



The Cattle That Came

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Bulgarian

Intermediate

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Once upon a time, a young couple went up on a great mountain to build a little home. They had no money at all, and a spade and an axe were their sole possessions, but they knew the world was full of good things for those who have courage and kindness, and they set out bravely to fell the trees and dig the ground until they had cleared a little space for a cottage. They lived on wild berries and nuts until their first crops rose, and by dint of working, early and late, they presently had a fine cottage and then a prosperous farm. They exchanged berries for seed, and their crops for clothes and furnishings, until six children had been born to them, each as pretty as a forest flower and as sturdy. By the time Peter, the eldest, was seven, the trees in the orchard were laden with fruit, roses climbed over the roof and the chimney of the cottage and flowers grew along the garden path; and the farmer and his wife often turned their eyes to the meadows on the mountain and wondered if they would ever have enough to buy cattle to graze thereon.

One fine afternoon in the time of harvest the children were helping their parents gather the cherries and early apples. Suddenly the mother, looking up, saw a great eagle high overhead carrying something, and on gazing closely she perceived the bird held a baby. She gave a loud shriek and called her husband who rushed out with his spade waving and calling, but the bird still hovered overhead. Just then, however, the children hearing their parents' cries, popped their heads out of the trees to see what was happening. Out of the top of the cherry tree, came Peter and John and James, from the apple tree peeped little Rozsa and Pille, and Baby Blue-eyes rolling on the grass, sat up and stared.

On seeing the poor little baby high in the air, the children shrieked with their parents, and frightened at the noise, Baby Blue-eyes lifted her voice in the most ear-piercing wail the family had ever heard. Apparently the eagle had never heard anything like it either, for it rose with a great swoop, dropping the baby to the ground. Fortunately, the farmer's wife held out her apron in time to save it, and then all the family clustered round to behold a most beautiful child, in the finest silken clothes, laughing and crowing and in no way hurt.

As they stood admiring it, who should come out of the forest but an elegant lady, magnificently dressed, with jewels glittering on her outstretched hands. It was plain she was the mother of the little one, and coming up, she thanked them a thousand times for rescuing the child, and begged to know if there was anything they wanted which she could provide. The farmer kept shaking his head, saying they wanted nothing from her for they had done nothing for her beyond their simple duty to the innocent baby, but little Peter piped out suddenly that they were always wishing they had a cow so that they might have milk for breakfast.

On hearing this the lady said six pairs of cattle should arrive, a pair for every child. "But," she added, "they must always be kept together, and belong to all of you. If you sell them or separate them, your prosperity will vanish. It was by calling together that you were able to frighten the eagle, even the baby's screams being needed, and it is by living and working together that good will come to you. As long as the cattle graze in your fields your fortune will be secure."

With this the lady departed, and one evening some days after, when the farmer and his wife were resting on the garden bench, what should they see but six magnificent pairs of cattle coming up from the meadows, with the children driving them.

From that day, they enjoyed marvellous prosperity. The farmer and his wife now had absolute confidence that everything they sowed would bear fine harvests. They lost all fear of the future or misfortune, planted boldly,

marketed their produce wisely, and by the time the children were grown up, the farmer's estate extended over the mountain, and every child had married and brought his bride or her husband to a snug cottage, near the parents' home. But all ate together in the parents' house, worked together, and shared the produce equally.

Soon each cottage was blessed with children, and a happy circle of little ones carried on the good work of helping in the general good.

But at last the farmer and his wife grew full of years and one day the farmer called his children to his bedside and told them he was leaving for the long journey, and made them promise to continue in loving fellowship and to hold all things in common and remember their prosperity depended on keeping the six pairs of cattle, which had never grown old or feeble, all these years.

For some time after the farmer had passed away, the family remembered his words, and shared the harvests and the land without thought of private profit or possession. Peter, the eldest, looked after the animals, and with his son, attended to the marketing of the extra produce. John saw to the gardens and the fields, with his strapping boys and girls. James and his family cut down the trees, and made the furniture they needed, also the boots and shoes, and further, painted gay flowers on the chairs and chests, and were always around with their tools or paint brush, improving the insides or outsides of the homes when they were not busy at shoemaking. Rozsa and her husband carded and spun and wove the wool from the sheep, and the flax from the field, and with their children, made good strong clothes for every one, on which Rozsa's little girls and boys embroidered pretty patterns and letters so that every one was gay for Sundays and holidays.

Pille managed the dairy, and made the best butter and cheese ever tasted, while her children drove the cows and milked them, and her husband attended to the chickens, the geese, the turkeys, the ducks, and all the other fowl about the place. And Baby Blue-eyes married a pastry cook, and the two of them cooked the fine dinners they all enjoyed in the big house, and their little ones ran in the woods and found mushrooms and berries and herbs.

Never was there a happier set of people, and, of course, all were always ready to lend a hand when any one wanted help, and glad to teach what they knew, so that in the winter evenings, one might see every one round the fire having an embroidery lesson, or learning how to make some sweetmeat, or hearing stories of the market town where Peter went every month on their business; and in the summer all the children would go nutting or picking berries, and every one would make the hay or cut the crops together.

There was nothing left on earth and how discontent began to grow up amongst them, like some evil weed, none could say. But grow it certainly did.

It started when Peter began to listen to the other farmers boast of the money each was making and the triumphs they were winning over one another. Some bragged of the fine things they were doing for their children, but Peter noticed they never rejoiced at hearing of the fine things the other farmers were doing for their children. No, every man seemed bent on getting all he could for himself and his, and Peter was told he was a poor sort of father, to work so hard for other people's children, and give his own no more than he gave to the others.

Then John talked with the neighbours who came to see his crops and his vegetables, and he found they were all boasting of the profit they made from this crop or that, and were especially glad when they made more than another had; and they thought John very foolish to let all the family enjoy the things he raised, without setting apart the best for his own use, and his children's use.

Then James began to get his head turned by the compliments strangers paid the family on the pretty things in their homes; every one marvelled to hear that James had made everything, and several took him aside and said it was absurd such a clever fellow should be at the beck and call of a whole circle of relations and he ought to go to the city for his children's sake, and make a name for himself and a big fortune and give them a good education and see that they advanced in the world. Even Rozsa and her husband were not left in peace, for when the family sallied out to church or a merry-making, every one remarked on the quality and beauty of their clothes, and when they heard they were made at home, cried that Rozsa ought to set up a shop and make for all the grand people roundabout. It was sheer waste to put such clever work into the clothes of her own family.

Pille and her husband were approached by men from foreign parts who wanted cargoes for their ships, and thought the casks of cheese and butter would be all the better for a trip across the ocean; and Baby Blue-eyes

and her husband received a visit from no other than the steward of the King of the land, saying he had heard of their skill, and desired their services for the State banquets. When Baby Blue-eyes and her husband explained this excellent cooking was just for home use, and the delicious sweetmeats were tasted by no one but the children of the family, and the jellies and delicacies were everyday fare, and at the service of any sick neighbour or any one else who was hungry, the steward threw up his hands and cried he had never heard of such wicked waste. Such excellence should be reserved for Royal banquets.

So one night when they were gathered together, all sitting silent with no more jokes or stories or friendly help, Peter broke out with the news that he was not going to be a fool any longer, but would take his share of the farm and do the best he could for himself; and then the others joined in, repeating the compliments they had received on their cleverness, and every one saying they were doing too much for the others, more than their fair share, and could do very much better for themselves and their children.

So the next thing was to divide the property; and you may be sure each held a very different opinion from what the others did, about what he or she deserved, and finally they came to the six pairs of cattle, and found they could not divide them up for there were only twelve cattle and there were no less than forty-three members of the family. Besides they could not forget their father's warning that if the cattle were divided their prosperity would end. So at last Peter proposed that they should all drive the cattle from the meadows, and the one whose cottage they stopped nearest to should have the lot. After much wrangling they agreed to this, and all set out to drive the cattle home. But of course no one would let the cattle stop at any one else's cottage and they belaboured the poor beasts so unmercifully that at last the cattle threw up their heads, lashed their tails, and broke into a frenzied gallop, right over the mountain top. Up flew the family after them, and found themselves standing on the edge of a great precipice with the poor cattle sinking in the swamp far below.

The moans of the poor creatures rose up to them, and the family at last saw what they had done, and came home weeping and quarrelling, each laying the blame on the other. Then no one cared to do any work, for all feared that ill luck would come on everything; and indeed, everything they touched did seem to turn out badly. For the first time in their lives they sat down to heavy bread and soup with too much salt in it. John forgot to water his young cauliflower plants and found them withered quite away; the butter wouldn't churn and the cheese wouldn't set; and so it went from day to day. The worst effect of all was, that the children no longer played with one another, but threw stones and mud and said hard words even as their parents did.

No one had divided the lands yet, and no one had the heart to make a move in that direction. But at last one

evening when they were round the fire, bemoaning their sad fate, Peter spoke out and said: "We have all been to blame, every one of us, for we broke our promise to our father in the first place, and then, we stopped loving each other. Instead of being grateful for all the good that had been given us, we began to want more than we could use, and for the poor purpose of exulting over our neighbours, and even our own brothers. This punishment is deserved and at least we need not be cowardly enough to grumble at it."

These were the first true words the family had heard for many a day and John was ready enough to agree, and so was James, and finally Rozsa and Pille chimed in with: "Yes, prosperity has gone from us forever but we can still keep our word to our father and go on living together. We ourselves will gladly do our best for every one again."

"Yes, yes," cried Baby Blue-eyes, "though the poor cattle are gone, I am grateful we are all left. I never wanted to cook for the King's grand guests, and we will see that no more spoilt dishes come to table. At least we can do our best to help and happify each other." All joined in with this, and that night all embraced -on parting and, though all were saddened, once more love and kindness reigned.

From that day the family returned to their own ways, save that each worked with added diligence; and mothers, and fathers too, were quick to see that the little ones lived in friendship with each other and allowed no quarrelling to spring up again.

Then, to their great surprise, instead of their prosperity coming to an end, as they expected, everything they did succeeded more and more; never had they had such harvests as they beheld next year; never had the children looked so well and beautiful; never had their homes looked so charming. They asked one another how this could have happened, for the words of the lady and of their father must surely have been true; until Peter suddenly exclaimed, 'Why, of course, we did not separate the cattle; we were saved in time, by the poor creatures' fate.'

‘Yet it was our selfishness that drove them to their doom,’ said John very soberly. But at that moment what should they hear but a great shout of joy coming nearer and nearer, and rushing to the door of the house, in which they were waiting for the children to come home to dinner, they beheld the six pairs of cattle driven by the children. How the cattle had got out of the swamp and into the meadows none ever knew, but returning from the forest where the little ones had spent the morning gathering berries, the children had beheld the cattle quietly grazing, and had driven them home in joy and triumph, even as their parents had driven them, home, long years ago.

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