

The Shifty Lad

by Andrew Lang
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In the land of Erin there dwelt long ago a widow who had an only son. He was a clever boy, so she saved up enough money to send him to school, and, as soon as he was old enough, to apprentice him to any trade that he would choose. But when the time came, he said he would not be bound to any trade, and that he meant to be a thief.

Now his mother was very sorrowful when she heard of this, but she knew quite well that if she tried to stop his having his own way he would only grow more determined to get it. So all the answer she made was that the end of thieves was hanging at the bridge of Dublin, and then she left him alone, hoping that when he was older he might become more sensible.

One day she was going to church to hear a sermon from a great preacher, and she begged the Shifty Lad, as the neighbours called him from the tricks he played, to come with her. But he only laughed and declared that he did not like sermons, adding:

‘However, I will promise you this, that the first trade you hear named after you come out from church shall be my trade for the rest of my life.’

These words gave a little comfort to the poor woman, and her heart was lighter than before as she bade him farewell.

When the Shifty Lad thought that the hour had nearly come for the sermon to be over, he hid himself in some bushes in a little path that led straight to his mother’s house, and, as she passed along, thinking of all the good things she had heard, a voice shouted close to her ear ‘Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!’ The suddenness of it made her jump. The naughty boy had managed to change his voice, so that she did not know it for his, and he had concealed himself so well that, though she peered about all round her, she could see no one. As soon as she had turned the corner the Shifty Lad came out, and by running very fast through the wood he contrived to reach home before his mother, who found him stretched out comfortably before the fire.

‘Well, have you got any news to tell me?’ asked he.

‘No, nothing; for I left the church at once, and did not stop to speak to anyone.’

‘Oh, then no one has mentioned a trade to you?’ he said in tones of disappointment.

‘Ye--es,’ she replied slowly. ‘At least, as I walked down the path a voice cried out “Robbery! Robbery! Robbery!” but that was all.’

‘And quite enough too,’ answered the boy. ‘What did I tell you? That is going to be my trade.’

‘Then your end will be hanging at the bridge of Dublin,’ said she. But there was no sleep for her that night, for she lay in the dark thinking about her son.

‘If he is to be a thief at all, he had better be a good one. And who is there that can teach him?’ the mother asked herself. But an idea came to her, and she arose early, before the sun was up, and set off for the home of the Black Rogue, or Gallows Bird, who was such a wonderful thief that, though all had been robbed by him, no one could catch him.

‘Good-morning to you,’ said the woman as she reached the place where the Black Gallows Bird lived when he was not away on his business. ‘My son has a fancy to learn your trade. Will you be kind enough to teach him?’

‘If he is clever, I don’t mind trying,’ answered the Black Gallows Bird; ‘and, of course, if ANY one can turn him into a first-rate thief, it is I. But if he is stupid, it is of no use at all; I can’t bear stupid people.’

‘No, he isn’t stupid,’ said the woman with a sigh. ‘So to-night, after dark, I will send him to you.’

The Shifty Lad jumped for joy when his mother told him where she had been.

‘I will become the best thief in all Erin!’ he cried, and paid no heed when his mother shook her head and murmured something about ‘the bridge of Dublin.’

Every evening after dark the Shifty Lad went to the home of the Black Gallows Bird, and many were the new tricks he learned. By-and-by he was allowed to go out with the Bird and watch him at work, and at last there came a day when his master thought that he had grown clever enough to help in a big robbery.

‘There is a rich farmer up there on the hill, who has just sold all his fat cattle for much money and has bought some lean ones which will cost him little. Now it happens that, while he has received the money for the fat cattle, he has not yet paid the price of the thin ones, which he has in the cowhouse. To-morrow he will go to the market with the money in his hand, so to-night we must get at the chest. When all is quiet we will hide in the loft.’

There was no moon, and it was the night of Hallowe’en, and everyone was burning nuts and catching apples in a tub of water with their hands tied, and playing all sorts of other games, till the Shifty Lad grew quite tired of waiting for them to get to bed. The Black Gallows Bird, who was more accustomed to the business, tucked himself up on the hay and went to sleep, telling the boy to wake him when the merry-makers had departed. But the Shifty Lad, who could keep still no longer, crept down to the cowshed and loosened the heads of the cattle which were tied, and they began to kick each other and bellow, and made such a noise that the company in the farmhouse ran out to tie them up again. Then the Shifty Lad entered the room and picked up a big handful of nuts, and returned to the loft, where the Black Rogue was still sleeping. At first the Shifty Lad shut his eyes too, but very soon he sat up, and taking a big needle and thread from his pocket, he sewed the hem of the Black Gallows Bird’s coat to a heavy piece of bullock’s hide that was hanging at his back.

By this time the cattle were all tied up again, but as the people could not find their nuts they sat round the fire and began to tell stories.

‘I will crack a nut,’ said the Shifty Lad.

‘You shall not,’ cried the Black Gallows Bird; ‘they will hear you.’

‘I don’t care,’ answered the Shifty Lad. ‘I never spend Hallowe’en yet without cracking a nut’; and he cracked one.

‘Some one is cracking nuts up there,’ said one of the merry-makers in the farmhouse. ‘Come quickly, and we will see who it is.’

He spoke loudly, and the Black Gallows Bird heard, and ran out of the loft, dragging the big leather hide after him which the Shifty Lad had sewed to his coat.

‘He is stealing my hide!’ shouted the farmer, and they all darted after him; but he was too swift for them, and at last he managed to tear the hide from his coat, and then he flew like a hare till he reached his old hiding-place. But all this took a long time, and meanwhile the Shifty Lad got down from the loft, and searched the house till he found the chest with the gold and silver in it, concealed behind a load of straw and covered with loaves of bread and a great cheese. The Shifty Lad slung the money bags round his shoulders and took the bread and the cheese under his arm, then set out quietly for the Black Rogue’s house.

‘Here you are at last, you villain!’ cried his master in great wrath. ‘But I will be revenged on you.’

‘It is all right,’ replied the Shifty Lad calmly. ‘I have brought what you wanted’; and he laid the things he was carrying down on the ground.

‘Ah! you are the better thief,’ said the Black Rogue’s wife; and the Black Rogue added:

‘Yes, it is you who are the clever boy’; and they divided the spoil and the Black Gallows Bird had one half and the Shifty Lad the other half.

A few weeks after that the Black Gallows Bird had news of a wedding that was to be held near the town; and the bridegroom had many friends and everybody sent him a present. Now a rich farmer who lived up near the moor thought that nothing was so useful to a young couple when they first began to keep house as a fine fat sheep, so he bade his shepherd go off to the mountain where the flock were feeding, and bring him back the best he could find. And the shepherd chose out the largest and fattest of the sheep and the one with the

whitest fleece; then he tied its feet together and put it across his shoulder, for he had a long way to go.

That day, the Shifty Lad happened to be wandering over the moor, when he saw the man with the sheep on his shoulder walking along the road which led past the Black Rogue's house. The sheep was heavy and the man was in no hurry, so he came slowly and the boy knew that he himself could easily get back to his master before the shepherd was even in sight.

'I will wager,' he cried, as he pushed quickly through the bushes which hid the cabin--'I will wager that I will steal the sheep from the man that is coming before he passes here.'

'Will you indeed?' said the Gallows Bird. 'I will wager you a hundred silver pieces that you can do nothing of the sort.'

'Well, I will try it, anyway,' replied the boy, and disappeared in the bushes. He ran fast till he entered a wood through which the shepherd must go, and then he stopped, and taking off one of his shoes smeared it with mud and set it in the path. When this was done he slipped behind a rock and waited.

Very soon the man came up, and seeing the shoe lying there, he stooped and looked at it.

'It is a good shoe,' he said to himself, 'but very dirty. Still, if I had the fellow, I would be at the trouble of cleaning it'; so he threw the shoe down again and went on.

The Shifty Lad smiled as he heard him, and, picking up the shoe, he crept round by a short way and laid the other shoe on the path. A few minutes after the shepherd arrived, and beheld the second shoe lying on the path.

'Why, that is the fellow of the dirty shoe!' he exclaimed when he saw it. 'I will go back and pick up the other one, and then I shall have a pair of good shoes,' and he put the sheep on the grass and returned to fetch the shoe. Then the Shifty Lad put on his shoes, and, picking up the sheep, carried it home. And the Black Rogue paid him the hundred marks of his wager.

When the shepherd reached the farmhouse that night he told his tale to his master, who scolded him for being stupid and careless, and bade him go the next day to the mountain and fetch him a kid, and he would send that as a wedding gift. But the Shifty Lad was on the lookout, and hid himself in the wood, and the moment the man drew near with the kid on his shoulders began to bleat like a sheep, and no one, not even the sheep's own mother, could have told the difference.

'Why, it must have got its feet loose, and have strayed after all,' thought the man; and he put the kid on the grass and hurried off in the direction of the bleating. Then the boy ran back and picked up the kid, and took it to the Black Gallows Bird.

The shepherd could hardly believe his eyes when he returned from seeking the sheep and found that the kid had vanished. He was afraid to go home and tell the same tale that he had told yesterday; so he searched the wood through and through till night was nearly come. Then he felt that there was no help for it, and he must go home and confess to his master.

Of course, the farmer was very angry at this second misfortune; but this time he told him to drive one of the big bulls from the mountain, and warned him that if he lost THAT he would lose his place also. Again the Shifty Lad, who was on the watch, perceived him pass by, and when he saw the man returning with the great bull he cried to the Black Rogue:

'Be quick and come into the wood, and we will try to get the bull also.'

'But how can we do that?' asked the Black Rogue.

'Oh, quite easily! You hide yourself out there and baa like a sheep, and I will go in the other direction and bleat like a kid. It will be all right, I assure you.'

The shepherd was walking slowly, driving the bull before him, when he suddenly heard a loud baa amongst the bushes far away on one side of the path, and a feeble bleat answering it from the other side.

'Why, it must be the sheep and the kid that I lost,' said he. 'Yes, surely it must'; and tying the bull hastily to a tree, he went off after

the sheep and the kid, and searched the wood till he was tired. Of course by the time he came back the two thieves had driven the bull home and killed him for meat, so the man was obliged to go to his master and confess that he had been tricked again.

After this the Black Rogue and the Shifty Lad grew bolder and bolder, and stole great quantities of cattle and sold them and grew quite rich. One day they were returning from the market with a large sum of money in their pockets when they passed a gallows erected on the top of a hill.

‘Let us stop and look at that gallows,’ exclaimed the Shifty Lad. ‘I have never seen one so close before. Yet some say that it is the end of all thieves.’

There was no one in sight, and they carefully examined every part of it.

‘I wonder how it feels to be hanged,’ said the Shifty Lad. ‘I should like to know, in case they ever catch me. I’ll try first, and then you can do so.’

As he spoke he fastened the loose cord about his neck, and when it was quite secure he told the Black Rogue to take the other end of the rope and draw him up from the ground.

‘When I am tired of it I will shake my legs, and then you must let me down,’ said he.

The Black Rogue drew up the rope, but in half a minute the Shifty Lad’s legs began to shake, and he quickly let it down again.

‘You can’t imagine what a funny feeling hanging gives you,’ murmured the Shifty Lad, who looked rather purple in the face and spoke in an odd voice. ‘I don’t think you have every tried it, or you wouldn’t have let me go up first. Why, it is the pleasantest thing I have ever done. I was shaking my legs from sheer delight, and if you had been there you would have shaken your legs too.’

‘Well, let me try, if it is so nice,’ answered the Black Rogue. ‘But be sure you tie the knot securely, for I don’t want to fall down and break my neck.’

‘Oh, I will see to that!’ replied the Shifty Lad. ‘When you are tired, just whistle, and I’ll let you down.’

So the Black Rogue was drawn up, and as soon as he was as high as the rope would allow him to go the Shifty Lad called to him:

‘Don’t forget to whistle when you want to come down; but if you are enjoying yourself as I did, shake your legs.’

And in a moment the Black Rogue’s legs began to shake and to kick, and the Shifty Lad stood below, watching him and laughing heartily.

‘Oh, how funny you are! If you could only see yourself! Oh, you ARE funny! But when you have had enough, whistle and you shall be let down’; and he rocked again with laughter.

But no whistle came, and soon the legs ceased to shake and to kick, for the Black Gallows Bird was dead, as the Shifty Lad intended he should be.

Then he went home to the Black Rogue’s wife, and told her that her husband was dead, and that he was ready to marry her if she liked. But the woman had been fond of the Black Rogue, thief though he was, and she shrank from the Shifty Lad in horror, and set the people after him, and he had to fly to another part of the country where none knew of his doings.

Perhaps if the Shifty Lad’s mother knew anything of this, she may have thought that by this time her son might be tired of stealing, and ready to try some honest trade. But in reality he loved the tricks and danger, and life would have seemed very dull without them. So he went on just as before, and made friends whom he taught to be as wicked as himself, till they took to robbing the king’s storehouses, and by the advice of the Wise Man the king sent out soldiers to catch the band of thieves.

For a long while they tried in vain to lay hands on them. The Shifty Lad was too clever for them all, and if they laid traps he laid better ones. At last one night he stole upon some soldiers while they were asleep in a barn and killed them, and persuaded the villagers that if THEY did not kill the other soldiers before morning they would

certainly be killed themselves. Thus it happened that when the sun rose not a single soldier was alive in the village.

Of course this news soon reached the king's ears, and he was very angry, and summoned the Wise Man to take counsel with him. And this was the counsel of the Wise Man--that he should invite all the people in the countryside to a ball, and among them the bold and impudent thief would be sure to come, and would be sure to ask the king's daughter to dance with him.

'Your counsel is good,' said the king, who made his feast and prepared for his ball; and all the people of the countryside were present, and the Shifty Lad came with them.

When everyone had eaten and drunk as much as they wanted they went into the ballroom. There was a great throng, and while they were pressing through the doorway the Wise Man, who had a bottle of black ointment hidden in his robes, placed a tiny dot on the cheek of the Shifty Lad near his ear. The Shifty Lad felt nothing, but as he approached the king's daughter to ask her to be his partner he caught sight of the black dot in a silver mirror. Instantly he guessed who had put it there and why, but he said nothing, and danced so beautifully that the princess was quite delighted with him. At the end of the dance he bowed low to his partner and left her, to mingle with the crowd that was filling the doorway. As he passed the Wise Man he contrived not only to steal the bottle but to place two black dots on his face, and one on the faces of twenty other men. Then he slipped the bottle back in the Wise Man's robe.

By-and-by he went up to the king's daughter again, and begged for the honour of another dance. She consented, and while he was stooping to tie the ribbons on his shoe she took out from her pocket another bottle, which the Wizard had given her, and put a black dot on his cheek. But she was not as skilful as the Wise Man, and the Shifty Lad felt the touch of her fingers; so as soon as the dance was over he contrived to place a second black dot on the faces of the twenty men and two more on the Wizard, after which he slipped the bottle into her pocket.

At length the ball came to an end, and then the king ordered all the doors to be shut, and search made for a man with two black dots on his cheek. The chamberlain went among the guests, and soon found

such a man, but just as he was going to arrest him and bring him before the king his eye fell on another with the same mark, and another, and another, till he had counted twenty--besides the Wise Man--on whose face were found spots.

Not knowing what to do, the chamberlain hurried back with his tale to the king, who immediately sent for the Wise Man, and then for his daughter.

‘The thief must have stolen your bottle,’ said the king to the Wizard.

‘No, my lord, it is here,’ answered the Wise Man, holding it out.

‘Then he must have got yours,’ he cried, turning to his daughter.

‘Indeed, father, it is safe in my pocket,’ replied she, taking it out as she spoke; and they all three looked at each other and remained silent.

‘Well,’ said the king at last, ‘the man who has done this is cleverer than most men, and if he will make himself known to me he shall marry the princess and govern half my kingdom while I am alive, and the whole of it when I am dead. Go and announce this in the ballroom,’ he added to an attendant, ‘and bring the fellow hither.’

So the attendant went into the ballroom and did as the king had bidden him, when, to his surprise, not one man, but twenty, stepped forward, all with black dots on their faces.

‘I am the person you want,’ they all exclaimed at once, and the attendant, as much bewildered as the chamberlain had been, desired them to follow him into the king’s presence.

But the question was too difficult for the king to decide, so he called together his council. For hours they talked, but to no purpose, and in the end they hit upon a plan which they might just as well have thought of at the beginning.

And this was the plan. A child was to be brought to the palace, and next the king’s daughter would give her an apple. Then the child was to take the apple and be led into a room where the twenty men with the black dots were sitting in a ring. And to whomsoever the child gave the apple, that man should marry the king’s daughter.

‘Of course,’ said the king, ‘it may not be the right man, after all, but then again it MAY be. Anyhow, it is the best we can do.’

The princess herself led the child into the room where the twenty men were now seated. She stood in the centre of the ring for a moment, looking at one man after another, and then held out the apple to the Shifty Lad, who was twisting a shaving of wood round his finger, and had the mouthpiece of a bagpipe hanging from his neck.

‘You ought not to have anything which the others have not got,’ said the chamberlain, who had accompanied the princess; and he bade the child stand outside for a minute, while he took away the shaving and the mouthpiece, and made the Shifty Lad change his place. Then he called the child in, but the little girl knew him again, and went straight up to him with the apple.

‘This is the man whom the child has twice chosen,’ said the chamberlain, signing to the Shifty Lad to kneel before the king. ‘It was all quite fair; we tried it twice over.’ In this way the Shifty Lad won the king’s daughter, and they were married the next day.

A few days later the bride and bridegroom were taking a walk together, and the path led down to the river, and over the river was a bridge.

‘And what bridge may this be?’ asked the Shifty Lad; and the princess told him that this was the bridge of Dublin.

‘Is it indeed?’ cried he. ‘Well, now, many is the time that my mother has said, when I played her a trick, that my end would be that I should hang on the bridge of Dublin.’

‘Oh, if you want to fulfil her prophecies,’ laughed the princess, ‘you have only to let me tie my handkerchief round your ankle, and I will hold you as you hang over the wall of the bridge.’

‘That would be fine fun,’ said he; ‘but you are not strong enough to hold me up.’

‘Oh, yes, I am,’ said the princess; ‘just try.’ So at last he let her bind the handkerchief round his ankle and hang him over the wall, and they both laughed and jested at the strength of the princess.

‘Now pull me up again,’ called he; but as he spoke a great cry arose that the palace was burning. The princess turned round with a start, and let go her handkerchief, and the Shifty Lad fell, and struck his head on a stone, and died in an instant.

So his mother’s prophecy had come true, after all.

West Highland Tales.