



Peter Bull

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Danish

Intermediate

11 min read

There once lived in Denmark a peasant and his wife who owned a very good farm, but had no children. They often lamented to each other that they had no one of their own to inherit all the wealth that they possessed. They continued to prosper, and became rich people, but there was no heir to it all.

One year it happened that they owned a pretty little bull-calf, which they called Peter. It was the prettiest little creature they had ever seen—so beautiful and so wise that it understood everything that was said to it, and so gentle and so full of play that both the man and his wife came to be as fond of it as if it had been their own child.

One day the man said to his wife, 'I wonder, now, whether our parish clerk could teach Peter to talk; in that case we could not do better than adopt him as our son, and let him inherit all that we possess.'

'Well, I don't know,' said his wife, 'our clerk is tremendously learned, and knows much more than his Paternoster, and I could almost believe that he might be able to teach Peter to talk, for Peter has a wonderfully good head too. You might at least ask him about it.'

Off went the man to the clerk, and asked him whether he thought he could teach a bull-calf that they had to speak, for they wished so much to have it as their heir.

The clerk was no fool; he looked round about to see that no one could overhear them, and said, 'Oh, yes, I can easily do that, but you must not speak to anyone about it. It must be done in all secrecy, and the priest must not

know of it, otherwise I shall get into trouble, as it is forbidden. It will also cost you something, as some very expensive books are required.'

That did not matter at all, the man said; they would not care so very much what it cost. The clerk could have a hundred dollars to begin with to buy the books. He also promised to tell no one about it, and to bring the calf round in the evening.

He gave the clerk the hundred dollars on the spot, and in the evening took the calf round to him, and the clerk promised to do his best with it. In a week's time he came back to the clerk to hear about the calf and see how it was thriving. The clerk, however, said that he could not get a sight of it, for then Peter would long after him and forget all that he had already learned. He was getting on well with his learning, but another hundred dollars were needed, as they must have more books. The peasant had the money with him, so he gave it to the clerk, and went home again with high hopes.

In another week the man came again to learn what progress Peter had made now.

'He is getting on very well,' said the clerk.

'I suppose he can't say anything yet?' said the man.

'Oh, yes,' said the clerk, 'he can say "Moo" now.'

'Do you think he will get on with his learning?' asked the peasant.

'Oh, yes,' said the clerk, 'but I shall want another hundred dollars for books. Peter can't learn well out of the ones that he has got.'

'Well, well,' said the man, 'what must be spent shall be spent.'

So he gave the clerk the third hundred dollars for books, and a cask of good old ale for Peter. The clerk drank the ale himself, and gave the calf milk, which he thought would be better for it.

Some weeks passed, during which the peasant did not come round to ask after the calf, being frightened lest it should cost him another hundred dollars, for he had begun to squirm a bit at having to part with so much money. Meanwhile the clerk decided that the calf was as fat as it could be, so he killed it. After he had got all the beef out of the way he went inside, put on his black clothes, and made his way to the peasant's house.

As soon as he had said 'Good-day' he asked, 'Has Peter come home here?'

'No, indeed, he hasn't,' said the man; 'surely he hasn't run away?'

'I hope,' said the clerk, 'that he would not behave so contemptibly after all the trouble I have had to teach him, and all that I have spent upon him. I have had to spend at least a hundred dollars of my own money to buy books for him before I got him so far on. He could say anything he liked now, so he said to-day that he longed to see his parents again. I was willing to give him that pleasure, but I was afraid that he wouldn't be able to find the way here by himself, so I made myself ready to go with him. When we had got outside the house I remembered that I had left my stick inside, and went in again to get it. When I came out again Peter had gone off on his own account. I thought he would be here, and if he isn't I don't know where he is.'

The peasant and his wife began to lament bitterly that Peter had run away in this fashion just when they were to have so much joy of him, and after they had spent so much on his education. The worst of it was that now they had no heir after all. The clerk comforted them as best he could; he also was greatly distressed that Peter should have behaved in such a way just when he should have gained honour from his pupil. Perhaps he had only gone astray, and he would advertise him at church next Sunday, and find out where anyone had seen him. Then he bade them 'Good-bye,' and went home and dined on a good fat veal roast.

Now it so happened that the clerk took in a newspaper, and one day he chanced to read in its columns of a new merchant who had settled in a town at some distance, and whose name was 'Peter Bull.' He put the newspaper in his pocket, and went round to the sorrowing couple who had lost their heir. He read the paragraph to them, and added, 'I wonder, now, whether that could be your bull-calf Peter?'

'Yes, of course it is,' said the man; 'who else would it be?'

His wife then spoke up and said, 'You must set out, good man, and see about him, for it is him, I am perfectly certain. Take a good sum of money with you, too; for who knows but what he may want some cash now that he has turned a merchant!'

Next day the man got a bag of money on his back and a sandwich in his pocket, and his pipe in his mouth, and set out for the town where the new merchant lived. It was no short way, and he travelled for many days before he finally arrived there. He reached it one morning, just at daybreak, found out the right place, and asked if the merchant was at home. Yes, he was, said the people, but he was not up yet.

'That doesn't matter,' said the peasant, 'for I am his father. Just show me up to his bedroom.'

He was shown up to the room, and as soon as he entered it, and caught sight of the merchant, he recognised him at once. He had the same broad forehead, the same thick neck, and same red hair, but in other respects he was now like a human being. The peasant rushed straight up to him and took a firm hold of him. 'O Peter,' said he, 'what a sorrow you have caused us, both myself and your mother, by running off like this just as we had got you well educated! Get up, now, so that I can see you properly, and have a talk with you.'

The merchant thought that it was a lunatic who had made his way in to him, and thought it best to take things quietly.

'All right,' said he, 'I shall do so at once.' He got out of bed and made haste to dress himself.

'Ay,' said the peasant, 'now I can see how clever our clerk is. He has done well by you, for now you look just like a human being. If one didn't know it, one would never think that it was you we got from the red cow; will you come home with me now?'

'No,' said the merchant, 'I can't find time just now. I have a big business to look after.'

'You could have the farm at once, you know,' said the peasant, 'and we old people would retire. But if you would rather stay in business, of course you may do so. Are you in want of anything?'

'Oh, yes,' said the merchant; 'I want nothing so much as money. A merchant has always a use for that.'

'I can well believe that,' said the peasant, 'for you had nothing at all to start with. I have brought some with me for that very end.' With that he emptied his bag of money out upon the table, so that it was all covered with

bright dollars.

When the merchant saw what kind of man he had before him he began to speak him fair, and invited him to stay with him for some days, so that they might have some more talk together.

‘Very well,’ said the peasant, ‘but you must call me “Father.”’

‘I have neither father nor mother alive,’ said Peter Bull.

‘I know that,’ said the man; ‘your real father was sold at Hamburg last Michaelmas, and your real mother died while calving in spring; but my wife and I have adopted you as our own, and you are our only heir, so you must call me “Father.”’

Peter Bull was quite willing to do so, and it was settled that he should keep the money, while the peasant made his will and left to him all that he had, before he went home to his wife, and told her the whole story. She was delighted to hear that it was true enough about Peter Bull—that he was no other than their own bull-calf.

‘You must go at once and tell the clerk,’ said she, ‘and pay him the hundred dollars of his own money that he spent upon our son. He has earned them well, and more besides, for all the joy he has given us in having such a son and heir.’

The man agreed with this, and thanked the clerk for all he had done, and gave him two hundred dollars. Then he sold the farm, and removed with his wife to the town where their dear son and heir was living. To him they gave all their wealth, and lived with him till their dying day.

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