

## **Ball-carrier and the Bad One**

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

Far, far in the forest there were two little huts, and in each of them lived a man who was a famous hunter, his wife, and three or four children. Now the children were forbidden to play more than a short distance from the door, as it was known that, away on the other side of the wood near the great river, there dwelt a witch who had a magic ball that she used as a means of stealing children.

Her plan was a very simple one, and had never yet failed. When she wanted a child she just flung her ball in the direction of the child's home, and however far off it might be, the ball was sure to reach it. Then, as soon as the child saw it, the ball would begin rolling slowly back to the witch, just keeping a little ahead of the child, so that he always thought that he could catch it the next minute. But he never did, and, what was more, his parents never saw him again.

Of course you must not suppose that all the fathers and mothers who had lost children made no attempts to find them, but the forest was so large, and the witch was so cunning in knowing exactly where they were going to search, that it was very easy for her to keep out of the way. Besides, there was always the chance that the children might have been eaten by wolves, of which large herds roamed about in winter.

One day the old witch happened to want a little boy, so she threw her ball in the direction of the hunters' huts. A child was standing outside, shooting at a mark with his bow and arrows, but the moment he saw the ball, which was made of glass whose blues and greens and whites, all frosted over, kept changing one into the other, he flung down his bow, and stooped to pick the ball up. But as he did so it began to roll very gently downhill. The boy could not let it roll away, when it was

so close to him, so he gave chase. The ball seemed always within his grasp, yet he could never catch it; it went quicker and quicker, and the boy grew more and more excited. That time he almost touched it--no, he missed it by a hair's breadth! Now, surely, if he gave a spring he could get in front of it! He sprang forward, tripped and fell, and found himself in the witch's house!

'Welcome! welcome! grandson!' said she; 'get up and rest yourself, for you have had a long walk, and I am sure you must be tired!' So the boy sat down, and ate some food which she gave him in a bowl. It was quite different from anything he had tasted before, and he thought it was delicious. When he had eaten up every bit, the witch asked him if he had ever fasted.

'No,' replied the boy, 'at least I have been obliged to sometimes, but never if there was any food to be had.'

'You will have to fast if you want the spirits to make you strong and wise, and the sooner you begin the better.'

'Very well,' said the boy, 'what do I do first?'

'Lie down on those buffalo skins by the door of the hut,' answered she; and the boy lay down, and the squirrels and little bears and the birds came and talked to him.

At the end of ten days the old woman came to him with a bowl of the same food that he had eaten before.

'Get up, my grandson, you have fasted long enough. Have the good spirits visited you, and granted you the strength and wisdom that you desire?'

'Some of them have come, and have given me a portion of both,' answered the boy, 'but many have stayed away from me.'

‘Then,’ said she, ‘you must fast ten days more.’

So the boy lay down again on the buffalo skins, and fasted for ten days, and at the end of that time he turned his face to the wall, and fasted for twenty days longer. At length the witch called to him, and said:

‘Come and eat something, my grandson.’ At the sound of her voice the boy got up and ate the food she gave him. When he had finished every scrap she spoke as before: ‘Tell me, my grandson, have not the good spirits visited you all these many days that you have fasted?’

‘Not all, grandmother,’ answered he; ‘there are still some who keep away from me and say that I have not fasted long enough.’

‘Then you must fast again,’ replied the old woman, ‘and go on fasting till you receive the gifts of all the good spirits. Not one must be missing.’

The boy said nothing, but lay down for the third time on the buffalo skins, and fasted for twenty days more. And at the end of that time the witch thought he was dead, his face was so white and his body so still. But when she had fed him out of the bowl he grew stronger, and soon was able to sit up.

‘You have fasted a long time,’ said she, ‘longer than anyone ever fasted before. Surely the good spirits must be satisfied now?’

‘Yes, grandmother,’ answered the boy, ‘they have all come, and have given me their gifts.’

This pleased the old woman so much that she brought him another basin of food, and while he was eating it she talked to him, and this is what she said: ‘Far away, on the other side of the great river, is the

home of the Bad One. In his house is much gold, and what is more precious even than the gold, a little bridge, which lengthens out when the Bad One waves his hand, so that there is no river or sea that he cannot cross. Now I want that bridge and some of the gold for myself, and that is the reason that I have stolen so many boys by means of my ball. I have tried to teach them how to gain the gifts of the good spirits, but none of them would fast long enough, and at last I had to send them away to perform simple, easy little tasks. But you have been strong and faithful, and you can do this thing if you listen to what I tell you! When you reach the river tie this ball to your foot, and it will take you across--you cannot manage it in any other way. But do not be afraid; trust to the ball, and you will be quite safe!’

The boy took the ball and put it in a bag. Then he made himself a club and a bow, and some arrows which would fly further than anyone else’s arrows, because of the strength the good spirits had given him. They had also bestowed on him the power of changing his shape, and had increased the quickness of his eyes and ears so that nothing escaped him. And in some way or other they made him understand that if he needed more help they would give it to him.

When all these things were ready the boy bade farewell to the witch and set out. He walked through the forest for several days without seeing anyone but his friends the squirrels and the bears and the birds, but though he stopped and spoke to them all, he was careful not to let them know where he was going.

At last, after many days, he came to the river, and beyond it he noticed a small hut standing on a hill which he guessed to be the home of the Bad One. But the stream flowed so quickly that he could not see how he was ever to cross it, and in order to test how swift the current really was, he broke a branch from a tree and threw it in. It seemed hardly to touch the water before it was carried away, and even his magic sight could not follow it. He could not help feeling frightened, but he hated giving up anything that he had once

undertaken, and, fastening the ball on his right foot, he ventured on the river. To his surprise he was able to stand up; then a panic seized him, and he scrambled up the bank again. In a minute or two he plucked up courage to go a little further into the river, but again its width frightened him, and a second time he turned back. However, he felt rather ashamed of his cowardice, as it was quite clear that his ball could support him, and on his third trial he got safely to the other side.

Once there he replaced the ball in the bag, and looked carefully round him. The door of the Bad One's hut was open, and he saw that the ceiling was supported by great wooden beams, from which hung the bags of gold and the little bridge. He saw, too, the Bad One sitting in the midst of his treasures eating his dinner, and drinking something out of a horn. It was plain to the boy that he must invent some plan of getting the Bad One out of the way, or else he would never be able to steal the gold or the bridge.

What should he do? Give horrible shrieks as if he were in pain? But the Bad One would not care whether he were murdered or not! Call him by his name? But the Bad One was very cunning, and would suspect some trick. He must try something better than that! Then suddenly an idea came to him, and he gave a little jump of joy. 'Oh, how stupid of me not to think of that before!' said he, and he wished with all his might that the Bad One should become very hungry--so hungry that he could not wait a moment for fresh food to be brought to him. And sure enough at that instant the Bad One called out to his servant, 'You did not bring food that would satisfy a sparrow Fetch some more at once, for I am perfectly starving.' Then, without giving the woman time to go to the larder, he got up from his chair, and rolled, staggering from hunger, towards the kitchen.

Directly the door had closed on the Bad One the boy ran in, pulled down a bag of gold from the beam, and tucked it under his left arm. Next he unhooked the little bridge and put it under his right. He did not try to escape, as most boys of his age would have done, for the

wisdom put into his mind by the good spirits taught him that before he could reach the river and make use of the bridge the Bad One would have tracked him by his footsteps and been upon him. So, making himself very small and thin, he hid himself behind a pile of buffalo skins in the corner, first tearing a slit through one of them, so that he could see what was going on.

He had hardly settled himself when the servant entered the room, and, as she did so, the last bag of gold on the beam fell to the ground--for they had begun to fall directly the boy had taken the first one. She cried to her master that someone had stolen both the bag and the bridge, and the Bad One rushed in, mad with anger, and bade her go and seek for footsteps outside, that they might find out where the thief had gone. In a few minutes she returned, saying that he must be in the house, as she could not see any footsteps leading to the river, and began to move all the furniture in the room, without discovering Ball Carrier.

‘But he must be here somewhere,’ she said to herself, examining for the second time the pile of buffalo skins; and Ball-Carrier, knowing that he could not possibly escape now, hastily wished that the Bad One should be unable to eat any more food at present.

‘Ah, there is a slit in this one,’ cried the servant, shaking the skin; ‘and here he is.’ And she pulled out Ball-Carrier, looking so lean and small that he would hardly have made a mouthful for a sparrow.

‘Was it you who took my gold and bridge?’ asked the Bad One.

‘Yes,’ answered Ball-Carrier, ‘it was I who took them.’

The Bad One made a sign to the woman, who inquired where he had hidden them. He lifted his left arm where the gold was, and she picked up a knife and scraped his skin so that no gold should be left sticking to it.

‘What have you done with the bridge?’ said she. And he lifted his right arm, from which she took the bridge, while the Bad One looked on, well pleased. ‘Be sure that he does not run away,’ chuckled he. ‘Boil some water, and get him ready for cooking, while I go and invite my friends the water-demons to the feast.’

The woman seized Ball-Carrier between her finger and thumb, and was going to carry him to the kitchen, when the boy spoke:

‘I am very lean and small now,’ he said, ‘hardly worth the trouble of cooking; but if you were to keep me two days, and gave me plenty of food, I should get big and fat. As it is, your friends the water-demons would think you meant to laugh at them, when they found that I was the feast.’

‘Well, perhaps you are right,’ answered the Bad One; ‘I will keep you for two days.’ And he went out to visit the water-demons.

Meanwhile the servant, whose name was Lung Woman, led him into a little shed, and chained him up to a ring in the wall. But food was given him every hour, and at the end of two days he was as fat and big as a Christmas turkey, and could hardly move his head from one side to the other.

‘He will do now,’ said the Bad One, who came constantly to see how he was getting on. ‘I shall go and tell the water-demons that we expect them to dinner to-night. Put the kettle on the fire, but be sure on no account to taste the broth.’

Lung-Woman lost no time in obeying her orders. She built up the fire, which had got very low, filled the kettle with water, and passing a rope which hung from the ceiling through the handle, swung it over the flames. Then she brought in Ball-Carrier, who, seeing all these preparations, wished that as long as he was in the kettle the water

might not really boil, though it would hiss and bubble, and also, that the spirits would turn the water into fat.

The kettle soon began to sing and bubble, and Ball Carrier was lifted in. Very soon the fat which was to make the sauce rose to the surface, and Ball-Carrier, who was bobbing about from one side to the other, called out that Lung-Woman had better taste the broth, as he thought that some salt should be added to it. The servant knew quite well that her master had forbidden her to do any thing of the kind, but when once the idea was put into her head, she found the smell from the kettle so delicious that she unhooked a long ladle from the wall and plunged it into the kettle.

‘You will spill it all, if you stand so far off,’ said the boy; ‘why don’t you come a little nearer?’ And as she did so he cried to the spirits to give him back his usual size and strength and to make the water scalding hot. Then he gave the kettle a kick, which upset all the boiling water upon her, and jumping over her body he seized once more the gold and the bridge, picked up his club and bow and arrows, and after setting fire to the Bad One’s hut, ran down to the river, which he crossed safely by the help of the bridge.

The hut, which was made of wood, was burned to the ground before the Bad One came back with a large crowd of water-demons. There was not a sign of anyone or anything, so he started for the river, where he saw Ball Carrier sitting quietly on the other side. Then the Bad One knew what had happened, and after telling the water demons that there would be no feast after all, he called to Ball-Carrier, who was eating an apple.

‘I know your name now,’ he said, ‘and as you have ruined me, and I am not rich any more, will you take me as your servant?’

‘Yes, I will, though you have tried to kill me,’ answered Ball-Carrier, throwing the bridge across the water as he spoke. But when the Bad

One was in the midst of the stream, the boy wished it to become small; and the Bad One fell into the water and was drowned, and the world was rid of him.

[U.S.. Bureau of Ethnology.]

### How Ball-carrier Finished His Task

After Ball-Carrier had managed to drown the Bad One so that he could not do any more mischief, he forgot the way to his grandmother's house, and could not find it again, though he searched everywhere. During this time he wandered into many strange places, and had many adventures; and one day he came to a hut where a young girl lived. He was tired and hungry and begged her to let him in and rest, and he stayed a long while, and the girl became his wife. One morning he saw two children playing in front of the hut, and went out to speak to them. But as soon as they saw him they set up cries of horror and ran away. 'They are the children of my sister who has been on a long journey,' replied his wife, 'and now that she knows you are my husband she wants to kill you.'

'Oh, well, let her try,' replied Ball-Carrier. 'It is not the first time people have wished to do that. And here I am still, you see!'

'Be careful,' said the wife, 'she is very cunning.' But at this moment the sister-in-law came up.

'How do you do, brother-in-law? I have heard of you so often that I am very glad to meet you. I am told that you are more powerful than any man on earth, and as I am powerful too, let us try which is the strongest.'

‘That will be delightful,’ answered he. ‘Suppose we begin with a short race, and then we will go on to other things.’

‘That will suit me very well,’ replied the woman, who was a witch. ‘And let us agree that the one who wins shall have the right to kill the other.’

‘Oh, certainly,’ said Ball-Carrier; ‘and I don’t think we shall find a flatter course than the prairie itself--no one knows how many miles it stretches. We will run to the end and back again.’

This being settled they both made ready for the race, and Ball-Carrier silently begged the good spirits to help him, and not to let him fall into the hands of this wicked witch.

‘When the sun touches the trunk of that tree we will start,’ said she, as they both stood side by side. But with the first step Ball-Carrier changed himself into a wolf and for a long way kept ahead. Then gradually he heard her creeping up behind him, and soon she was in front. So Ball-Carrier took the shape of a pigeon and flew rapidly past her, but in a little while she was in front again and the end of the prairie was in sight. ‘A crow can fly faster than a pigeon,’ thought he, and as a crow he managed to pass her and held his ground so long that he fancied she was quite beaten. The witch began to be afraid of it too, and putting out all her strength slipped past him. Next he put on the shape of a hawk, and in this form he reached the bounds of the prairie, he and the witch turning homewards at the moment.

Bird after bird he tried, but every time the witch gained on him and took the lead. At length the goal was in sight, and Ball-Carrier knew that unless he could get ahead now he would be killed before his own door, under the eyes of his wife. His eyes had grown dim from fatigue, his wings flapped wearily and hardly bore him along, while the witch seemed as fresh as ever. What bird was there whose flight was swifter than his? Would not the good spirits tell him? Ah, of

course he knew; why had he not thought of it at first and spared himself all that fatigue? And the next instant a humming bird, dressed in green and blue, flashed past the woman and entered the house. The witch came panting up, furious at having lost the race which she felt certain of winning; and Ball-Carrier, who had by this time changed back into his own shape, struck her on the head and killed her.

For a long while Ball-Carrier was content to stay quietly at home with his wife and children, for he was tired of adventures, and only did enough hunting to supply the house with food. But one day he happened to eat some poisonous berries that he had found in the forest, and grew so ill that he felt he was going to die.

‘When I am dead do not bury me in the earth,’ he said, ‘but put me over there, among that clump of trees.’ So his wife and her three children watched by him as long as he was alive, and after he was dead they took him up and laid the body on a platform of stakes which they had prepared in the grove. And as they returned weeping to the hut they caught a glimpse of the ball rolling away down the path back to the old grandmother. One of the sons sprang forward to stop it, for Ball-Carrier had often told them the tale of how it had helped him to cross the river, but it was too quick for him, and they had to content themselves with the war club and bow and arrows, which were put carefully away.

By-and-by some travellers came past, and the chief among them asked leave to marry Ball-Carrier’s daughter. The mother said she must have a little time to think over it, as her daughter was still very young; so it was settled that the man should go away for a month with his friends, and then come back to see if the girl was willing.

Now ever since Ball-Carrier’s death the family had been very poor, and often could not get enough to eat. One morning the girl, who had had no supper and no breakfast, wandered off to look for cranberries, and though she was quite near home was astonished at noticing a large

hut, which certainly had not been there when last she had come that way. No one was about, so she ventured to peep in, and her surprise was increased at seeing, heaped up in one corner, a quantity of food of all sorts, while a little robin redbreast stood perched on a beam looking down upon her.

‘It is my father, I am sure,’ she cried; and the bird piped in answer.

From that day, whenever they wanted food they went to the hut, and though the robin could not speak, he would hop on their shoulders and let them feed him with the food they knew he liked best.

When the man came back he found the girl looking so much prettier and fatter than when he had left her, that he insisted that they should be married on the spot. And the mother, who did not know how to get rid of him, gave in.

The husband spent all his time in hunting, and the family had never had so much meat before; but the man, who had seen for himself how poor they were, noticed with amazement that they did not seem to care about it, or to be hungry. ‘They must get food from somewhere,’ he thought, and one morning, when he pretended to be going out to hunt, he hid in a thicket to watch. Very soon they all left the house together, and walked to the other hut, which the girl’s husband saw for the first time, as it was hid in a hollow. He followed, and noticed that each one went up to the redbreast, and shook him by the claw; and he then entered boldly and shook the bird’s claw too. The whole party afterwards sat down to dinner, after which they all returned to their own hut.

The next day the husband declared that he was very ill, and could not eat anything; but this was only a pretence so that he might get what he wanted. The family were all much distressed, and begged him to tell them what food he fancied.

‘Oh! I could not eat any food,’ he answered every time, and at each answer his voice grew fainter and fainter, till they thought he would die from weakness before their eyes.

‘There must be some thing you could take, if you would only say what it is,’ implored his wife.

‘No, nothing, nothing; except, perhaps--but of course that is impossible!’

‘No, I am sure it is not,’ replied she; ‘you shall have it, I promise--only tell me what it is.’

‘I think--but I could not ask you to do such a thing. Leave me alone, and let me die quietly.’

‘You shall not die,’ cried the girl, who was very fond of her husband, for he did not beat her as most girls’ husbands did. ‘Whatever it is, I will manage to get it for you.’

‘Well, then, I think, if I had that--redbreast, nicely roasted, I could eat a little bit of his wing!’

The wife started back in horror at such a request; but the man turned his face to the wall, and took no notice, as he thought it was better to leave her to herself for a little.

Weeping and wringing her hands, the girl went down to her mother. The brothers were very angry when they heard the story, and declared that, if any one were to die, it certainly should not be the robin. But all that night the man seemed getting weaker and weaker, and at last, quite early, the wife crept out, and stealing to the hut, killed the bird, and brought him home to her husband.

Just as she was going to cook it her two brothers came in. They cried out in horror at the sight, and, rushing out of the hut, declared they would never see her any more. And the poor girl, with a heavy heart, took the body of the redbreast up to her husband.

But directly she entered the room the man told her that he felt a great deal better, and that he would rather have a piece of bear's flesh, well boiled, than any bird, however tender. His wife felt very miserable to think that their beloved redbreast had been sacrificed for nothing, and begged him to try a little bit.

'You felt so sure that it would do you good before,' said she, 'that I can't help thinking it would quite cure you now.' But the man only flew into a rage, and flung the bird out of the window. Then he got up and went out.

Now all this while the ball had been rolling, rolling, rolling to the old grandmother's hut on the other side of the world, and directly it rolled into her hut she knew that her grandson must be dead. Without wasting any time she took a fox skin and tied it round her forehead, and fastened another round her waist, as witches always do when they leave their own homes. When she was ready she said to the ball: 'Go back the way you came, and lead me to my grandson.' And the ball started with the old woman following.

It was a long journey, even for a witch, but, like other things, it ended at last; and the old woman stood before the platform of stakes, where the body of Ball-Carrier lay.

'Wake up, my grandson, it is time to go home,' the witch said. And Ball-Carrier stepped down off the platform, and brought his club and bow and arrows out of the hut, and set out, for the other side of the world, behind the old woman.

When they reached the hut where Ball-Carrier had fasted so many years ago, the old woman spoke for the first time since they had started on their way.

‘My grandson, did you ever manage to get that gold from the Bad One?’

‘Yes, grandmother, I got it.’

‘Where is it?’ she asked.

‘Here, in my left arm-pit,’ answered he.

So she picked up a knife and scraped away all the gold which had stuck to his skin, and which had been sticking there ever since he first stole it. After she had finished she asked again:

‘My grandson, did you manage to get that bridge from the Bad One?’

‘Yes, grandmother, I got that too,’ answered he.

‘Where is it?’ she asked, and Ball-Carrier lifted his right arm, and pointed to his arm-pit.

‘Here is the bridge, grandmother,’ said he.

Then the witch did something that nobody in the world could have guessed that she would do. First, she took the gold and said to Ball-carrier:

‘My grandson, this gold must be hidden in the earth, for if people think they can get it when they choose, they will become lazy and stupid. But if we take it and bury it in different parts of the world they will have to work for it if they want it, and then will only find a little at a time.’ And as she spoke, she pulled up one of the poles of the hut,

and Ball-Carrier saw that underneath was a deep, deep hole, which seemed to have no bottom. Down this hole she poured all the gold, and when it was out of sight it ran about all over the world, where people that dig hard sometimes find it. And after that was done she put the pole back again.

Next she lifted down a spade from a high shelf, where it had grown quite rusty, and dug a very small hole on the opposite side of the hut--very small, but very deep.

‘Give me the bridge,’ said she, ‘for I am going to bury it here. If anyone was to get hold of it, and find that they could cross rivers and seas without any trouble, they would never discover how to cross them for themselves. I am a witch, and if I had chosen I could easily have cast my spells over the Bad One, and have made him deliver them to you the first day you came into my hut. But then you would never have fasted, and never have planned how to get what you wanted, and never have known the good spirits, and would have been fat and idle to the end of your days. And now go; in that hut, which you can just see far away, live your father and mother, who are old people now, and need a son to hunt for them. You have done what you were set to do, and I need you no more.’

Then Ball-Carrier remembered his parents and went back to them.

[From Bureau of Ethnology. ‘Indian Folklore.’]