



Ririro

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The Story Of A Very Bad Boy

Andrew Lang

Once upon a time there lived in a little village in the very middle of France a widow and her only son, a boy about fifteen, whose name was Antoine, though no one ever called him anything but Touéno-Bouéno. They were very poor indeed, and their hut shook about their ears on windy nights, till they expected the walls to fall in and crush them, but instead of going to work as a boy of his age ought to do, Touéno-Bouéno did nothing but lounge along the street, his eyes fixed on the ground, seeing nothing that went on round him.

'You are very, very stupid, my dear child,' his mother would sometimes say to him, and then she would add with a laugh, 'Certainly you will never catch a wolf by the tail.'

One day the old woman bade Antoine go into the forest and collect enough dry leaves to make beds for herself and him. Before he had finished it began to rain heavily, so he hid himself in the hollow trunk of a tree, where he was so dry and comfortable that he soon fell fast asleep. By and bye he was awakened by a noise which sounded like a dog scratching at the door, and he suddenly felt frightened, why he did not know. Very cautiously he raised his head, and right above him he saw a big hairy animal, coming down tail foremost.

'It is the wolf that they talk so much about,' he said to himself, and he made himself as small as he could and shrunk into a corner.

The wolf came down the inside of the tree, slowly, slowly; Antoine felt turned to stone, so terrified was he, and hardly dared to breathe. Suddenly an idea entered his mind, which he thought might save him still. He remembered to have heard from his mother that a wolf could neither bend his back nor turn his head, so as to look behind him, and quick as lightning he stretched up his hand, and seizing the wolf's tail, pulled it towards him.

Then he left the tree and dragged the animal to his mother's house.

'Mother, you have often declared that I was too stupid to catch a wolf by the tail. Now see,' he cried triumphantly.

'Well, well, wonders will never cease,' answered the good woman, who took care to keep at a safe distance. 'But as you really have got him, let us see if we can't put him to some use. Fetch the skin of the ram which died last week out of the

chest, and we will sew the wolf up in it. He will make a splendid ram, and tomorrow we will drive him to the fair and sell him.'

Very likely the wolf, who was cunning and clever, may have understood what she said, but he thought it best to give no sign, and suffered the skin to be sewn upon him.

'I can always get away if I choose,' thought he, 'it is better not to be in a hurry'; so he remained quite still while the skin was drawn over his head, which made him very hot and uncomfortable, and resisted the temptation to snap off the fingers or noses that were so close to his mouth.

The fair was at its height next day when Touéno-Bouéno arrived with his wolf in ram's clothing. All the farmers crowded round him, each offering a higher price than the last. Never had they beheld such a beautiful beast, said they, and at last, after much bargaining, he was handed over to three brothers for a good sum of money.

It happened that these three brothers owned large flocks of sheep, though none so large and fine as the one they had just bought.



'My flock is the nearest,' observed the eldest brother; 'we will leave him in the fold for the night, and tomorrow we will decide which pastures will be best for him.' And the wolf grinned as he listened, and held up his head a little higher than before.

Early next morning the young farmer began to go his rounds, and the sheep-fold was the first place he visited. To his horror, the sheep were all stretched out dead before him, except one, which the wolf had eaten, bones and all. Instantly the truth flashed upon him. It was no ram that lay curled up in the corner pretending to be asleep (for in reality he could bend back and turn his head as much as he liked), but a wolf who was watching him out of the corner of his eye, and might spring upon him at any moment. So the farmer took no notice, and only thought that here was a fine chance of revenging himself on his next brother for a trick which he had played, and merely told him that the ram would not eat the grass in that field, and it might be well to drive him to the pasture by the river, where his own flock was feeding. The second brother eagerly swallowed the bait, and that evening the wolf was driven down to the field where the young man kept the sheep which had been left him by his father. By the next morning they also were all dead, but the second brother likewise held his peace, and allowed the sheep which belonged to the youngest to share the fate of the

other two. Then they met and confessed to each other their disasters, and resolved to take the animal as fast as possible back to Touéno-Bouéno, who should get a sound thrashing.

Antoine was sitting on a plum tree belonging to a neighbour, eating the ripe fruit, when he saw the three young farmers coming towards him. Swinging himself down, he flew home to the hut, crying breathlessly, 'Mother, mother, the farmers are close by with the wolf. They have found out all about it, and will certainly kill me, and perhaps you too. But if you do as I tell you, I may be able to save us both. Lie down on the floor, and pretend to be dead, and be sure not to speak, whatever happens.'

Thus when the three brothers, each armed with a whip, entered the hut a few seconds later, they found a woman extended on the floor, and Touéno kneeling at her side, whistling loudly into her ears.

'What are you doing now, you rascal?' asked the eldest.

'What am I doing? Oh, my poor friends, I am the most miserable creature in the world! I have lost the best of mothers, and I don't know what will become of me,' and he hid his face in his hands and sobbed again.

'But what are you whistling like that for?'

'Well, it is the only chance. This whistle has been known to bring the dead back to life, and I hoped—' here he buried his face in his hands again, but peeping between his fingers he saw that the brothers had opened their six eyes as wide as saucers.

'Look!' he suddenly exclaimed with a cry, 'Look! I am sure I felt her body move! And now her nostrils are twitching. Ah! the whistle has not lost its power after all,' and stooping down, Touéno whistled more loudly than before, so that the old woman's feet and hands showed signs of life, and she soon was able to lift her head.

The farmers were so astonished at her restoration, that it was some time before they could speak. At length the eldest turned to the boy and said:

'Now listen to me. There is no manner of doubt that you are a young villain. You sold us a ram knowing full well that it was a wolf, and we came here to-day to pay you out for it. But if you will give us that whistle, we will pardon what you have done, and will leave you alone.'

'It is my only treasure, and I set great store by it,' answered the boy, pretending to hesitate. 'But as you wish for it so much, well, I suppose I can't refuse,' and he held out the whistle, which the eldest brother put in his pocket.

Armed with the precious whistle, the three brothers returned home full of joy,

and as they went the youngest said to the others, 'I have such a good idea! Our wives are all lazy and grumbling, and make our lives a burden. Let us give them a lesson, and kill them as soon as we get in. Of course we can restore them to life at once, but they will have had a rare fright.'

'Ah, how clever you are,' answered the other two. 'Nobody else would have thought of that.'

So gaily the three husbands knocked down their three wives, who fell dead to the ground. Then one by one the men tried the whistle, and blew so loudly that it seemed as if their lungs would burst, but the women lay stark and stiff and never moved an eyelid. The husbands grew pale and cold, for they had never dreamed of this, nor meant any harm, and after a while they understood that their efforts were of no use, and that once more the boy had tricked them. With stern faces they rose to their feet, and taking a large sack they retraced their steps to the hut.

This time there was no escape. Touéno had been asleep, and only opened his eyes as they entered. Without a word on either side they thrust him into the sack, and tying up the mouth, the eldest threw it over his shoulders. After that they all set out to the river, where they intended to drown the boy.

But the river was a long way off, and the day was very hot and Antoine was heavy, heavier than a whole sheaf of corn. They carried him in turns, but even so they grew very tired and thirsty, and when a little tavern came in sight on the roadside, they thankfully flung the sack down on a bench and entered to refresh themselves. They never noticed that a beggar was sitting in the shade of the end of the bench, but Touéno's sharp ears caught the sound of someone eating, and as soon as the farmers had gone into the inn, he began to groan softly.

'What is the matter?' asked the beggar drawing a little nearer. 'Why have they shut you up, poor boy?'

'Because they wanted to make me a bishop, and I would not consent,' answered Touéno.

'Dear me,' exclaimed the beggar, 'yet it isn't such a bad thing to be a bishop.'

'I don't say it is,' replied the young rascal, 'but I should never like it. However, if you have any fancy for wearing a mitre, you need only untie the sack, and take my place.'

'I should like nothing better,' said the man, as he stooped to undo the big knot.

So it was the beggar and not Touéno-Buéno who was flung into the water.

The next morning the three wives were buried, and on returning from the cemetery, their husbands met Touéno-Buéno driving a magnificent flock of

sheep. At the sight of him the three farmers stood still with astonishment.

'What! you scoundrel!' they cried at last, 'we drowned you yesterday, and to-day we find you again, as well as ever!'

'It does seem odd, doesn't it?' answered he. 'But perhaps you don't know that beneath this world there lies another yet more beautiful and far, far richer. Well, it was there that you sent me when you flung me into the river, and though I felt a little strange at first, yet I soon began to look about me, and to see what was happening. There I noticed that close to the place I had fallen, a sheep fair was being held, and a bystander told me that every day horses or cattle were sold somewhere in the town. If I had only had the luck to be thrown into the river on the side of the horse fair I might have made my fortune! As it was, I had to content myself with buying these sheep, which you can get for nothing.'

'And do you know exactly the spot in the river which lies over the horse fair?'

'As if I did not know it, when I have seen it with my own eyes.'

'Then if you do not want us to avenge our dead flocks and our murdered wives, you will have to throw us into the river just over the place of the horse fair.'

'Very well; only you must get three sacks and come with me to that rock which juts into the river. I will throw you in from there, and you will fall nearly on to the horses' backs.'

So he threw them in, and as they were never seen again, no one ever knew into which fair they had fallen.

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