

THE WICKED STEPMOTHER

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One day a Bráhmaṇ adjured his wife not to eat anything without him lest she should become a she-goat. In reply the Bráhmaṇí begged him not to eat anything without her, lest he should be changed into a tiger. A long time passed by and neither of them broke their word, till one day the Bráhmaṇí, while giving food to her children, herself took a little to taste; and her husband was not present. That very moment she was changed into a goat.

When the Bráhmaṇ came home and saw the she-goat running about the house he was intensely grieved, because he knew that it was none other than his own beloved wife. He kept the goat tied up in the yard of his house, and tended it very carefully.

In a few years he married again, but this wife was not kind to the children. She at once took a dislike to them, and treated them unkindly and gave them little food. Their mother, the she-goat, heard their complainings, and noticed that they were getting thin, and therefore called one of them to her secretly, and bade the child tell the others to strike her horns with a stick whenever they were very hungry, and some food would fall down for them. They did so, and instead of getting weaker and thinner, as their stepmother had expected, they became stronger and stronger. She was surprised to see them getting so fat and strong while she was giving them so little food.

In course of time a one-eyed daughter was born to this wicked woman. She loved the girl with all her heart, and grudged not any expense or attention that she thought the child required. One day, when the girl had grown quite big and could walk and talk well, her mother sent her to play with the other children, and ordered her to notice how and whence they obtained anything to eat. The girl promised to do so, and most rigidly stayed by them the whole day, and saw all that happened.

On hearing that the goat supplied her step-children with food the woman got very angry, and determined to kill the beast as soon as possible.

She pretended to be very ill, and sending for the *hakím*, bribed him to prescribe some goat's flesh for her. The Bráhmaṇ was very anxious about his wife's state, and although he grieved to have to slay the goat (for he was obliged to kill the goat, not having money to purchase another), yet he did not mind if his wife really recovered. But the little children wept when they heard this, and went to their mother, the she-goat, in great distress, and told her everything.

“Do not weep, my darlings,” she said. “It is much better for me to die than to live such a life as this. Do not weep. I have no fear concerning you. Food will be provided for you, if you will attend to my instructions. Be sure to gather my bones, and bury them all together in some secret place, and whenever you are very hungry go to that place and ask for food. Food will then be given you.”

The poor she-goat gave this advice only just in time. Scarcely had it finished these words and the children had departed than the butcher came with a knife and slew it. Its body was cut into pieces and cooked, and the stepmother had the meat, but the step-children got the bones. They did with them as they had been directed, and thus got food regularly and in abundance.

Some time after the death of the she-goat one morning one of the step-daughters was washing her face in the stream that ran by the house, when her nose-ring unfastened and fell into the water. A fish happened to see it and swallowed it, and this fish was caught by a man and sold to the king's cook for His Majesty's dinner. Great was the surprise of the cook when, on opening the fish to clean it, he found the nose-ring. He took it to the king, who was so interested in it that he issued a proclamation and sent it to every town and village in his dominions, that whosoever had missed a nose-ring should apply to him. Within a few days the brother of the girl reported to the king that the nose-ring belonged to his sister, who had lost it one day while bathing her face in the river. The king ordered the girl to appear before him, and was so fascinated by her pretty face and nice manner that he married her, and provided amply for the support of her family.

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