this ox too, without the man's knowing it, and without his doing him any harm, he should be as good as any of them. If that were all, said the youth, he did not think it a very hard thing.

This time he took with him a rope, and hung himself up under the armpits to a tree right in the man's way. So the man came along with his ox, and when he saw such a sight hanging there he began to feel a little queer.

"Well," said he, "whatever heavy thoughts you had when you hanged yourself up there, it can't be helped; you may hang for what I care! I can't breathe life into you again;" and with that he went on his way with his ox.—Down slipped the youth from the tree, and ran by a footpath, and got before the man, and hung himself up right in his way again.

"Bless me!" said the man, "were you really so heavy at heart that you hanged yourself up there—or is it only a piece of witchcraft that I see before me? Ay, ay! you may hang for all I care, whether you are a ghost or whatever you are." So he passed on with his ox.

Now the youth did just what he had done twice before; he jumped down from the tree, ran through the wood, by a footpath, and hung himself up right in the man's way again. But when the man saw the sight for the third time, he said to himself:

"Well! this is an ugly business! Is it likely now that they should have been so heavy at heart as to hang themselves, all these three? No! I cannot think that it is anything else than a piece of witchcraft that I see. But now I'll soon know for certain; if the other two are still hanging there, it must be really so;

but if they are not, then it can be nothing but witchcraft that which I see."

So he tied up his ox, and ran back to see if the others were still really hanging there.

But while he went and peered up into the trees, the youth jumped down and took his ox and went off with it. When the man came back and found his ox gone, he was in a sad plight, and, as any one might know without being told, he began to cry and bemoan, but at last he came to take it easier, and so he thought:

"There's no other help for it than to go home and take the third ox without my dame's knowing it, and to try and drive a good bargain with it, so that I may get a good sum of money for it."

So he went home and set off with the ox, and as his old dame knew never a word about the matter. But the robbers knew all about it, and they said to the youth, that if he could steal this ox as he had stolen the other two, then he should be master over the whole band. Well, the youth set off, and ran into the wood; and as the man came up with his ox he set up a dreadful bellowing, just like a great ox in the wood. When the man heard that, you can think how glad he was, for it seemed to him that he knew the voice of his big bullock, and he thought that now he should find both of them again; so he tied up the third ox, and ran off from the road to look for them in the wood; but meantime the youth went off with the third ox.

Now when the man came back and found that he had lost this ox too, he was so wild that there was no end to his grief. He cried and roared and beat his breast, and, to tell the truth, it was many days before he dared to go home; for he was afraid lest his old dame should kill outright on the spot.

As for the robbers, they were not very well pleased either, when they had to own that the youth was master over the whole band.

So one day they thought they would try their hands at something which he was not man enough to do; and they all sat off together, every man except Jack, of them, and left him alone at home.—Now, the first thing that he did when they were all well clear of the house, was to drive the oxen out to the road, so that they might run back to the man from whom he had stolen them; and right glad was he to see them; so you may fancy. Next he took all the horses which the robbers had, and loaded them with the best things that he could lay his hands on—gold and silver, and clothes and other fine things; and then he bade the old dame to greet the robbers when they came back, and to thank them for him, and to say that now he was sitting off on his travels; and that they would hard work to find him again; and with that, off he started.

After a good bit he came to the road along which he was going when he fell among the robbers; and when he got near home, and could see to his father's cottage, he put on a uniform which he had found among the clothes taken from the robbers, and which was made just like a general's. So he drove up to the door as if he were any other great man. After that he went in and asked if he could have a lodging. No, that he could not at any price.

"However, should I be able," said the man, "to make room in my house for such a fine gentleman—I who scarce have a rag to lie upon, and miserable rags too!"

"You were always a stingy old hunk," said the youth, "and so you are still, when you won't take your own son in."

"What! you my son!" said the man. "Don't you know me again?" said the youth. Well, after a little while he knew him again.

But what have you been turning your hand to, that you have made yourself so great a man in such haste?" asked the man.

"Oh, I'll soon tell you," said the youth. "You said I might take to any trade I chose, and so I bound myself apprentice to some thieves and robbers, and now I've served out my time, and am become a Master Thief."

Now there lived a 'Squire close by to his father's cottage, and he had a great house, and such heaps of money, that he could not tell how much he had. He had a daughter too, and a smart and

pretty girl she was. So the Master Thief set his heart upon having her to wife; and he told his father to go to the 'Squire and ask for his daughter for him.

"If he asks by what trade I get my living, you can say I am a Master Thief."

"I think you've lost your wits," said the man, "for you can't be in your right mind when you think of such nonsense."

No; he had not lost his wits; his father must and should go to the 'Squire and ask for his daughter.

"Nay, but I tell you, I dare not go to the 'Squire and be your spokesman; he is so rich, and has so much money," said the man.

"Yes, there was no help for it," said the Master Thief; he should go whether he would or no; and if he did not go by fair means, he would make him go by foul. But the man was still loth to go; so he stepped after him and rubbed him down with a cudgel, and kept on till the man came crying and sobbing inside the 'Squire's door.

"How now my man? What ails you?" said the 'Squire.

So he told him the whole story; how he had three sons who set off one day, and how he gave them leave to go whithersoever they would, and to follow whatever calling they chose.

"And here now is the youngest come home, and has beaten me until he has made me come to you and ask you for your daughter for him to wife; and he bids me say, besides, that he is a Master Thief." And so he fell to crying and sobbing again.

"Never mind, my man," said the 'Squire, laughing, "just go back and tell him for me, that he must prove his skill first. If he can steal the roast from the spit in the kitchen on Sunday, while all the household are looking after it, he shall have my daughter. Just go and tell him that."

So he went back and told the youth, who thought it would be an easy job. So he set about and caught three hares alive, and put them into a bag, and dressed himself in some rags, until he looked so poor and filthy that it made one's heart bleed to see; and then he sneaked into the passage at the back door of the 'Squire's house on the Sunday afternoon, with his bag, just like any other beggar boy. But the 'Squire himself and all his household were in the kitchen watching the roast. Just as they were doing this, the youth let one hare go, and it set off and ran round and round the yard in front of the house.

"Oh, just look at that hare," said the folks in the kitchen, and were all for running out to catch it.

Yes the 'Squire saw it running too.—"Oh, let it run," said he; "there's no use in thinking to catch a hare by running after it."

A little while after, the youth let the second hare go, and they saw it in the kitchen, and thought it was the same they had seen before, and still wanted to run out and catch it; but the 'Squire said again it was no use. It was not long before the youth let the third hare go, and it set off and ran round and round the yard as the others before it.

Now they saw it from the kitchen, and still thought it was the same hare that kept on running about, and were all eager to be out after it.

"Well, it is a fine hare," said the 'Squire; "come and see if we can't lay our hands on it."

So he ran, and the rest with him—away they all went, the hare before, and they after so that all was rare fun to see. But meantime the youth took the roast and ran off with it; and where the 'Squire got a roast for his dinner that day I don't know; but one thing I know, and that is, that he had no roast hare, though he ran after it till he was both warm and weary.

Now it chanced that the Priest came to dinner that day, and when the 'Squire told him what trick the Master Thief had played him, he made such game of him that there was no end to it.

"For my part," said the Priest, "I don't think how it could ever happen to me to be made such a fool of by a fellow like that."

"Very well—only keep a sharp lookout," said the 'Squire; maybe he'll come to see you before you know a word of it." But the Priest stuck to his text,—that he did, and made game of the

'Squire because he had been so taken in."

Later in the afternoon came the Master Thief, and wanted to have the 'Squire's daughter, as he had given his word. But the 'Squire began to talk him over, and said:

"Oh, you must prove your skill a little more; for what you did to-day was no great thing after all. Couldn't you now play off a good trick?"

"Well, as for that, it wouldn't be hard," said the Master Thief. So he dressed himself up like a bird, threw a great white sheet over his body, took the wings of a goose and tied them to his back, and so climbed up into a great maple which stood in the Priest's garden. And when the Priest came home in the evening, the youth began to bawl out:

'Father Laurence? Father Laurence!—for that was the Priest's name.

"Who is that calling me?" said the Priest.

"I am an angel," said the Master Thief, "sent from God to let you know that you shall be taken up alive into heaven's for your piety's sake. Next Monday you must hold yourself ready for the journey, for I shall come then to fetch you in a sack; and all your gold and silver, and all that you have of this world's goods, you must lay together in a heap in your dining-room."

Well, Father Laurence fell on his knees before the angel, and thanked him; and the very next day he preached a farewell sermon, and expounded how there had come down an angel into the big maple in his garden, who told him that he was to be taken up alive into heaven for his piety's sake; and he preached and made such a touching discourse, that all who were at church wept, both young and old.

So the Monday after came the Master Thief like an angel again, and the Priest fell on his knees and thanked him before he was put into the sack; but when he had got him well in, the Master Thief drew and dragged him over stocks and stones.

"Ow! ow!" groaned the Priest inside the sack, "wherever are we going?"

"This is the narrow way which leadeth unto the kingdom of heaven," said the Master Thief, who went on dragging him along until he had nearly broken every bone in his body. At last he tumbled him into a goose-house that belonged to the 'Squire, and the geese began pecking and pinching him with their bills, so that he was more dead than alive.

"Now you are in the flames of purgatory, to be cleansed and purified for life everlasting," said the Master Thief; and with that he went his way, and took all the gold and silver, and all the fine things which the Priest had laid together in his dining-room. The next morning, when the goose girl came to let the geese out, she heard how the Priest lay in the sack and bemoaned himself in the goose-house.

"In heaven's name, who's there, and what ails you!" she cried.

"Oh!" said the Priest, "if you are an angel from heaven, do let me out, and let me return again to earth, for it is worse here than in hell. The little fiends keep on pinching me with tongues."

"God help us, I am no angel at all," said the girl, as she helped the Priest out of the sack; "I am only after the 'Squire's geese, and like enough they are the little fiends, which have pinched your reverence."

"Oh!" groaned the the Priest, "this all that Master Thief's doing. Ah! my gold and my silver, and my fine clothes." And he beat his breast and hobbled home at such a rate that the girl thought he had lost his wits all at once.

Now when the 'Squire came to hear how it had gone with the Priest, and how he had been along the narrow way, and into purgatory, he laughed until he well nigh split his sides. But when the Master Thief came and asked for his daughter as he had promised, the 'Squire put him off again, and said:

"You must do one masterpiece better still, that I may see plainly what you are fit for. Now I have twelve horses in my stable, and on them I will put twelve grooms, one on each. If you are so good a thief as to steal the horses from under them, I'll see what I can do for you."—Concluded next week.