

## **The Master Thief**

by Sir George Webbe Dasent  
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Once upon a time there was a poor cottager who had three sons. He had nothing to leave them when he died, and no money with which to put them to any trade, so that he did not know what to make of them. At last he said he would give them leave to take to anything each liked best, and to go whithersoever they pleased, and he would go with them a bit of the way; and so he did. He went with them till they came to a place where three roads met, and there each of them chose a road, and their father bade them good-bye, and went back home. I have never heard tell what became of the two elder; but as for the youngest, he went both far and long, as you shall hear.

So it fell out one night as he was going through a great wood that such bad weather overtook him. It blew, and sleeted, and drove so that he could scarce keep his eyes open; and in a trice, before he knew how it was, he got bewildered, and could not find either road or path. But as he went on and on, at last he saw a glimmering of light far far off in the wood. So he thought he would try and get to the light; and after a time he did reach it. There it was in a large house, and the fire was blazing so brightly inside, that he could tell the folk had not yet gone to bed; so he went in and saw an old dame bustling about and minding the house.

'Good evening!' said the youth.

'Good evening!' said the old dame.

'Hutetu! it's such foul weather out of doors to-night', said he.

'So it is', said she.

'Can I get leave to have a bed and shelter here to-night?' asked the youth.

'You'll get no good by sleeping here', said the old dame; 'for if the folk come home and find you here, they'll kill both me and you.'

'What sort of folk, then, are they who live here?' asked the youth.

'Oh, robbers! And a bad lot of them too', said the old dame. 'They stole me away when I was little, and have kept me as their housekeeper ever since.'

'Well, for all that, I think I'll just go to bed', said the youth. 'Come what may, I'll not stir out at night in such weather.'

'Very well', said the old dame; 'but if you stay, it will be the worse for you.'

With that the youth got into a bed which stood there, but he dared not go to sleep, and very soon after in came the robbers; so the old dame told them how a stranger fellow had come in whom she had not been able to get out of the house again.

'Did you see if he had any money?' said the robbers.

'Such a one as he money!' said the old dame, 'the tramper! Why, if he had clothes to his back, it was as much as he had.'

Then the robbers began to talk among themselves what they should do with him; if they should kill him outright, or what else they should do. Meantime the youth got up and began to talk to them, and to ask if they didn't want a servant, for it might be that he would be glad to enter their service.

'Oh', said they, 'if you have a mind to follow the trade that we follow, you can very well get a place here.'

'It's all one to me what trade I follow', said the youth; 'for when I left home, father gave me leave to take to any trade I chose.'

'Well, have you a mind to steal?' asked the robbers.

'I don't care', said the youth, for he thought it would not take long to learn that trade.

Now there lived a man a little way off who had three oxen. One of these he was to take to the town to sell, and the robbers had heard what he was going to do, so they said to the youth, if he were good to

steal the ox from the man by the way without his knowing it, and without doing him any harm, they would give him leave to be their serving-man.

Well! the youth set off, and took with him a pretty shoe, with a silver buckle on it, which lay about the house; and he put the shoe in the road along which the man was going with his ox; and when he had done that, he went into the wood and hid himself under a bush. So when the man came by he saw the shoe at once.

'That's a nice shoe', said he. 'If I only had the fellow to it, I'd take it home with me, and perhaps I'd put my old dame in a good humour for once.' For you must know he had an old wife, so cross and snappish, it was not long between each time that she boxed his ears. But then he bethought him that he could do nothing with the odd shoe unless he had the fellow to it; so he went on his way and let the shoe lie on the road.

Then the youth took up the shoe, and made all the haste he could to get before the man by a short cut through the wood, and laid it down before him in the road again. When the man came along with his ox, he got quite angry with himself for being so dull as to leave the fellow to the shoe lying in the road instead of taking it with him; so he tied the ox to the fence, and said to himself, 'I may just as well run back and pick up the other, and then I'll have a pair of good shoes for my old dame, and so, perhaps, I'll get a kind word from her for once.'

So he set off, and hunted and hunted up and down for the shoe, but no shoe did he find; and at length he had to go back with the one he had. But, meanwhile the youth had taken the ox and gone off with it; and when the man came and saw his ox gone, he began to cry and bewail, for he was afraid his old dame would kill him outright when she came to know that the ox was lost. But just then it came across his mind that he would go home and take the second ox, and drive it to the town, and not let his old dame know anything about the matter. So he did this, and went home and took the ox without his dame's knowing it, and set off with it to the town. But the robbers knew all about it, and they said to the youth, if he could get this ox too, without the man's knowing it, and without his doing him any harm, he should be as good as any one of them. If that were all, the youth said, he did not think it a very hard thing.

This time he took with him a rope, and hung himself up under the arm-pits to a tree right in the man's way. So the man came along with his ox, and when he saw such a sight hanging there he began to feel a little queer.

'Well', said he, 'whatever heavy thoughts you had who have hanged yourself up there, it can't be helped; you may hang for what I care! I can't breathe life into you again'; and with that he went on his way with his ox. Down slipped the youth from the tree, and ran by a footpath, and got before the man, and hung himself up right in his way again.

'Bless me!' said the man, 'were you really so heavy at heart that you hanged yourself up there--or is it only a piece of witchcraft that I see before me? Aye, aye! you may hang for all I care, whether you are a ghost or whatever you are.' So he passed on with his ox.

Now the youth did just as he had done twice before; he jumped down from the tree, ran through the wood by a footpath, and hung himself up right in the man's way again. But when the man saw this sight for the third time, he said to himself:

'Well! this is an ugly business! Is it likely now that they should have been so heavy at heart as to hang themselves, all these three? No! I cannot think it is anything else than a piece of witchcraft that I see. But now I'll soon know for certain; if the other two are still hanging there, it must be really so; but if they are not, then it can be nothing but witchcraft that I see.'

So he tied up his ox, and ran back to see if the others were still really hanging there. But while he went and peered up into all the trees, the youth jumped down and took his ox and ran off with it. When the man came back and found his ox gone, he was in a sad plight, and, as any one might know without being told, he began to cry and bemoan; but at last he came to take it easier, and so he thought:

'There's no other help for it than to go home and take the third ox without my dame's knowing it, and to try and drive a good bargain with it, so that I may get a good sum of money for it.'

So he went home and set off with the ox, and his old dame knew never a word about the matter. But the robbers, they knew all about it,

and they said to the youth, that if he could steal this ox as he had stolen the other two, then he should be master over the whole band. Well, the youth set off, and ran into the wood; and as the man came by with his ox he set up a dreadful bellowing, just like a great ox in the wood. When the man heard that, you can't think how glad he was, for it seemed to him that he knew the voice of his big bullock, and he thought that now he should find both of them again; so he tied up the third ox, and ran off from the road to look for them in the wood; but meantime the youth went off with the third ox. Now, when the man came back and found he had lost this ox too, he was so wild that there was no end to his grief. He cried and roared and beat his breast, and, to tell the truth, it was many days before he dared go home; for he was afraid lest his old dame should kill him outright on the spot.

As for the robbers, they were not very well pleased either, when they had to own that the youth was master over the whole band. So one day they thought they would try their hands at something which he was not man enough to do; and they set off all together, every man Jack of them, and left him alone at home. Now, the first thing that he did when they were all well clear of the house, was to drive the oxen out to the road, so that they might run back to the man from whom he had stolen them; and right glad he was to see them, as you may fancy. Next he took all the horses which the robbers had, and loaded them with the best things he could lay his hands on--gold and silver, and clothes and other fine things; and then he bade the old dame to greet the robbers when they came back, and to thank them for him, and to say that now he was setting off on his travels, and they would have hard work to find him again; and with that, off he started.

After a good bit he came to the road along which he was going when he fell among the robbers, and when he got near home, and could see his father's cottage, he put on a uniform which he had found among the clothes he had taken from the robbers, and which was made just like a general's. So he drove up to the door as if he were any other great man. After that he went in and asked if he could have a lodging? No; that he couldn't at any price.

'How ever should I be able', said the man, 'to make room in my house for such a fine gentleman--I who scarce have a rag to lie upon, and miserable rags too?'

'You always were a stingy old hunk', said the youth, 'and so you are still, when you won't take your own son in.'

'What, you my son!' said the man.

'Don't you know me again?' said the youth. Well, after a little while he did know him again.

'But what have you been turning your hand to, that you have made yourself so great a man in such haste?' asked the man.

'Oh! I'll soon tell you', said the youth. 'You said I might take to any trade I chose, and so I bound myself apprentice to a pack of thieves and robbers, and now I've served my time out, and am become a Master Thief.'

Now there lived a Squire close by to his father's cottage, and he had such a great house, and such heaps of money, he could not tell how much he had. He had a daughter too, and a smart and pretty girl she was. So the Master Thief set his heart upon having her to wife, and he told his father to go to the Squire and ask for his daughter for him.

'If he asks by what trade I get my living, you can say I'm a Master Thief.'

'I think you've lost your wits', said the man, 'for you can't be in your right mind when you think of such stuff.'

No! he had not lost his wits, his father must and should go to the Squire, and ask for his daughter.

'Nay, but I tell you, I daren't go to the Squire and be your spokesman; he who is so rich, and has so much money', said the man.

Yes, there was no help for it, said the Master Thief; he should go whether he would or no; and if he did not go by fair means, he would soon make him go by foul. But the man was still loath to go; so he stepped after him, and rubbed him down with a good birch cudgel, and kept on till the man came crying and sobbing inside the Squire's door.

'How now, my man! what ails you?' said the Squire. So he told him the whole story; how he had three sons who set off one day, and how he had given them leave to go whithersoever they would, and to follow whatever calling they chose. 'And here now is the youngest come home, and has thrashed me till he has made me come to you and ask for your daughter for him to wife; and he bids me say, besides, that he's a Master Thief.' And so he fell to crying and sobbing again.

'Never mind, my man', said the Squire, laughing; 'just go back and tell him from me, he must prove his skill first. If he can steal the roast from the spit in the kitchen on Sunday, while all the household are looking after it, he shall have my daughter. Just go and tell him that.'

So he went back and told the youth, who thought it would be an easy job. So he set about and caught three hares alive, and put them into a bag, and dressed himself in some old rags, until he looked so poor and filthy that it made one's heart bleed to see; and then he stole into the passage at the back-door of the Squire's house on the Sunday forenoon, with his bag, just like any other beggar-boy. But the Squire himself and all his household were in the kitchen watching the roast. Just as they were doing this, the youth let one hare go, and it set off and ran round and round the yard in front of the house.

'Oh, just look at that hare!' said the folk in the kitchen, and were all for running out to catch it.

Yes, the Squire saw it running too. 'Oh, let it run', said he; 'there's no use in thinking to catch a hare on the spring.'

A little while after, the youth let the second hare go, and they saw it in the kitchen, and thought it was the same they had seen before, and still wanted to run out and catch it; but the Squire said again it was no use. It was not long before the youth let the third hare go, and it set off and ran round and round the yard as the others before it. Now, they saw it from the kitchen, and still thought it was the same hare that kept on running about, and were all eager to be out after it.

'Well, it is a fine hare', said the Squire; 'come let's see if we can't lay our hands on it.'

So out he ran, and the rest with him--away they all went, the hare before, and they after; so that it was rare fun to see. But meantime the

youth took the roast and ran off with it; and where the Squire got a roast for his dinner that day I don't know; but one thing I know, and that is, that he had no roast here, though he ran after it till he was both warm and weary.

Now it chanced that the Priest came to dinner that day, and when the Squire told him what a trick the Master Thief had played him, he made such game of him that there was no end of it.

'For my part', said the Priest, 'I can't think how it could ever happen to me to be made such a fool of by a fellow like that.'

'Very well--only keep a sharp look-out', said the Squire; 'maybe he'll come to see you before you know a word of it.' But the Priest stuck to his text--that he did, and made game of the Squire because he had been so taken in.

Later in the afternoon came the Master Thief, and wanted to have the Squire's daughter, as he had given his word. But the Squire began to talk him over, and said, 'Oh, you must first prove your skill a little more; for what you did to-day was no great thing, after all. Couldn't you now play off a good trick on the Priest, who is sitting in there, and making game of me for letting such a fellow as you twist me round his thumb.'

'Well, as for that, it wouldn't be hard', said the Master Thief. So he dressed himself up like a bird, threw a great white sheet over his body, took the wings of a goose and tied them to his back, and so climbed up into a great maple which stood in the Priest's garden. And when the Priest came home in the evening, the youth began to bawl out:

'Father Laurence! Father Laurence!--for that was the Priest's name.

'Who is that calling me?' said the Priest.

'I am an angel', said the Master Thief, 'sent from God to let you know that you shall be taken up alive into heaven for your piety's sake. Next Monday night you must hold yourself ready for the journey, for I shall come then to fetch you in a sack; and all your gold and your silver, and all that you have of this world's goods, you must lay together in a heap in your dining-room.'



Well, Father Laurence fell on his knees before the angel, and thanked him; and the very next day he preached a farewell sermon, and gave it out how there had come down an angel unto the big maple in his garden, who had told him that he was to be taken up alive into heaven for his piety's sake; and he preached and made such a touching discourse, that all who were at church wept, both young and old.

So the next Monday night came the Master Thief like an angel again, and the Priest fell on his knees and thanked him before he was put into the sack; but when he had got him well in, the Master Thief drew and dragged him over stocks and stones.

'OW! OW!' groaned the Priest inside the sack, 'wherever are we going?'

'This is the narrow way which leadeth unto the kingdom of heaven', said the Master Thief, who went on dragging him along till he had nearly broken every bone in his body. At last he tumbled him into a goose-house that belonged to the Squire, and the geese began pecking and pinching him with their bills, so that he was more dead than alive.

'Now you are in the flames of purgatory, to be cleansed and purified for life everlasting', said the Master Thief; and with that he went his way, and took all the gold which the Priest had laid together in his dining-room. The next morning, when the goose-girl came to let the geese out, she heard how the Priest lay in the sack, and bemoaned himself in the goose-house.

'In heaven's name, who's there, and what ails you?' she cried.

'Oh!' said the Priest, 'if you are an angel from heaven, do let me out, and let me return again to earth, for it is worse here than in hell. The little fiends keep on pinching me with tongs.'

'Heaven help us, I am no angel at all', said the girl, as she helped the Priest out of the sack; 'I only look after the Squire's geese, and like enough they are the little fiends which have pinched your reverence.'

'Oh!' groaned the Priest, 'this is all that Master Thief's doing. Ah! my gold and my silver, and my fine clothes.' And he beat his breast, and hobbled home at such a rate that the girl thought he had lost his wits all at once.

Now when the Squire came to hear how it had gone with the Priest, and how he had been along the narrow way, and into purgatory, he laughed till he well-nigh split his sides. But when the Master Thief came and asked for his daughter as he had promised, the Squire put him off again, and said:

'You must do one masterpiece better still, that I may see plainly what you are fit for. Now, I have twelve horses in my stable, and on them I will put twelve grooms, one on each. If you are so good a thief as to steal the horses from under them, I'll see what I can do for you.'

'Very well, I daresay I can do it', said the Master Thief; 'but shall I really have your daughter if I can?'

'Yes, if you can, I'll do my best for you', said the Squire. So the Master Thief set off to a shop, and bought brandy enough to fill two pocket-flasks, and into one of them he put a sleepy drink, but into the other only brandy. After that he hired eleven men to lie in wait at night, behind the Squire's stable-yard; and last of all, for fair words and a good bit of money, he borrowed a ragged gown and cloak from an old woman; and so, with a staff in his hand, and a bundle at his back, he limped off, as evening drew on, towards the Squire's stable. Just as he got there they were watering the horses for the night, and had their hands full of work. 'What the devil do you want?' said one of the grooms to the old woman.

'Oh, oh! hutetu! it is so bitter cold', said she, and shivered and shook, and made wry faces. 'Hutetu! it is so cold, a poor wretch may easily freeze to death'; and with that she fell to shivering and shaking again.

'Oh! for the love of heaven, can I get leave to stay here a while, and sit inside the stable door?'

'To the devil with your leave', said one. 'Pack yourself off this minute, for if the Squire sets his eye on you, he'll lead us a pretty dance.'

'Oh! the poor old bag-of-bones', said another, whose heart took pity on her, 'the old hag may sit inside and welcome; such a one as she can do no harm.'

And the rest said, some she should stay, and some she shouldn't; but while they were quarrelling and minding the horses, she crept further and further into the stable, till at last she sat herself down behind the door; and when she had got so far, no one gave any more heed to her.

As the night wore on, the men found it rather cold work to sit so still and quiet on horseback.

'Hutetu! it is so devilish cold', said one, and beat his arms crosswise.

'That it is', said another; 'I freeze so, that my teeth chatter.'

'If one only had a quid to chew', said a third.

Well! there was one who had an ounce or two; so they shared it between them, though it wasn't much, after all, that each got; and so they chewed and spat, and spat and chewed. This helped them somewhat; but in a little while they were just as bad as ever.

'Hutetu!' said one, and shivered and shook.

'Hutetu!' said the old woman, and shivered so, that every tooth in her head chattered. Then she pulled out the flask with brandy in it, and her hand shook so that the spirit splashed about in the flask, and then she took such a gulp, that it went 'bop' in her throat.

'What's that you've got in your flask, old girl?' said one of the grooms.

'Oh! it's only a drop of brandy, old man', said she.

'Brandy! Well, I never! Do let me have a drop', screamed the whole twelve, one after another.

'Oh! but it is such a little drop', mumbled the old woman, 'it will not even wet your mouths round.' But they must and would have it; there was no help for it; and so she pulled out the flask with the sleepy drink in it, and put it to the first man's lips; then she shook no more, but guided the flask so that each of them got what he wanted, and the twelfth had not done drinking before the first sat and snored. Then the Master Thief threw off his beggar's rags, and took one groom after the other so softly off their horses, and set them astride on the beams between the stalls; and so he called his eleven men, and rode off with

the Squire's twelve horses. But when the Squire got up in the morning, and went to look after his grooms, they had just begun to come to; and some of them fell to spurring the beams with their spurs, till the splinters flew again, and some fell off, and some still hung on and sat there looking like fools.

'Ho! ho!' said the Squire; 'I see very well who has been here; but as for you, a pretty set of blockheads you must be to sit here and let the Master Thief steal the horses from between your legs.'

So they all got a good leathering because they had not kept a sharper look-out.

Further on in the day came the Master Thief again, and told how he had managed the matter, and asked for the Squire's daughter, as he had promised; but the Squire gave him one hundred dollars down, and said he must do something better still.

'Do you think now', said he, 'you can steal the horse from under me while I am out riding on his back?' 'O, yes! I daresay I could', said the Master Thief, 'if I were really sure of getting your daughter.'

Well, well, the Squire would see what he could do; and he told the Master Thief a day when he would be taking a ride on a great common where they drilled the troops. So the Master Thief soon got hold of an old worn-out jade of a mare, and set to work, and made traces and collar of withies and broom-twigs, and bought an old beggarly cart and a great cask. After that he told an old beggar woman, he would give her ten dollars if she would get inside the cask, and keep her mouth agape over the taphole, into which he was going to stick his finger. No harm should happen to her; she should only be driven about a little; and if he took his finger out more than once, she was to have ten dollars more. Then he threw a few rags and tatters over himself, and stuffed himself out, and put on a wig and a great beard of goat's hair, so that no one could know him again, and set off for the common, where the Squire had already been riding about a good bit. When he reached the place, he went along so softly and slowly that he scarce made an inch of way. 'Gee up! Gee up!' and so he went on a little; then he stood stock still, and so on a little again; and altogether the pace was so poor it never once came into the Squire's head that this could be the Master Thief.

At last the Squire rode right up to him, and asked if he had seen any one lurking about in the wood thereabouts. 'No', said the man, 'I haven't seen a soul.'

'Harkye, now', said the Squire, 'if you have a mind to ride into the wood, and hunt about and see if you can fall upon any one lurking about there, you shall have the loan of my horse, and a shilling into the bargain, to drink my health, for your pains.'

'I don't see how I can go', said the man, 'for I am going to a wedding with this cask of mead, which I have been to town to fetch, and here the tap has fallen out by the way, and so I must go along, holding my finger in the taphole.'

'Ride off', said the Squire; 'I'll look after your horse and cask.'

Well, on these terms the man was willing to go; but he begged the Squire to be quick in putting his finger into the taphole when he took his own out, and to mind and keep it there till he came back. At last the Squire grew weary of standing there with his finger in the taphole, so he took it out.

'Now I shall have ten dollars more!' screamed the old woman inside the cask; and then the Squire saw at once how the land lay, and took himself off home; but he had not gone far before they met him with a fresh horse, for the Master Thief had already been to his house, and told them to send one. The day after, he came to the Squire and would have his daughter, as he had given his word; but the Squire put him off again with fine words, and gave him two hundred dollars, and said he must do one more masterpiece. If he could do that, he should have her. Well, well, the Master Thief thought he could do it, if he only knew what it was to be.

'Do you think, now', said the Squire, 'you can steal the sheet off our bed, and the shift off my wife's back. Do you think you could do that?'

'It shall be done', said the Master Thief. 'I only wish I was as sure of getting your daughter.'

So when night began to fall, the Master Thief went out and cut down a thief who hung on the gallows, and threw him across his shoulders, and carried him off. Then he got a long ladder and set it up against the

Squire's bedroom window, and so climbed up, and kept bobbing the dead man up and down, just for all the world like one that was peeping in at the window.

'That's the Master Thief, old lass!' said the Squire, and gave his wife a nudge on the side. 'Now see if I don't shoot him, that's all.'

So saying he took up a rifle which he had laid at his bedside.

'No! no! pray don't shoot him after telling him he might come and try', said his wife.

'Don't talk to me, for shoot him I will', said he; and so he lay there and aimed and aimed; but as soon as the head came up before the window, and he saw a little of it, so soon was it down again. At last he thought he had a good aim; 'bang' went the gun, down fell the dead body to the ground with a heavy thump, and down went the Master Thief too as fast as he could.

'Well', said the Squire, 'it is quite true that I am the chief magistrate in these parts; but people are fond of talking, and it would be a bore if they came to see this dead man's body. I think the best thing to be done is that I should go down and bury him.'

'You must do as you think best, dear', said his wife. So the Squire got out of bed and went downstairs, and he had scarce put his foot out of the door before the Master Thief stole in, and went straight upstairs to his wife.

'Why, dear, back already!' said she, for she thought it was her husband.

'O yes, I only just put him into a hole, and threw a little earth over him. It is enough that he is out of sight, for it is such a bad night out of doors; by-and-by I'll do it better. But just let me have the sheet to wipe myself with--he was so bloody--and I have made myself in such a mess with him.'

So he got the sheet.

After a while he said:

'Do you know I am afraid you must let me have your nightshift too, for the sheet won't do by itself; that I can see.'

So she gave him the shift also. But just then it came across his mind that he had forgotten to lock the house-door, so he must step down and look to that before he came back to bed, and away he went with both shift and sheet.

A little while after came the true Squire.

'Why! what a time you've taken to lock the door, dear!' said his wife; 'and what have you done with the sheet and shift?'

'What do you say?' said the Squire.

'Why, I am asking what you have done with the sheet and shift that you had to wipe off the blood', said she.

'What, in the Deil's name!' said the Squire, 'has he taken me in this time too?'

Next day came the Master Thief and asked for the Squire's daughter, as he had given his word; and then the Squire dared not do anything else than give her to him, and a good lump of money into the bargain; for, to tell the truth, he was afraid lest the Master Thief should steal the eyes out of his head, and that the people would begin to say spiteful things of him if he broke his word. So the Master Thief lived well and happily from that time forward. I don't know whether he stole any more; but if he did, I am quite sure it was only for the sake of a bit of fun.