

Stith Thompson - The folktale p72

Three other tales of the loss and recovery of magic objects have been studied together by Antti Aarne (5). The magic objects they treat of are, respectively, three, two, and one. By far the most popular of the three is The Table, the Ass, and the Stick (Type 563), and indeed it seems likely that the other two are little more than special developments of this type.

A poor man receives from a benefactor a table, a tablecloth, or sack which supplies itself with food. This is stolen from him by the host at the inn where he stays and an object identical in appearance is substituted for it. When the poor man goes home and tries to produce food, he fails. When he goes again to his benefactor he is given a marvelous ass or horse which will drop all the gold he may desire. The host at the inn plays the same trick a second time, and the man finds himself possessed of a worthless animal. The third time the benefactor gives him a magic cudgel and with this he compels the host to return the magic objects he has stolen.

This tale has a very extensive distribution, and is present in almost every collection of stories in Europe and Asia. It is told almost throughout Africa and has been carried frequently to both North and South America. Aside from the present day oral forms in India, there is indication that a tale with most of its essentials was current at least as early as the sixth century after Christ, since it appears in a collection of Chinese Buddhistic legends.(6) After all his extensive study of the versions of this tale, Aarne is undecided as to whether it has moved from Asia into Europe or vice versa.(7)

(5). Die Zaubergahen (Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne, XXVII, Helsinki, 1911, pp. 1-96).

(6). Chavannes, 500 Contes, III, 256, No. 468.

(7). For a discussion of this question, see Krohn, Übersicht, pp. 51-2.