

THE DEAD MAN'S DEBT

There was once a young man who lived happily with his mother, even though they were very poor, and often went without meals. All they had which hadn't been sold, except for the clothes on their backs, were two little cows, which fed on the pasture outside their house, and which gave them a little milk. But, one day, when the larder was again empty, the mother decided that one of them should be sold. She said to her son "A little money would give us some breathing room. Take one of the cows to market, and try to get a good price." He did so, the very next day, and did get a very good price — much more than either he, or his mother, had hoped for.

On his way home, with his pockets full, he passed through a village where many strict puritanical people lived. There, on a low wall, he found they had laid out a body, and had left a stick leaning against the wall next to it. Everybody who passed by picked up the stick, and hit the dead man. He found this very strange, and so he asked the next person why they were all beating the dead man's body. According to the villager, "he was a sinful reprobate who had died leaving a lot of money owing to the good people of the village. Now he must lie on the wall, and let himself be beaten until all his debts have been paid in full."

"How much does he owe?" asked the young man. When the villagers told him, he offered to settle the dead man's debt, and to pay for him to receive a proper burial. The villagers agreed and, once they had received every penny owing, the dead man was properly laid to rest before the young man carried on his way. But, his good deed had cost the young man everything which he had received from the sale of the little cow, and he went home with empty pockets.

When he arrived home, his mother asked him if he got a good price for the little cow. "Yes," he told her, "much more than either of us thought, but —".

"But what?" asked his mother, "Do you have the money?"

"No —" was the young man's reply. "I used all of it to release a dead man from his debt, so that he could be properly laid to rest."

When he had told her the rest of the story, she said to him "you may have done a very good deed today, but how are we going to live, now that you have given everything away and left us with nothing?"

The young man thought a while, and then replied "Don't worry, we still have another cow. I'll sell that one, and maybe, I'll get just as good a price."

His mother agreed, and so on the next market day he took the second cow with him, and sold it — for an even better price! But, on his way back, with his pockets full, he met a gang of pirates, who were dragging a female hostage behind them. She was wearing nothing but a shawl, and was struggling to keep

up with their pace. Feeling sorry for her, he asked the men “what are you doing with that woman?”

“We haven’t decided yet,” replied one of the men, “but, when we’re finished with her, we’ll sell her off to some rich old merchant?”

When he heard this, the young man immediately decided that he couldn’t leave the young lady to her fate with the pirates. So, he asked them how much her ransom would be. The amount they asked was high, but when he offered to give them all he had made from selling the cow, they released her. He gave her his coat, with its now empty pockets, and they made their way back to his home.

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“No —” was the young man’s reply. “I used all of it to release this young lady from a band of pirates.”

When he had told her the rest of the story, she angrily said to him “Now, how are we going to live? You have not only given everything away and left us with nothing, but this time, you have also brought an extra mouth to feed. She doesn’t even have any clothes, let alone money to buy food, or anything to sell.” She continued repeating the same complaints, over and over, sometimes shouting, sometimes weeping, sometimes loud, and sometimes under her breath, until she tired out. Then the girl spoke. She said that, if they let her stay a little while, she would not only work hard in the house, but she hoped that her handwork was good enough to bring in a little money. But, if they sent her away now, without anything, she didn’t know where she could go and how she could live. On hearing the young woman’s pleas, the older woman’s heart softened a little, and the idea of a little help in the house appealed to her. So, she agreed that the girl could stay for the time being.

As she had promised, the young woman worked hard in the house, and her needlework really was so good, that many people brought her work. Soon, she had earned as much as the son had received from the sale of the two cows, and they could live comfortably. In time, she became a member of the family. She married the young man who had rescued her.

But, whenever she was alone, the young woman worked on an embroidering a special cloth, which neither her husband, nor his mother, were aware. When it was finished, she said to her husband “Before, and after I came here, we have both experienced many hardships. But, now things are better for us, and we should be thankful for what we have. I think we should make a short pilgrimage to the cathedral in the city.” The young man readily agreed, and a few days later they found themselves in the city. After visiting the cathedral, the young woman told her husband “There is a place, here in the city, where the king drives past in his carriage everyday. Should we go to watch?”

The young man had nothing against this suggestion, so she led him to the place where the king should pass by. They hadn't been waiting long, when she saw the carriage approaching. Excitedly she shouted out "He's coming, he's coming!" and at the same time she pulled out and unrolled her special embroidery. It was richly decorated with the king's name, and the names of all his family with one name especially finely stitched. As the coach passed, she held up the banner and cried out "Father! Father! Please stop!"

The carriage came to a halt, and after the king had read all of the names embroidered onto the cloth, he got out and approached the young woman who was holding it. When he saw her, he smiled and, then, embraced her. The young man, standing dumbfounded next to her, quietly tried to interrupt to ask his smiling wife, what was happening. She quickly explained to him, that she was the king's daughter, and that she had been kidnapped by a band of pirates who had thrown her clothes into the sea. Then she introduced the young man to her father, explaining that he had given all that he had to rescue her, and that he was now her husband.

The king then invited the young couple to join him in the carriage, and they rode on, together into the palace. There, all the royal household came together to welcome the princess, and to celebrate her return. But, when she stood up to make a speech, she told them "I am very happy that I am once again with my father, my mother, the rest of my family, and even distant relatives, but there is still one person missing." When the king asked her who that might be, she replied "My husband's mother, and my mother-in-law, who took me into her house and heart when I had nothing. Please, let her come to live at court, to repay her for everything that she has done for me." The king was happy to do so, and instructed his daughter and her husband to fetch his mother. At the same time, he promised his new son-in-law half of his kingdom while he lived, and everything else, including the crown, on his death.

The royal couple soon set off in a coach with two servants, who were jealous of the poor country boy's good fortune. They planned to take the route along the coast road, where they hoped for an accident which would throw the young prince into the sea. Accident or not, the coach did overturn by a steep cliff above the shore, and the young man did fall into water, and the two men did nothing to rescue him. Instead, after righting the carriage, they made the princess swear an oath, that she would never tell anybody that his death was anything but an accident. Then they drove on, in silence, to the home of the dead young man's mother to give her the unhappy news, and bring her to the palace. There, on what should have been a joyful occasion, she was received with great sadness. The two servants again told their story of the disastrous accident on the coast road, and the princess remained tearfully silent.

But, not everything happened as the two villains had planned. The young man was a strong swimmer, and after being carried some way by the current, managed to reach a small island. There was nothing on this island except an eagle's nest, which was, fortunately, occupied. Each day, the adult birds

brought fresh meat to feed their chicks, and by taking a little from them, the young man was able to sustain himself. He stayed there many days, with no way off the island, looking out across the empty sea, until one day he saw something in the water. As it grew nearer, he saw that it looked like a person, swimming towards him, and it was, indeed something like that. When the swimmer reached the shore, it waved and called to him "Come with me!"

The young prince refused, answering "How can I? I very nearly died in that water, and it was only by a miracle that the strong current brought me here. How can I swim against it?"

The stranger replied "Don't be afraid, trust me and I will bring you safely to shore. Don't you recognise me?"

"No," answered the young man, "who are you?"

"I am the the dead man whose debt you paid, and who you gave a proper burial. Now, I can repay my debt to you, by helping you to return to your wife before it is too late". He then went on to tell the prince how he was now almost forgotten in the palace, except by his wife and mother, and that the king had instructed his daughter to find a new husband. On hearing this, the prince sprang into the water, and soon they were both on the other shore. "Now," said the spirit, "you must hurry. The wedding is today, and you must arrive before they take their vows. The princess will recognise you, but you need to get to her."

The young prince took his leave of the dead man, and hurried to the palace. But, because he looked so poor, dirty, and unrecognisable, when he arrived, the palace guard wouldn't let him through the gate. He insisted that they send a message to the princess, and they did so. But, they only told her that there was a poor beggar at the gate, so she sent down a little money. The guards gave this to him, saying that he should now be happy, and tried to send him away. But, he was not happy, and again insisted that he must see the princess in person. So, they sent another message, and this time the princess came to the gate. Now, the poor beggar was happy. The princess immediately recognised her husband, and to the astonishment of the guards, happily embraced him.

She quickly took him to the king, and the wedding was immediately cancelled. Instead, they held a great feast to celebrate the return of the young prince. Even the intended bridegroom was happy to take part because, as compensation, the king presented him with a part of his lands, and he later found another wife of his own choosing.