



The Old Man and the Daring

Kids

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Supernatural

The Old Man and the Daring Kids

Not very long ago there lived a teacher named Shanker. Shanker had taught little children for years and was now growing old. He loved his pupils and his pupils loved him. But those who were not his students felt that there was hardly anything attractive about him. Shanker was old fashioned and shabby. His clothes were never impressive and there was little hair left on his head to need much combing. His beard was growing longer by the day in a rather unruly fashion. Something happened in his life that had made him age suddenly. He got more and more lonely and his pupils felt that something was going wrong with their beloved teacher. His life became mechanical; he did the very same things daily, at the very same times of the day. There wasn't much hope that things would change in the future either.

Then one day while he was on his walk early in the morning, a little before sunrise, he came across a black little puppy that was thin as a skeleton. It hardly had the strength to get up. Its eyes were sunken in and you could count every little rib on its body. The old teacher first looked at the pup and wondered what was wrong with it. He tried to find out whether it was about to die. A passer-by saw the teacher engrossed in the little object on the road and advised him not to get involved with the puppy. He wondered what could interest the man in a sickly dying puppy. It could be dirty and in any case it could become a nuisance for everyone if it came back to a healthy existence. But something made Shanker stay on for the little fellow and he decided to pick it up. He

bought some milk from a teashop on the roadside, soaked a corner of his handkerchief in it, and gradually fed it with milk. The pup allowed the milk to go into his mouth drop by drop. Soon its eyes opened and it got the strength to stand on its legs. The teacher was relieved. He picked up the little creature and placed it in the sheltered corner of a ruined structure where it would be a little safer from the speeding vehicles. A skinny old woman standing on the road in the darkness seemed to take interest in the entire activity. When Shanker looked at her he had a strange feeling because she had peculiar piercing eyes that made him look away from her.

The next morning Shanker found himself walking towards the spot where he had left the pup. He was keen to know what the fate of the animal had been. He half expected it to have died either of starvation or a driver's carelessness. When he reached the ruined structure he quickly went to the corner where he had left the pup. The place was empty, with no sign of anything there. He was disappointed. He looked the other side and noticed the same old skinny woman sitting and grinning at him. He wasn't happy at all to find the pup missing. But then he thought that that had to happen and what could he do about it? Life was like that. He turned to resume his walk. Just then he heard the squeak of the pup. It had fallen into a ditch close by and was unable to come out of it. Shanker hurried towards the ditch and lifted the pup out of it. The pup was shivering and its tail was pressed inwards between its hind legs. It was again in a condition similar to the one he had left it in the previous day. He went to the teashop to buy milk and biscuits and fed the fellow again. When he left the pup it tried to follow him. Shanker didn't want that to happen because getting onto the road would endanger it. He walked fast, but the puppy was not slow and it made every effort to keep up with the man, even though it got knocked down once or twice by Shanker's feet and rolled aside.

Shanker soon discovered that the old witch was following him as well. She gave him an angry look when he tried to look her in the eyes. She had a weird expression and her manner was not at all pleasing.

'Where are you walking that fellow? Why are you so keen to save a creature that is crawling towards its death?' The man found her voice very strange and hoarse. He stopped and looked at her in discomfort as the pup began to tug at the bottom of his trousers. Her face became uglier and uglier as he looked at it till it seemed to be the face of a creature that was hardly human. Her eyes were virtually emitting needles that pierced his eyes. 'Are you dumb? I asked you a question, didn't I?' she repeated.

'Yes. Who are you? I mean, what are you?' asked the old man nervously.

'That's none of your business! And you can't ask me a question in reply to a question. That pup is mine. I need

pups and kittens that are underfed or virtually dead. You have no right over them. What use is such a puppy to you?’

‘Not everything is done for utility’s sake.’

‘I would have picked up the pup yesterday if you hadn’t touched it. I believe that the creature I take under my care should be one that no one should have touched for twenty-four hours. I had to push it into that ditch for these hours just because you had touched it yesterday. Since you are touching it everyday, I’ll have to break my general rule and just take it away.’

The woman rushed towards the pup, picked it up almost throttling the little fellow, and shoved it in her bag. Before Shanker could say anything to her, she vanished into the air. Shanker was astonished at what had happened. He tried to find her and the pup but could find nothing.

‘Don’t get into a confrontation with these witches,’ said the man who had met him on his walk on the previous day, ‘We mustn’t come in the way of these creatures!’

‘Witches? Was this thing a witch?’ asked the perplexed man.

‘What else was it? They are harmless only till you keep them out of your way.’

‘And what would she do to the pup?’

‘God alone knows!’ said the man and walked away.

Shanker went back home and told his wife about the weird and amazing experience he had been through. His wife only said that he was merely imagining things. He was growing old and his mind was hardly under his control. Of late he had often been saying things that could not be relied upon.

Shanker went to his study and sat gloomily, quite shaken up. For an hour or more he tried to think of ways of getting back the poor puppy from the clutches of the witch. It was then that the twelve year old Pintu and his younger sister, Tina, came to him with their books. They found him looking so different this morning. Pintu asked what the matter was but the teacher wouldn’t tell him. How could he talk about a witch with children? Pintu then went to his teacher’s wife and asked her what the matter with him was.

‘O, it’s nothing,’ she said, ‘the old man is getting interested in witches!’

‘Witches?’ said Pintu and Tina in unison.

‘Yes, imagine talking about a witch who disappeared with a pup he had found on the road,’ she said and laughed. ‘He claims to have seen the witch on two successive mornings during the course of his walks.’

‘But why do you laugh?’ said Tina. ‘I have read about witches in my story books and if there were no witches in

existence, why would people write about them?’

‘People write about them to fool children like you, little girl, not big hulks like him.’

The woman’s argument did not appeal to the kids and they went right back to the teacher’s study. They asked him to tell them all about the witch but he refused to tell them anything. The children could get frightened after all he thought and requested them to leave him alone for that day.

The children left him alone indeed but they now had something to think about and see for themselves. The idea of a witch was too much for them to resist and it took the two no more than ten minutes to decide that they would wake up very early next morning, hide outside their teacher’s gate and wait for him to set out on his walk so that they could follow him on the sly to the place where he had met the witch. Saving the pup from the witch could be the biggest adventure for them. Pintu and Tina couldn’t sleep properly that night. At four thirty in the morning their alarm clock rang and they sprang out of bed going straight to change their clothes for the adventure. Their father had always asked them to go early to bed and then rise early and play outside in the freshness of early morning.

They changed their clothes and got ready in a record ten minutes. Living in the same colony they were at their teacher’s gate at five. They didn’t have to wait for more than a couple of minutes before Shanker walked out with a little stick in hand. They tiptoed behind him at a safe distance to remain unnoticed. Before they realised what was happening they saw the teacher confronted with the witch. Tina caught her brother’s hand and asked him to return. She was getting frightened and her brother was worried about her.

‘Don’t worry, we’re staying at a safe distance and this is the time we’ve been waiting for. We can’t afford to get scared now.’

The witch approached the teacher and stood near him. She looked very angry with him and her quick and frequent fidgety movements made Shanker look uncomfortable. For a while the two stood face to face in silence. Shanker found it difficult to look at her thorny eyes. The children suddenly began to worry about their poor teacher. He looked like a man twenty years even older than he actually was. She waved her hands towards Shanker and the man felt dizzy and fell down. The children didn’t know what to do but they managed to look on at the magical happenings. Soon the witch was pulling the man towards a dark corner from where she suddenly disappeared with the teacher.

The children were stunned. But Pintu still had the courage and strength to reach the point where the two had disappeared in the darkness. Tina also managed to follow her brother somehow but things were getting too

difficult for her. Pintu suddenly remembered what their wonderful teacher had once said to them and he repeated the words to his sister.

‘Whenever you’re in doubt speak to God and to the good spirits that abound in the world. He listens and they listen if you’ve been good children. The One who made this world loves us all and He never disappoints.’

Tina folded her hands in prayer as her tears rolled down her cheeks. Pintu sighed deeply and pleaded, in a voice full of anguish:

‘God, if you exist somewhere, come and help us or we’ll be forced to believe that you are just a name that people take to fool little children and grown ups who have foolish minds.’

Before a minute could elapse, a beautiful and angelic fairy was standing in front of them. She wiped their tears and held them close to herself, one on each side.

‘The world is full of troubles but the good get God’s strength to fight them. You must be brave and you can rescue your teacher from the wicked witch. Here take these two powders and keep them carefully. One is chilly powder and the other is pepper. Witches are scared of both because chilly powder blinds them and pepper makes them melt into nothing.’

Having given the two containers with the powders, the fairy waved her hand towards the spot from where the witch had disappeared with Shanker. Suddenly a hidden passage that led underground came to light on that very place. The fairy pointed towards it and the children ran to it and opened the lid that showed the dark passage. The fairy then gave them a little stick from which light began to emit as it does from a torch and she asked them to go to where their teacher was. The children went down and down through the gradual slope until they arrived at a place where their teacher sat quietly, the little black pup in his lap. He seemed to be praying to God when the children’s arrival disturbed him.

‘Why have you come here? There is a witch here who can catch hold of you. Go back quickly before she sees you. Run back!’ he said in as loud a whisper as he could.

‘No, no, Sir!’ said Pintu, ‘we are here to save you and take you right back to your house. Please let us hide and don’t let the witch know that we’re here.’

The teacher pleaded but the children quickly hid behind a curtain as they heard the footsteps of the witch returning.

‘That’s a good old man! Sitting and waiting to be put into my prison. Now walk into that little place and sit on that stone. And please leave my puppy alone. If you touched it again, I’ll have to kill you.’

Just then the witch began to sniff around as though she was detecting the presence of other humans there.

‘Who has entered my abode? How could this ever happen? Tell me old man, who’s in here?’ she yelled at a man who only looked at the ground. She went straight towards the curtain where the children were absolutely ready with the chilly and pepper powders. She lifted the curtain and discovered the children.

‘My, my! How did you manage to reach here? Good. How fortunate I am. Now you will live with me for ever and serve me like my obedient servants.’

Saying this she bent towards them to hold them by their hands. This was the moment Pintu was waiting for. He quickly flung the powder into her eyes. The witch yelled out in pain and rubbed her eyes falling down and struggling to grope about as she got blinder and blinder.

‘What have you done to my eyes? Oh, what have you done, you wicked children!’

‘Children are never wicked,’ said Tina. ‘You are wicked. Why did you drag our teacher here?’

‘I’ll release him. Quick get me some water first. Quick or I’ll lose my eyes,’ the witch implored.

‘We haven’t come here to wash your eyes, have we? Tell us about all the wicked things you do here all the time,’ said Pintu.

‘Yes, I’ll tell you but first get water,’ she cried as fire seemed to come out of her eyes.

Tina quickly threw the pepper powder on her and the witch began to melt and was soon reduced to a little foul smelling liquid. The teacher and the children clapped their hands and hugged each other and Shanker couldn’t stop praising them. They looked around and found a little door. When they opened the door, several weakly puppies and kittens came whining towards them. The teacher and his students were soon helping the little fellows to escape from the witch’s trap. In a few minutes they had all come out and the sun was beginning to rise. It seemed to give the message of God to the children that now all was well. The puppies and kittens were weak and needed help from their saviours. Shanker bought milk for all of them and made them feel stronger so that they could find their way into the world. The little black pup had by now got used to Shanker and he came running to him. Shanker picked him up and the three walked back to his house.

When Shanker’s wife saw the three she wondered why the children had come so early in the morning.

‘We’re discussing certain things about witches,’ said Pintu.

‘Witches that kidnap little puppies like this one,’ said Tina.

‘Witches? Your teacher has a real fondness for witches. Hasn’t he?’ she asked.

‘He has had a close encounter with one,’ said Pintu.

‘How dare you? You calling me a witch, you wicked boy?’ said the woman and walked away in a huff and the three others laughed and laughed together. The little pup seemed to enjoy their company and was glad to sniff around the place he was to call home.

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