

THE GREEDY YOUNGSTER

by Peter Christen Asbjornsen



Once upon a time there were five women who were in a field reaping corn. None of them had any children, but they were all wishing for a child. All at once they found a big goose egg, almost as big as a man's head.

"I saw it first," said one. "I saw it just as soon as you did," shouted another. "But I'll have it," screamed the third, "I saw it first of all."

Thus they kept on quarrelling and fighting about the egg, and they were very near tearing each other's hair. But at last they agreed that it should belong to them all, and that they should sit on it as the geese do and hatch a gosling. The first woman sat on it for eight days, taking it very comfortably and doing nothing at all, while the others had to work hard both for their own and her living. One of the women began to make some insinuations to her about this.

"Well, I suppose you didn't come out of the egg either before you could chirp," said the woman who was on the egg, "But I think there is something in this egg, for I fancy I can hear some one inside grumbling every other moment: 'Herring and soup! Porridge and milk!' You can come and sit for eight days now, and then we will sit and work in turn, all of us."

So when the fifth in turn had sat for eight days, she heard plainly some one inside the egg screeching for "Herring and soup! Porridge and milk!" And so she made a hole in it; but instead of a gosling out came a baby, but it was awfully ugly, and had a big head and a tiny little body.

The first thing it screamed out for, as soon as it put its head outside the egg, was "Herring and soup! Porridge and milk!" And so they called it "the greedy youngster."

Ugly as he was, they were fond of him at first; but before long he became so greedy that he ate up all the meat they had. When they boiled a dish of soup or a pot of porridge which they thought would be sufficient for all six, he finished it all by himself. So they would not have him any longer.

"I have not had a decent meal since this changeling crept out of the eggshell," said one of them, and when the youngster heard that they were all of the same opinion, he said he was quite willing to go his way; "if they did not want him, he was sure he did not want them," and with that he left the place.

After a long time he came to a farm where the fields were full of stones, and he went in and asked for a situation. They wanted a labourer on the farm, and the farmer put him to pick up stones from the field. Yes, the youngster went to work and picked up the stones, some of which were so big that they would make many cart-loads; but whether they were big or small, he put them all into his pocket. It did not take him long to finish that job, so he wanted to know what he should do next.

"You will have to get all the stones out of the field," said the farmer. "I suppose you can't be ready before you have commenced?"

But the youngster emptied his pockets and threw all the stones in a heap. Then the farmer saw that he had finished the work, and he thought he ought to look well after one who was so strong. He must come in and get something to eat, he said. The youngster thought so too, and he alone ate what was prepared both for master and servants, and still he was only half satisfied.

“He is the right sort of man for a labourer, but he is a terrible eater, to be sure,” thought the farmer. “A man like him would eat a poor farmer out of house and home before anybody knew a word about it,” he said. He had no more work for him; it was best for him to go to the king’s palace.

The youngster set out for the palace, where he got a place at once. There was plenty of food and plenty of work. He was to be errand boy, and to help the girls to carry wood and water and do other odd jobs. So he asked what he was to do first.

“You had better chop some wood in the mean time,” they said. Yes, he commenced to chop and cut wood till the splinters flew about him. It was not long before he had chopped up everything in the place, both firewood and timber, both rafters and beams, and when he was ready with it, he came in and asked what he was to do now.

“You can finish chopping the wood,” they said.

“There is no more to chop,” he answered.

That could not be possible, thought the overlooker, and had a look into the wood-shed.

But yes, the youngster had chopped up everything; he had even cut up the timber and planks in the place. This was vexatious, the overlooker said; and then he told the youngster that he should not taste food until he had gone into the forest and cut just as much timber as he had chopped up for firewood.

The youngster went to the smithy and got the smith to help him to make an axe of five hundredweight of iron, and then he set out for the forest and began to make a regular clearance, not only of the pine and the lofty fir trees, but of everything else which was to be found in the king’s forests, and in the neighbours’ as well. He did not stop to cut the branches or the tops off, but he left them lying there as if a hurricane had blown them down. He put a proper load on the sledge and put all the horses to it, but they could not even move it; so he took the horses by the heads to give the sledge a start, but he pulled so hard that the horses’ heads came off. He then turned the horses out of the shafts and drew the load himself.

When he came to the palace, the king and his overlooker were standing in the hall to give him a scolding for having destroyed the forest—the overlooker had been there and seen what he had been doing. But when the king saw the youngster dragging half the forest after him, he got both angry and afraid; but he thought he had better be a little careful with him, since he was strong.

“Well, you are a wonderful workman, to be sure,” said the king; “but how much do you

eat at a time, because I suppose you are hungry now?”

Oh, when he was to have a proper meal of porridge, it would take twelve barrels of meal to make it, thought the youngster; but when he had put that away, he could wait awhile, of course, for his next meal.

It took some time to boil such a dish of porridge, and meantime he was to bring in a little firewood for the cook. He put a lot of wood on a sledge, but when he was coming through the door with it he was a little rough and careless again. The house got almost out of shape, and all the joists creaked; he was very near dragging down the whole palace. When the porridge was nearly ready, they sent him out to call the people home from the fields. He shouted so that the mountains and hills around rang with echoes, but the people did not come quick enough for him. He came to blows with them, and killed twelve of them.

“You have killed twelve men,” said the king; “and you eat for many times twelve; but how many do you work for?”

“For many times twelve as well,” answered the youngster.

When he had finished his porridge, he was to go into the barn to thrash. He took one of the rafters from the roof and made a flail out of it, and when the roof was about to fall in, he took a big pine tree with branches and all and put it up instead of the rafter. So he went on thrashing the grain and the straw and the hay all together. This was doing more damage than good, for the

corn and the chaff flew about together, and a cloud of dust arose over the whole palace.

When he had nearly finished thrashing, enemies came into the country, as a war was coming on. So the king told the youngster that he should take men with him to go and meet the enemy and fight them, for the king thought they would surely kill him.

No, he would not have any men with him to be cut to pieces; he would fight by himself, answered the youngster.

“So much the better,” thought the king; “the sooner I shall get rid of him; but he must have a proper club.”

They sent for the smith; he forged a club which weighed a hundredweight. “A very nice thing to crack nuts with,” said the youngster. So the smith made one of three hundredweight. “It would be very well for hammering nails into boots,” was the answer. Well, the smith could not make a bigger one with the men he had. So the youngster set out for the smithy himself, and made a club that weighed five tons, and it took a hundred men to turn it on the anvil. “That one might do for lack of a better,” thought the youngster. He wanted next a bag with some provisions; they had to make one out of fifteen oxhides, and they filled it with food, and away he went down the hill with the bag on his back and the club on his shoulder.

When he came so far that the enemy saw him, they sent a soldier to ask him if he was going to fight them.

“Yes; but wait a little till I have had something to eat,” said the youngster. He threw him-

self down on the grass and began to eat with the big bag of food in front of him.

But the enemy would not wait, and commenced to fire at him at once, till it rained and hailed around him with bullets.

“I don’t mind these crowberries a bit,” said the youngster, and went on eating harder than ever. Neither lead nor iron took any effect upon him, and his bag with food in front of him guarded him against the bullets as if it were a rampart.

So they commenced throwing bomb-shells and firing cannons at him. He only grinned a little every time he felt them.

“They don’t hurt me a bit,” he said. But just then he got a bomb-shell right down his wind-pipe.

“Fy!” he shouted, and spat it out again; but then a chain-shot made its way into his butter-can, and another carried away the piece of food he held between his fingers.

That made him angry; he got up and took his big club and struck the ground with it, asking them if they wanted to take the food out of his mouth, and what they meant by blowing crowberries at him with those pea-shooters of theirs. He then struck the ground again till the hills and rocks rattled and shook, and sent the enemy flying in the air like chaff. This finished the war.

When he came home again, and asked for more work, the king was taken quite aback, for he thought he should have got rid of him in the war. He knew of nothing else but to send him on a message to the devil.

“You had better go to the devil and ask him for my ground-rent,” he said. The youngster took his bag on his back, and started at once. He was not long in getting there, but the devil was gone to court, and there was no one at home but his mother, and she said that she had never heard talk of any ground-rent. He had better call again another time.

“Yes, call again to-morrow is always the cry,” he said; but he was not going to be made a fool of, he told her. He was there, and there he would remain till he got the ground-rent. He had plenty of time to wait. But when he had finished all the food in his bag, the time hung



heavy on his hands, and then he asked the old lady for the round-rent again. She had better pay it now, he said.

“No, she was going to do nothing of the sort,” she said. Her words were as firm as the old fir tree just outside the gates, which was so big that fifteen men could scarcely span it.

But the youngster climbed right up in the top of it and twisted and turned it as if it was a willow, and then he asked her if she was going to pay the ground-rent now.

Yes, she dared not do anything else, and scraped together as much money as he thought he could carry in his bag. He then set out for home with the ground-rent, but as soon as he was gone the devil came home. When he heard that the youngster had gone off with his bag full of money, he first of all gave his mother a hiding, and then he started after him, thinking he would soon overtake him.

He soon came up to him, for he had nothing to carry, and now and then he used his wings; but the youngster had, of course, to keep to the ground with his heavy bag. Just as the devil was at his heels, he began to jump and run as fast as he could. He kept his club behind him to keep the devil off, and thus they went along, the youngster holding the handle and the devil trying to catch hold of the other end of it, till they came to a deep valley. There the youngster made a jump across from the top of one hill to the other, and the devil was in such a hurry to follow him that he ran his head against the club and fell down into the valley and broke his leg, and there he lay.

“There is the ground-rent,” said the youngster when he came to the palace, and threw the bag with the money to the king with such a crash that you could hear it all over the hall.

The king thanked him, and appeared to be well pleased, and promised him good pay and leave of absence if he wished it, but the youngster wanted only more work.

“What shall I do now?” he said.

As soon as the king had had time to consider, he told him that he must go to the hill-troll, who had taken his grandfather’s sword. The troll had a castle by the sea, where no one dared to go.

The youngster put some cartloads of food into his bag and set out again. He traveled both long and far, over woods and hills and wild moors, till he came to the big mountains where the troll, who had taken the sword of the king’s grandfather, was living.

But the troll seldom came out in the open air, and the mountain was well closed, so the youngster was not man enough to get inside.

So he joined a gang of quarrymen who were living at a farm on top of the hill, and who were quarrying stones in the hills about there. They had never had such help before, for he broke and hammered away at the rocks till the mountain cracked, and big stones of the size of a house rolled down the hill. But when he rested to get his dinner, for which he was going to have one of the cartloads in his bag, he found it was all eaten up.

“I have generally a good appetite myself,” said the youngster; “but the one who has been

here can do a trifle more than I, for he has eaten all the bones as well."

Thus the first day passed; and he fared no better the second. On the third day he set out to break stones again, taking with him the third load of food, but he lay down behind the bag and pretended to be asleep. All of a sudden, a troll with seven heads came out of the mountain and began to eat his food.

"It's all ready for me here, and I will eat," said the troll.

"We will see about that," said the youngster, and hit the troll with his club, so the heads rolled down the hill.

So he went into the mountain which the troll had come out of, and in there stood a horse eating out of a barrel of glowing cinders, and behind it stood a barrel of oats.

"Why don't you eat out of the barrel of oats?" asked the youngster.

"Because I cannot turn round," said the horse.

"But I will soon turn you round," said the youngster.

"Rather cut my head off," said the horse.

So he cut its head off, and the horse turned into a fine handsome fellow. He said he had been bewitched, and taken into the mountain and turned into a horse by the troll. He then helped the youngster to find the sword, which the troll had hidden at the bottom of the bed, and in the bed lay the old mother of the troll, asleep and snoring hard.

So they set out for home by water, but when they had got some distance out to sea the

old mother came after them. As she could not overtake them, she lay down and began to drink the sea, and she drank till the water fell; but she could not drink the sea dry, and so she burst.

When they came to land, the youngster sent word that the king must come and fetch the sword. He sent four horses, but no, they could not move it; he sent eight, and he sent twelve; but the sword remained where it was. They were not able to stir it from the spot. But the youngster took it and carried it up to the palace alone.

The king could not believe his eyes when he saw the youngster back again. He appeared, however, to be pleased to see him, and promised him land and riches. When the youngster wanted more work, the king said he might set out for an enchanted castle he had, where no one dared to live, and he would have to stop there till he had built a bridge over the sound, so that people could get across to the castle.

If he was able to do this he would reward him handsomely, yes, he would even give him his daughter in marriage, said he.

"Well, I think I can do it," said the youngster.

No one had ever got away alive; those who had got as far as the castle, lay there killed and torn to pieces as small as barley, and the king thought he should never see him any more if he would go thither.

But the youngster started on his expedition; he took with him the bag of food, a crooked, twisted block of a fir tree, an axe, a wedge, and

some chips of the fir root, and the small pauper boy at the palace.

When he came to the sound, he found the river full of ice, and the current ran as strong as in a waterfall; but he stuck his legs to the bottom of the river and waded until he got safe across.

When he had warmed himself and had something to eat, he wanted to go to sleep; but before long he heard such a terrible noise, as if they were turning the castle upside down. The door burst wide open, and he saw nothing but a gaping jaw extending from the threshold up to the lintel.

“There is a mouthful for you,” said the youngster and threw the pauper boy into the swallow: “taste that! But let me see now who you are! Perhaps you are an old acquaintance?”

And so it was; it was the devil who was about again.

They began to play cards, for the devil wanted to try and win back some of the ground-rent which the youngster had got out of his mother by threats, when he was sent by the king to collect it; but the youngster was always the fortunate one, for he put a cross on the back of all the good cards, and when he had won all the money which the devil had upon him, the devil had to pay him out of the gold and silver which was in the castle.

Suddenly the fire went out, so they could not tell the one card from the other.

“We must chop some wood now,” said the youngster, who drove the axe into the fir block, and forced the wedge in; but the twisted, knotty

block would not split, although the youngster worked as hard as he could with the axe.

“They say you are strong,” he said to the devil; “just spit on your hands, stick your claws in, and tear away, and let me see what you are made of.”

The devil did so, and put both his fists into the split and pulled as hard as he could, when the youngster suddenly struck the wedge out, and the devil stuck fast in the block and the youngster let him also have a taste of the butt end of his axe on his back. The devil begged and prayed so nicely to be let loose, but the youngster would not listen to anything of the kind unless he promised that he would never come there any more and create any disturbance. He also had to promise that he would build a bridge over the sound, so that people could pass over it at all times of the year, and it should be ready when the ice was gone.

“They are very hard conditions,” said the devil; but there was no other way out of it—if the devil wanted to be set free, he would have to promise it. He bargained, however, that he should have the first soul that went across the bridge. That was to be the toll.

Yes, he should have that, said the youngster. So the devil was let loose, and he started home. But the youngster lay down to sleep, and slept till far into the day.

When the king came to see if he was cut and chopped into small pieces, he had to wade through all the money before he came to his bedside. There was money in heaps and in bags

which reached far up the wall, and the youngster lay in bed asleep and snoring hard.

“Lord help me and my daughter,” said the king when he saw that the youngster was alive. Well, all was good and well done, that no one could deny; but there was no hurry talking of the wedding before the bridge was ready.

One day the bridge stood ready, and the devil was there waiting for the toll which he had bargained for.

The youngster wanted the king to go with him and try the bridge, but the king had no mind to do it. So he mounted a horse himself, and put the fat dairy-maid in the palace on the pommel in front of him; she looked almost like a big fir block, and so he rode over the bridge, which thundered under the horse’s feet.

“Where is the toll? Where have you got the soul?” cried the devil.

“Why, inside this fir block,” said the youngster; “if you want it you will have to spit in your hands and take it.”

“No, many thanks! If she does not come to me, I am sure I shan’t take her,” said the devil. “You got me once into a pinch, and I’ll take care you don’t get me into another,” and with that he flew straight home to his old mother, and since that time he has never been heard or seen thereabouts.

The youngster went home to the palace and asked for the reward the king had promised him, and when the king wanted to get out of it, and would not stick to what he had promised, the youngster said it was best he got a good bag

of food ready for him and he would take his reward himself.

Yes, the king would see to that, and when the bag was ready the youngster asked the king to come outside the door. The youngster then gave the king such a kick, which sent him flying up in the air. The bag he threw after him that he might not be without food; and if he has not come down again by this he is floating about with his bag between heaven and earth to this very day.