



The Steel Cane

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Armenian

Easy
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Once upon a time there lived an old woman who had a small cottage on the edge of the forest. Behind the cottage was a garden in which all sorts of vegetables grew, and, beyond that, a field with two or three cows in it, so her neighbours considered her quite rich, and envied her greatly.

As long as she was strong enough to work all day in her garden the old woman never felt lonely, but after a while she had a bad illness, which left her much weaker than before, and she began to think that now and then it would be nice to have someone to speak to. Just at this moment she heard of the death of a shepherd and his wife, who dwelt on the other side of the plain, leaving a little boy quite alone in the world.

‘That will just suit me,’ she said; and sent a man over to bring the child, whom she intended to adopt for her own.

Now the boy, who was about twelve years old, ought to have considered himself very lucky, for his new mother was as kind to him as the old one. But, unfortunately, he made friends with some bad rude companions whose tricks caused them to be a terror to everyone, and the poor old woman never ceased regretting her lost solitude.

Things went on in this way for some years, till the boy became a man.

‘Perhaps, if he were to be married he might sober down,’ she thought to herself. And she inquired among the neighbours what girls there were of an age to choose from. At length one was found, good and industrious, as well as pretty; and as the young man raised no objections the wedding took place at once, and the bride and

bridegroom went to live in the cottage with the old woman. But no change was to be seen in the husband's conduct. All day long he was out amusing himself in the company of his former friends, and if his wife dared to say anything to him on his return home he beat her with his stick. And next year, when a baby was born to them, he beat it also.

At length the old woman's patience was worn out. She saw that it was quite useless to expect the lazy, idle creature to mend his ways, and one day she said to him:

'Do you mean to go on like this for ever ? Remember, you are no longer a boy, and it is time that you left off behaving like one. Come, shake off your bad habits, and work for your wife and child, and above all, stop beating them. If not I will transform you into an ass, and heavy loads shall be piled on your back, and men shall ride you. Briars shall be your food, a goad shall prick you, and in your turn you shall know how it feels to be beaten.'

But if she expected her words to do any good she soon found out her mistake, for the young man only grew angry and cried rudely:

'Bah ! hold your tongue, or I will whip you also.'

'Will you ?' she answered grimly; and, swift as lightning, she picked up a steel cane that stood in the corner and laid it across his shoulders. In an instant his ears had grown long and his face longer, his arms had become legs, and his body was covered with close grey hair. Truly, he was an ass; and a very ugly one, too !

'Leave the house !' commanded the old woman. And, shambling awkwardly, he went.

As he was standing in the path outside, not knowing what to do, a man passed by.

'Ho ! my fine fellow, you are exactly what I was looking for ! You don't seem to have a master, so come with me. I will find something for you to do.' And taking him by the ear he led him from the cottage.

For seven years the ass led a hard life, just as the old woman had foretold. But instead of remembering that he had brought all his suffering on himself, and being sorry for his evil ways, he grew harder, and more bitter. At the end of the seven years his ass skin wore out, and he became a man again, and one day returned to the cottage.

His wife opened the door in answer to his knock; then, letting fall the latch she ran inside, crying:

‘Grandmother ! grandmother ! your son has come back !’

‘I thought he would,’ replied the old woman, going on with her spinning. ‘Well, we could have done very well without him. But as he is here I suppose he must come in.’

And come in he did. But as the old woman expected, he behaved still worse than before. For some weeks she allowed him to do what he liked; then at last she said:

‘So experience has taught you nothing ! After all, there are very few people who have sense to learn by it. But take care lest I change you into a wolf, to be a prey for dogs and men !’

‘You talk too much. I shall break your head for you !’ was all the answer she got.

Had the young man looked at her face he might have taken warning, but he was busy making a pipe, and took no notice. The next moment the steel cane had touched his shoulders, and a big grey wolf bounded through the door.

Oh ! what a yapping among the dogs, and what a shouting among the neighbours as they gave chase.

For seven years he led the life of a hunted animal, often cold and nearly always hungry, and never daring to allow himself a sound sleep. At the end of that time his wolf skin wore out also, and again he appeared at the cottage door. But the second seven years had taught him no more than the first — his conduct was worse than before; and one day he beat his wife and son so brutally that they screamed to the old woman to come to their aid.

She did, and brought the steel cane with her; In a second the ruffian had vanished, and a big black crow was flying about the room, crying 'Gour ! Gour !'

The window was open, and he darted through it; and seeking the companions who had ruined him, he managed to make them understand what had happened.

'We will avenge you,' said they; and taking up a rope, set out to strangle the old woman.

But she was ready for them. One stroke of her cane and they were all changed into a troop of black crows, and this time their feathers are lasting still.

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