

The Squire Who was a Horse

This happened long, long ago, even before serfdom. In a small town there once lived a squire. He was very rich, evil and cruel. He always chose stewards who never felt compassion for the peasants, but only fulfilled every whim of the master. The people could expect no kindness from them. It was evident that the squires acted like squires, but the stewards were real dogs.

Once, a certain steward had a grudge against a poor peasant. He advised his master to order this man to bring some wood from the forest. Now the poor soul had such a broken-down wagon and his horses were so skinny that their ribs stuck out. But what could the wretched fellow do? He rushed off to the forest. When he arrived he gave the forester a note from the steward. Then he was shown a great hill of large logs that could fill four wagons being pulled by strong, giant horses. The poor peasant sat down on a stump and started to worry and cry bitterly.

Suddenly an old man came toward him and asked, "Why are you weeping, my man?" The poor peasant raised his head and related his story. The old man expressed his sympathy and said, "Do not worry, but come with me."

They walked through a beech tree forest and came to a high cliff. They climbed inside where there was a stable that was full of horses. They were very well fed and their coats shone, but they all had human heads!

"Take that one," the old man said, pointing out the one he wanted the poor peasant to take. "Harness him and whip him when he doesn't listen to you. And when you have delivered the wood you must bring him back here again."

The peasant took the horse, harnessed him and chose a good cudgel because though the horse was strong, he was lazy. When the peasant lashed him harder, the horse would bend down and move a bit farther.

After some time, the wagon with the load of logs appeared in the courtyard of the squire. When the steward saw how much wood the poor peasant had brought, his eyes almost popped out of his head from surprise. Then he glanced at the horse: why, the animal had a human head! He flew like the wind to the squire, who came out onto the porch, took one look and fell down in a faint. They could scarcely bring him to his senses. The squire then asked the peasant where he had obtained such a horse, because he was really the squire's father! The peasant replied, "I'm not to blame that the steward is angry with me." And he related how he had acquired the horse. The squire ordered his private soldiers to give the steward a good thrashing and he begged the peasant to lead the horse back to where he had obtained it.

They said that not long after this the squire passed away. He died a sudden death and no doubt he, too, became a horse because he was just like his father: he kept evil stewards and for any kind of offence he beat and tortured people. But that is nothing to be surprised about: people pay dearly for their tears. In any case, the squire received his just reward.