



Esben and the Witch

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There was once a man who had twelve sons: the eleven eldest were both big and strong, but the twelfth, whose name was Esben, was only a little fellow. The eleven eldest went out with their father to field and forest, but Esben preferred to stay at home with his mother, and so he was never reckoned at all by the rest, but was a sort of outcast among them.

When the eleven had grown up to be men they decided to go out into the world to try their fortune, and they plagued their father to give them what they required for the journey. The father was not much in favour of this, for he was now old and weak, and could not well spare them from helping him with his work, but in the long run he had to give in. Each one of the eleven got a fine white horse and money for the journey, and so they said farewell to their father and their home, and rode away.

As for Esben, no one had ever thought about him; his brothers had not even said farewell to him.

After the eleven were gone Esben went to his father and said, 'Father, give me also a horse and money; I should also like to see round about me in the world.'

'You are a little fool,' said his father. 'If I could have let you go, and kept your eleven brothers at home, it would have been better for me in my old age.'

‘Well, you will soon be rid of me at any rate,’ said Esben.

As he could get no other horse, he went into the forest, broke off a branch, stripped the bark off it, so that it became still whiter than his brothers’ horses, and, mounted on this, rode off after his eleven brothers.

The brothers rode on the whole day, and towards evening they came to a great forest, which they entered. Far within the wood they came to a little house, and knocked at the door. There came an old, ugly, bearded hag, and opened it, and they asked her whether all of them could get quarters for the night.

‘Yes,’ said the old, bearded hag, ‘you shall all have quarters for the night, and, in addition, each of you shall have one of my daughters.’

The eleven brothers thought that they had come to very hospitable people. They were well attended to, and when they went to bed, each of them got one of the hag’s daughters. Esben had been coming along behind them, and had followed the same way, and had also found the same house in the forest. He slipped into this, without either the witch or her daughters noticing him, and hid himself under one of the beds.

A little before midnight he crept quietly out and wakened his brothers. He told these to change night-caps with the witch’s daughters. The brothers saw no reason for this, but, to get rid of Esben’s persistence, they made the exchange, and slept soundly again.

When midnight came Esben heard the old witch come creeping along. She had a broad-bladed axe in her hand, and went over all the eleven beds. It was so dark that she could not see a hand’s breadth before her, but she felt her way, and hacked the heads off all the sleepers who had the men’s night-caps on—and these were her own daughters. As soon as she had gone her way Esben wakened his brothers, and they hastily took their horses and rode off from the witch’s house, glad that they had escaped so well. They quite forgot to thank Esben for what he had done for them.

When they had ridden onwards for some time they reached a king's palace, and inquired there whether they could be taken into service. Quite easily, they were told, if they would be stablemen, otherwise the king had no use for them. They were quite ready for this, and got the task of looking after all the king's horses. Long after them came Esben riding on his stick, and he also wanted to get a place in the palace, but no one had any use for him, and he was told that he could just go back the way he had come. However, he stayed there and occupied himself as best he could. He got his food, but nothing more, and by night he lay just where he could.

At this time there was in the palace a knight who was called Sir Red. He was very well liked by the king, but hated by everyone else, for he was wicked both in will and deed. This Sir Red became angry with the eleven brothers, because they would not always stand at attention for him, so he determined to avenge himself on them. One day, therefore, he went to the king, and said that the eleven brothers who had come to the palace a little while ago, and served as stablemen, could do a great deal more than they pretended. One day he had heard them say that if they liked they could get for the king a wonderful dove which had a feather of gold and a feather of silver time about. But they would not procure it unless they were threatened with death.

The king then had the eleven brothers called before him, and said to them, 'You have said that you can get me a dove which has feathers of gold and silver time about.'

All the eleven assured him that they had never said anything of the kind, and they did not believe that such a dove existed in the whole world.

'Take your own mind of it,' said the king; 'but if you don't get that dove within three days you shall lose your heads, the whole lot of you.'

With that the king let them go, and there was great grief among them; some wept and others lamented.

At that moment Esben came along, and, seeing their sorrowful looks, said to them, 'Hello, what's the matter with you?'

'What good would it do to tell you, you little fool? You can't help us.'

'Oh, you don't know that,' answered Esben. 'I have helped you before.'

In the end they told him how unreasonable the king was, and how he had ordered them to get for him a dove with feathers of gold and silver time about.

‘Give me a bag of peas’ said Esben, ‘and I shall see what I can do for you.’

Esben got his bag of peas; then he took his white stick, and said, Fly quick, my little stick, Carry me across the stream.

Straightway the stick carried him across the river and straight into the old witch’s courtyard. Esben had noticed that she had such a dove; so when he arrived in the courtyard he shook the peas out of the bag, and the dove came fluttering down to pick them up. Esben caught it at once, put it into the bag, and hurried off before the witch caught sight of him; but the next moment she came running, and shouted after him, ‘I Hey is that you, Esben.?’

‘Ye—e—s!’

‘Is it you that has taken my dove?’

‘Ye—e—s!’

‘Was it you that made me kill my eleven daughters?’

‘Ye—e—s!’

‘Are you coming back again?’

‘That may be,’ said Esben.

‘Then you’ll catch it,’ shouted the witch.

The stick carried Esben with the dove back to the king’s palace, and his brothers were greatly delighted. The king thanked them many times for the dove, and gave them in return both silver and gold. At this Sir Red became still more embittered, and again thought of how to avenge himself on the brothers.

One day he went to the king and told him that the dove was by no means the best thing that the brothers could get for him; for one day he had heard them talking quietly among themselves, and they had said that they could procure a boar whose bristles were of gold and silver time about.

The king again summoned the brothers before him, and asked whether it was true that they had said that they could get for him a boar whose bristles were of gold and silver time about.

‘No,’ said the brothers; they had never said nor thought such a thing, and they did not believe that there was such a boar in the whole world.

‘You must get me that boar within three days,’ said the king, ‘or it will cost you your heads.’

With that they had to go. This was still worse than before, they thought. Where could they get such a marvellous boar? They all went about hanging their heads; but when only one day remained of the three Esben came along. When he saw his brothers’ sorrowful looks he cried,

‘Hallo, what’s the matter now?’

‘Oh, what’s the use of telling you?’ said his brothers. ‘You can’t help us, at any rate.’

‘Ah, you don’t know that,’ said Esben; ‘I’ve helped you before.’

In the end they told him how Sir Red had stirred up the king against them, so that he had ordered them to get for him a boar with bristles of gold and silver time about.

‘That’s all right,’ said Esben; ‘give me a sack of malt, and it is not quite impossible that I may be able to help you.’

Esben got his sack of malt; then he took his little white stick, set himself upon it, and said, ‘Fly quick, my little stick, carry me across the stream.’

Off went the stick with him, and very soon he was again in the witch’s courtyard. There he emptied out the malt, and next moment came the boar, which had every second bristle of gold and of silver. Esben at once put it into his sack and hurried off before the witch should catch sight of him; but the next moment she came running, and shouted after him, ‘Hey! is that you, Esben?’

'Ye—e—s!'

'Is it you that has taken my pretty boar?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'It was also you that took my dove?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And it was you that made me kill my eleven daughters?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'Are you coming back again?'

'That may be,' said Esben.

'Then you'll catch it,' said the witch.

Esben was soon back at the palace with the boar, and his brothers scarcely knew which leg to stand on, so rejoiced were they that they were safe again. Not one of them, however, ever thought of thanking Esben for what he had done for them.

The king was still more rejoiced over the boar than he had been over the dove, and did not know what to give the brothers for it. At this Sir Red was again possessed with anger and envy, and again he went about and planned how to get the brothers into trouble.

One day he went again to the king and said, 'These eleven brothers have now procured the dove and the boar, but they can do much more than that; I know they have said that if they liked they could get for the king a lamp that can shine over seven kingdoms.'

'If they have said that,' said the king, 'they shall also be made to bring it to me. That would be a glorious lamp for me.'

Again the king sent a message to the brothers to come up to the palace. They went accordingly, although very unwillingly, for they suspected that Sir Red had fallen on some new plan to bring them into trouble. As soon as they came before the king he said to them,

‘You brothers have said that you could, if you liked, get for me a lamp that can shine over seven kingdoms. That lamp must be mine within three days, or it will cost you your lives.’

The brothers assured him that they had never said so, and they were sure that no such lamp existed, but their words were of no avail.

‘The lamp!’ said the king, ‘or it will cost you your heads.’

The brothers were now in greater despair than ever. They did not know what to do, for such a lamp no one had ever heard of. But just as things looked their worst along came Esben.

‘Something wrong again?’ said he. ‘What’s the matter with you now?’

‘Oh, it’s no use telling you,’ said they. ‘You can’t help us, at any rate.’

‘Oh, you might at least tell me,’ said Esben; ‘I have helped you before.’

In the end they told him that the king had ordered them to bring him a lamp which could shine over seven kingdoms, but such a lamp no one had ever heard tell of.

‘Give me a bushel of salt,’ said Esben, ‘and we shall see how matters go.’

He got his bushel of salt, and then mounted his little white stick, and said, Fly quick, my little stick, Carry me across the stream.

With that both he and his bushel of salt were over beside the witch’s courtyard. But now matters were less easy, for he could not get inside the yard, as it was evening and the gate was locked. Finally he hit upon a plan; he got up on the roof and crept down the chimney.

He searched all round for the lamp, but could find it nowhere, for the witch always had it safely guarded, as it was one of her most precious treasures. When he became tired of searching for it he crept into the baking-oven, intending to lie down there and sleep till morning; but just at that moment he heard the witch calling from her bed to one of her daughters, and telling her to make some porridge for her. She had grown hungry, and had taken such a fancy to some porridge. The daughter got out of bed, kindled the fire, and put on

a potwith water in it.

'You mustn't put any salt in the porridge, though,' cried the witch.

'No, neither will I,' said the daughter; but while she was away getting the meal Esben slipped out of the oven and emptied the whole bushel of salt into the pot. The daughter came back then and put in the meal, and after it had boiled a little she took it in to her mother. The witch took a spoonful and tasted it.

'Uh!' said she; 'didn't I tell you not to put any salt in it, and it's just as salt as the sea.'

So the daughter had to go and make new porridge, and her mother warned her strictly not to put any salt in it. But now there was no water in the house, so she asked her mother to give her the lamp, so that she could go to the well for more.

'There you have it, then,' said the witch; 'but take good care of it.'

The daughter took the lamp which shone over seven kingdoms, and went out to the well for water, while Esben slipped out after her. When she was going to draw the water from the well she set the lamp down on a stone beside her. Esben watched his chance, seized the lamp, and gave her a push from behind, so that she plumped head first into the well. Then he made off with the lamp. But the witch got out of her bed and ran after him, crying:

'Hey! is that you again, Esben?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'Was it you that took my dove?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'Was it also you that took my boar?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And it was you that made me kill my eleven daughters?'

'Ye—e—s!'

‘And now you have taken my lamp, and drowned my twelfth daughter in the well?’

‘Ye—e—s!’

‘Are you coming back again?’

‘Tht may be,’ said Esben.

‘Then you’ll catch it,’ said the witch.

It was only a minute before the stick had again landed Esben at the king’s palace, and the brothers were then freed from their distress. The king gave them many fine presents, but Esben did not get even so much as thanks from them.

Never had Sir Red been so eaten up with envy as he was now, and he racked his brain day and night to find something quite impossible to demand from the brothers.

One day he went to the king and told him that the lamp the brothers had procured was good enough, but they could still get for him something that was far better. The king asked what that was.

‘It is,’ said Sir Red, ‘the most beautiful coverlet that any mortal ever heard tell of. It also has the property that, when anyone touches it, it sounds so that it can be heard over eight kingdoms.’

‘That must be a splendid coverlet,’ said the king, and he at once sent for the brothers.

‘You have said that you know of a coverlet, the most beautiful in the whole world, and which sounds over eight kingdoms when anyone touches it. You shall procure it for me, or else lose your lives,’ said he.

The brothers answered him that they had never said a word about such a coverlet, did not believe it existed, and that it was quite impossible for them to procure it. But the king would not hear a word; he drove them away, telling them that if they did not get it very soon it would cost them their heads.

Things looked very black again for the brothers, for they were sure there was no escape for them. The youngest of them, indeed, asked where Esben was, but the others said that that little fool could scarcely keep himself in clothes, and it was not to be expected that he could help them. Not one of them thought it worth while to look for Esben, but he soon came along of himself.

‘Well, what’s the matter now?’ said he.

‘Oh, what’s the use of telling you?’ said the brothers. ‘You can’t help us, at any rate.’

‘Ah! who knows that?’ said Esben. ‘I have helped you before.’

In the end the brothers told him about the coverlet which, when one touched it, sounded so that it could be heard over eight kingdoms. Esben thought that this was the worst errand that he had had yet, but he could not do worse than fail, and so he would make the attempt.

He again took his little white stick, set himself on it, and said, Fly quick, my little stick, Carry me across the stream.

Next moment he was across the river and beside the witch’s house. It was evening, and the door was locked, but he knew the way down the chimney. When he had got into the house, however, the worst yet remained to do, for the coverlet was on the bed in which the witch lay and slept. He slipped into the room without either she or her daughter waking; but as soon as he touched the coverlet to take it it sounded so that it could be heard over eight kingdoms.

The witch awoke, sprang out of bed, and caught hold of Esben. He struggled with her, but could not free himself, and the witch called to her daughter, ‘Come and help me; we shall put him into the little dark room to be fattened. Ho, ho! now I have him!’

Esben was now put into a little dark hole, where he neither saw sun nor moon, and there he was fed on sweet milk and nut-kernels. The daughter had enough to do cracking nuts for him, and at the end of fourteen days she had only one tooth left in her mouth; she had broken all the rest with the nuts. In this time however, she had taken a liking to Esben, and would willingly have set him free, but could not.

When some time had passed the witch told her daughter to go and cut a finger off Esben, so that she could see whether he was nearly fat enough yet. The daughter went and told Esben, and asked him what she should do. Esben told her to take an iron nail and wrap a piece of skin round it: she could then give her mother this to bite at.

The daughter did so, but when the witch bit it she cried, 'Uh! no, no! This is nothing but skin and bone; he must be fattened much longer yet.'

So Esben was fed for a while longer on sweet milk and nut-kernels, until one day the witch thought that now he must surely be fat enough, and told her daughter again to go and cut a finger off him. By this time Esben was tired of staying in the dark hole, so he told her to go and cut a teat off a cow, and give it to the witch to bite at. This the daughter did, and the witch cried, 'Ah! now he is fat—so fat that one can scarcely feel the bone in him. Now he shall be killed.'

Now this was just the very time that the witch had to go to Troms Church, where all the witches gather once every year, so she had no time to deal with Esben herself. She therefore told her daughter to heat up the big oven while she was away, take Esben out of his prison, and roast him in there before she came back. The daughter promised all this, and the witch went off on her journey.

The daughter then made the oven as hot as could be, and took Esben out of his prison in order to roast him. She brought the oven spade, and told Esben to seat himself on it, so that she could shoot him into the oven. Esben accordingly took his seat on it, but when she had got him to the mouth of the oven he spread his legs out wide, so that she could not get him pushed in.

'You mustn't sit like that,' said she.

'How then?' said Esben.

'You must cross your legs,' said the daughter; but Esben could not understand what she meant by this.

'Get out of the way,' said she, 'and I will show you how to place yourself.'

She seated herself on the oven spade, but no sooner had she done so than Esben laid hold of it, shot her into the oven, and fastened the door of it. Then he ran and seized the coverlet, but as soon as he did so it sounded so that it could be heard over eight kingdoms, and the witch, who was at Troms Church, came flying home, and shouted, 'Hey! is that you again, Esben?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'It was you that made me kill my eleven daughters?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And took my dove?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And my beautiful boar?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And drowned my twelfth daughter in the well, and took my lamp?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'And now you have roasted my thirteenth and last daughter in the oven, and taken my coverlet?'

'Ye—e—s!'

'Are you coming back again?'

'No, never again,' said Esben.

At this the witch became so furious that she sprang into numberless pieces of flint, and from this come all the flint stones that one finds about the country.

Esben had found again his little stick, which the witch had taken from him, so he said, Fly quick, my little stick, Carry me across the stream.

Next moment he was back at the king's palace. Here things were in a bad way, for the king had thrown all the eleven brothers into prison, and they were to be executed very shortly because they had not brought him the coverlet. Esben now went up to the king and gave him the coverlet with which the king was greatly delighted

When he touched it it could be heard over eight kingdoms, and all the other kings sat and were angry because they had not one like it.

Esben also told how everything had happened, and how Sir Red had done the brothers all the ill he could devise because he was envious of them. The brothers were at once set at liberty, while Sir Red, for his wickedness, was hanged on the highest tree that could be found, and so he got the reward he deserved.

Much was made of Esben and his brothers, and these now thanked him for all that he had done for them. The twelve of them received as much gold and silver as they could carry, and betook themselves home to their old father. When he saw again his twelve sons, whom he had never expected to see more, he was so glad that he wept for joy. The brothers told him how much Esben had done, and how he had saved their lives, and from that time forward he was no longer the butt of the rest at home

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