

THE WOODCUTTER

There was once a poor woodcutter, who despite often having very little to eat or drink, went happily about his life and his work. One morning, as he ambled into the woods, whistling a pretty tune and keeping time with the fingers of his free hand, he met an old woman. She was lame, and supported herself with a crutch. As she limped towards him, he cheerily wished her a good morning. She replied, not in an unfriendly way, "You are about your work very early, whistling away as if you don't have a care in the world. But, I'll wager that you have nothing set by, and went without breakfast this morning."

This surprised the woodcutter, not because it was true, but because he couldn't see how the old woman could know it. As he stood there, open mouthed, she continued "I can change that, if you come to work for me. Will you?"

"Why not?" thought the poor woodcutter, "There's nothing for me to do at home for, except for going hungry — and I can do that anywhere." So, he agreed. He shouldered his axe, and set off with the old woman leading the way. They travelled far and wide, through dark forests and across open heath, with the woodcutter struggling to keep pace. It was astounding, how fast and how far the old woman, leaning heavily on her crutch, could limp along.

After twelve days, they came to a cave in the side of a mountain. As they entered, the old woman told the woodcutter "This cave is the entrance to my palace. It doesn't look like much from here, but inside, you will see how rich and magnificent it is."

At the end of a long passage, which went deep into the mountain, they came to a great golden door, which the old woman opened with a golden key. Behind the door was a great hall, whose walls were with covered with gold, and decorated precious jewels. It was all very magnificent, but the woodcutter saw something else. In the middle of the room lay, pathetically whimpering and whining, a great lion. The old woman limped past the creature, without giving it any regard. The woodcutter, thinking it wisest, followed her without saying word.

They passed on into the next room, where there was also a lion, and continued on through the palace. Not every room was as richly decorated as the first, but there was at least one lion in every one.

Eventually, they came to another chamber which was as magnificent as the first. There wasn't a lion the middle of this room. Instead, there was a lioness, which, like the first lion, lay whimpering and whining. Her sadness cut deep into the man's heart, and turning to the old women, he said "All these poor creatures must be starving. Should I give them something to eat?"

“You don’t need to worry about feeding them,” the old woman answered harshly. “Starting tomorrow, your job is to beat them daily, to within an inch of their lives.” She continued, pointing to a whip hanging on the far wall, “If you do this, you will be paid well, but if you spare them, I will punish you.”

The woodcutter thought it best not to disagree, and promised to follow her instructions faithfully, before the old woman left him. She returned shortly after, with a dish of fresh fruit for his breakfast. As he ate, he thought to himself “a bowl of fresh peaches and figs, every morning in a fine palace, makes a better breakfast than a house with an empty larder.” By the time he had finished, he was already looking forward to breakfast the next day.

In the evening, the old woman showed him to a pleasant room, which had been prepared with a soft feather bed, in which he was soon fast asleep. The journey had been very long, and he was very tired. But, in the middle of the night, he was awakened by a knocking at the door. He quickly sprang out of bed, lit a candle, and went to the door. When he opened it, he came face to face with a lion! It was the one which had been in the first room.

The lion put its paw to its lips, as if to tell the woodcutter to remain silent, and then pointed to the open bedroom door. The woodcutter let it pass, and closed the door behind them. Then the lion began to speak!

“I suppose that you are already wondering about this palace and the old woman who lives here” it said quietly.

“She was to be my mother-in-law, and I, myself, was a prince. All the other animals here, except for one, are the palace servants and courtiers, who she has placed under the same enchantment. The lioness, who you saw in the last room, is her daughter — and my betrothed. The old woman was jealous of her daughter’s happiness, and so turned us all into these terrible beasts. You are the only person who can help us, but you must act now.

“The old woman is fast asleep, snoring like a pig. It is your only chance to put an end to her. Only then, can the enchantment be lifted, if you remove our collars.”

The woodcutter took up his axe, and followed the lion out of the room. They made their way, silently, to the old woman’s bedroom, and the woodcutter opened the door. He crept over to the bed, looked carefully into her wrinkled face to make sure that she really was sleeping, and raised his axe. It fell hard on her head, and then, she was no more.

Leaving the old woman lying in her own blood, the woodcutter went to each lion in turn, starting with the prince and princess, and removed its collar. By morning, the whole palace was full of people, all of whom wanted to thank the woodcutter personally for removing the enchantment.

That day, the whole court — the prince, princess, courtiers, servants, *and* the woodcutter — set off to return to the prince's kingdom. They arrived six days later to a great welcome. The festivities had no sooner ended, than there was to be a new celebration. This was, of course, the wedding of the prince and princess, which was still talked about long after. And, the guest of honour? That was the woodcutter, who, from that day on, lived a full and happy life in the royal palace.

THE MILLER'S BOY AND THE CAT

One day a young man came to a mill looking for work. The miller, who needed help in the mill, liked the look of the young man, and would have employed him immediately, if it hadn't been for a strange circumstance. Every time he had taken on an apprentice or a labourer, he had found them dead in their beds the next morning. He explained this, adding "you may not believe me, but it is so. And, I don't know why."

The young man answered, laughing "I do believe you, but it takes more than ghost stories to scare me. I need the work, so please let me try."

"No," replied the miller, "it would be a great pity if your young life was cut short. And when nobody else has survived, I don't see that it would be any different for you."

"All well and good," said the youth, "it is my life, I'm not afraid, and I will work hard if you give me the chance."

Happy at the youth's bravery, and angry at his stupidity, the miller answered "Good, if you want to risk your life, you can stay. As you say, it is your life."

The new miller's boy then went into the mill, and set about his work. He worked hard all day, and at night found a comfortable corner to make his bed. But, he didn't sleep. He listened, and watched, carefully what was going on in the mill. In the middle of the night, a large cat slunk into the mill and crept up to him. It meowed and hissed, arched its back and slowly waved its tail, as it circled him. He tried to shoo it away by hissing and shouting, but it was all to no avail. Then, in anger, he grabbed it by the tail, swung it around his head and threw it towards the door. It turned to face him, hissed one last time, and then turned and crept through the open door.

The miller's boy then laid down on his side, and slept soundly until morning. When his employer came into the mill, the miller was happily surprised to be met by the new boy, singing and whistling while he worked. He was even more astonished, and puzzled, when the young man told him about the strange cat.

That evening, the young man took a small hatchet and hid it in his bedclothes. At night, he again stayed awake and waited for the cat. This time, he didn't try to drive it away. Instead, he tried to get it to come to him, and it crept forward. Its front paw was almost on his bedclothes, when he pulled out the axe, and brought it down upon it. With its front paw missing, the mewling cat limped on three legs out of the mill, while the boy turned on his side and went to sleep.

In the morning, when the miller came into the mill, the young man called out to him "Take a look at what the creature left behind. I don't think it will bother

me again.” He showed the severed cat’s paw, to the miller, who was both impressed and amused at the story of what had happened in the night. When they had both laughed enough at the plight of the unfortunate cat, they went about their business as usual.

The morning was like any other, except that the miller had not seen his wife at all that day. It was now nearly noon, and time for their meal, but there was still no fire in the kitchen. He searched high and low for her, calling out in every room, but there was no answer. Eventually, he climbed the stairs and went into the bedroom, where he found her in bed.

“What are you doing, lying here?” he cried out, “It’s already midday, and you should be in the kitchen.”

She answered “I can’t turn my hand to anything today. I’m not well.”

The miller became curious, in all the years he had been married, he had never known his wife to be ill. He also noticed that she kept the bedclothes pulled up to her neck, so he pulled them aside. Then he saw that she only had one hand — the other had been brutally hacked off!