

The three green twigs

There was once on a time a hermit who lived in a forest at the foot of a mountain, and passed his time in prayer and good works, and every evening he carried, to the glory of God, two pails of water up the mountain. Many a beast drank of it, and many a plant was refreshed by it, for on the heights above, a strong wind blew continually, which dried the air and the ground, and the wild birds which dread mankind wheel about there, and with their sharp eyes search for a drink. And because the hermit was so pious, an angel of God, visible to his eyes, went up with him, counted his steps, and when the work was completed, brought him his food, even as the prophet of old was by God's command fed by the raven. When the hermit in his piety had already reached a great age, it happened that he once saw from afar a poor sinner being taken to the gallows. He said carelessly to himself, "There, that one is getting his deserts!" In the evening, when he was carrying the water up the mountain, the angel who usually accompanied him did not appear, and also brought him no food. Then he was terrified, and searched his heart, and tried to think how he could have sinned, as God was so angry, but he did not discover it. Then he neither ate nor drank, threw himself down on the ground, and prayed day and night. And as he was one day thus bitterly weeping in the forest, he heard a little bird singing beautifully and delightfully, and then he was still more troubled and said, "How joyously thou singest, the Lord is not angry with thee. Ah, if thou couldst but tell me how I can have offended him, that I might do penance, and then my heart also would be glad again." Then the bird began to speak and said, "Thou hast done injustice, in that thou hast condemned a poor sinner who was being led to the gallows, and for that the Lord is angry with thee. He alone sits in judgement. However, if thou wilt do penance and repent thy sins, he will forgive thee." Then the angel stood beside him with a dry branch in his hand and said, "Thou shalt carry this dry branch until three green twigs sprout out of it, but at night when thou wilt sleep, thou shalt lay it under thy head. Thou shalt beg thy bread from door to door, and not tarry more than one night in the same house. That is the penance which the Lord lays on thee." Then the hermit took the piece of wood, and went back

into the world, which he had not seen for so long. He ate and drank nothing but what was given him at the doors; many petitions were, however, not listened to, and many doors remained shut to him, so that he often did not get a crumb of bread.

Once when he had gone from door to door from morning till night, and no one had given him anything, and no one would shelter him for the night, he went forth into a forest, and at last found a cave which someone had made, and an old woman was sitting in it. Then said he, "Good woman, keep me with you in your house for this night;" but she said, "No, I dare not, even if I wished, I have three sons who are wicked and wild, if they come home from their robbing expedition, and find you, they would kill us both." The hermit said, "Let me stay, they will do no injury either to you or to me." and the woman was compassionate, and let herself be persuaded. Then the man lay down beneath the stairs, and put the bit of wood under his head. When the old woman saw him do that, she asked the reason of it, on which he told her that he carried the bit of wood about with him for a penance, and used it at night for a pillow, and that he had offended the Lord, because, when he had seen a poor sinner on the way to the gallows, he had said he was getting his deserts. Then the woman began to weep and cried, "If the Lord thus punishes one single word, how will it fare with my sons when they appear before him in judgment?"

At midnight the robbers came home and blustered and stormed. They made a fire, and when it had lighted up the cave and they saw a man lying under the stairs, they fell in a rage and cried to their mother, "Who is the man? Have we not forbidden any one whatsoever to be taken in?" Then said the mother, "Let him alone, it is a poor sinner who is expiating his crime." The robbers asked, "What has he done?" - "Old man," cried they, "tell us thy sins." The old man raised himself and told them how he, by one single word, had so sinned that God was angry with him, and how he was now expiating this crime. The robbers were so powerfully touched in their hearts by this story, that they were shocked with their life up to this time, reflected, and began with hearty repentance to do penance for it. The hermit, after he had converted the three sinners, lay

down to sleep again under the stairs. In the morning, however, they found him dead, and out of the dry wood on which his head lay, three green twigs had grown up on high. Thus the Lord had once more received him into his favour.

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