

The Reforged Little Man

Long ago, very long ago, two wanderers came one evening to a blacksmith, and the blacksmith kindly took them in for the night. Just at that time, a beggar, old and frail, arrived at the blacksmith's house and began to ask him for alms.

One of the wanderers took pity on him and said to the other: "You can do anything, so ease this poor man's lot; give him the chance to earn his daily bread."

The other wanderer very good-naturedly turned to the blacksmith and said: "Give me your tongs and put some coals in the forge, so that I may make this old and frail man young again."

The blacksmith immediately prepared everything; the younger wanderer began to work the bellows, and when the coals blazed up, the elder wanderer took the beggar, placed him in the tongs, and thrust him into the very heat, so that he soon glowed red-hot there, like a crimson rose.

Then he was taken out of the fire and lowered into a tub of water, so that the water hissed; and when he had cooled there and was lifted out of the tub, he stood up on his feet—straight, healthy, rejuvenated, like a twenty-year-old youth.

The blacksmith observed all this carefully and then invited everyone to supper.

Now the blacksmith had an old, half-blind, hunched-over mother-in-law; she sat down beside the youth and began to question him: did the fire burn him very painfully? "Never have I felt better," he answered, "I sat in that heat as if in coolness."

These words of the youth sank into the old woman's soul and gave her no peace all night long.

And so, when both wanderers departed in the morning, having thanked the blacksmith for the night's lodging, it occurred to him that he too could rejuvenate his old mother-in-law; after all, he had observed everything so excellently, and he trusted in his own skill.

He called her and asked whether she also wished to emerge from his forge as an eighteen-year-old girl.

She answered: "Of course I wish it!" For the youth had told her how good it was in the heat.

So the blacksmith kindled a great fire in the forge and thrust the old woman inside, who began to struggle and scream at the top of her voice. "Sit still, old woman! Why are you yelling and thrashing about so? I am only now turning up the heat for you!"

And he set to working the bellows, so that all her rags burned off her at once.

But the old woman did not cease screaming, and the blacksmith thought: "Well, something is wrong!"—he pulled her out and threw her into the tub of water.

Then she began to bellow and shriek so loudly that both the blacksmith's wife and his daughter-in-law heard her cries in the house, and both ran rushing to the forge: they see the old woman lying in the tub, all crooked, all wrinkled, barely alive, and screaming at the top of her voice.

Live to old age—do not chase after youth!