
The Man with the Bast Shoes

ONCE upon a time a traveller came to a village and asked for a night's lodging. He was handsomely dressed, but he had coarse bast shoes on his feet. A friendly farmer received the stranger hospitably, and offered him accommodation. At night the man asked his host, "Farmer, where shall I put my bast shoes?" The farmer showed him the place, but he added, "No, my shoes must spend the night among the feathered people, for that is what they are used to. So I would rather hang them on the perch in the hen-house." The farmer laughed at the joke, and permitted him to do so.

As soon as all were in their first sleep, the owner of the bast shoes rose from his bed, slipped into the hen-house, tore the shoes to pieces, and scattered the coarse plaits among the fowls. Next morning he went to the master of the house and complained, "Farmer, my property was badly damaged last night." Said the farmer, "Well, let whoever has done the mischief make it good." This was just what the stranger wanted, and he immediately caught the dappled cock, and put him into his knapsack, "for," said he, "he's the culprit; last night he pecked at my shoes till he spoiled them." Then he proceeded on his journey with the cock.

On the evening of the same day he arrived at a neighbouring village, and asked again for accommodation. At night he put the cock in the farmer's sheep-pen, and excused himself by saying, "My cock has not been used to anything else since he was a chicken." But at night he strangled the bird, and then complained, "The sheep have killed my cock." He indemnified himself by taking a fat ram from the flock, for he held by the farmer's adage, "He who has done the mischief must pay for it."

By a similar stratagem he exchanged the ram at the third village for an ox, and at last the ox for a horse. He soon contrived to get a sledge too, and drove merrily over hill and dale, till the stones flew behind him, while he contrived new schemes and stratagems. On the way, he encountered Master Reynard, who persuaded him by entreaties and cajoleries to take him into his sledge. After a while, the wolf and bear joined them, and likewise found a place in the sledge; but this made the load too heavy, and when they came to a curve in the road, the side-poles of the sledge gave way. Then the man sent his companions to fetch wood to make a new pole. But none of the three brought a proper one back. The fox and wolf brought thin sticks in their mouths, and the bear brought a whole pine-tree, roots and all. Then the man went himself, and soon found the wood which he wanted. Meantime, the wild beasts availed themselves of the opportunity, and sprang upon the horse and devoured it. But they stuffed the skin nicely with straw, and set it carefully up, so that it stood again on its four legs as if it was alive.

When the man came back with the pole, he mended the sledge and harnessed the horse again. "Oho! now we'll drive on." But alas! the horse would not move. Then the man looked at the red scamp, the grey rascal, and the brown villain, and said angrily, "Give me my horse back." But the wild beasts answered, "You killed it yourself, while we were running about looking for wood by your orders."

Thus they stood quarrelling and disputing, till Reynard considered how he could best put an end to the dispute and save his own skin. He knew of a pit in the neighbourhood which the hunter had dug for a wolf-trap, and covered loosely with thin twigs. "The matter won't be settled by quarrelsome and angry words," cried he; "but come, let the four of us go to the wolf-pit; we will all tread on it at once, and whoever falls in shall be adjudged guilty." The rest agreed, and when they stood on the twigs, they broke under their weight, and precipitated them into the pit, and even Reynard was unable to escape. He had trusted too much to the lightness of his tread, and had trodden on the twigs without consideration. Now they were all in the trap together, and none of them could hope to escape. The time seemed long to them, and their hunger soon became too great to bear.

First of all, the wild beasts attacked the man of the bast shoes and devoured him, and then Reynard had to resign his life. Last of all the bear throttled the wolf. Then came the hunter and gave the bear his quietus. Thus all the four rascals experienced the truth of the proverb, "As the deed, so the reward."