



The Ungrateful Children and the Old Father Who Went to School Again

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Easy
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Once upon a time there was an old man. He lived to a great age, and God gave him children whom he brought up to man's estate, and he divided all his goods amongst them. "I will pass my remaining days among my children," thought he.

So the old man went to live with his eldest son, and at first the eldest son treated him properly, and did reverence to his old father. "'Tis but meet and right that we should give our father to eat and drink, and see that he has wherewithal to clothe him, and take care to patch up his things from time to time, and let him have clean new shirts on festivals," said the eldest son. So they did so, and at festivals also the old father had his own glass beside him. Thus the eldest son was a good son to his old father.

But when the eldest son had been keeping his father for some time he began to regret his hospitality, and was rough to his father, and sometimes even shouted at him. The old man no longer had his own set place in the

house as heretofore, and there was none to cut up his food for him. So the eldest son repented him that he had said he would keep his father, and he began to grudge him every morsel of bread that he put in his mouth. The old man had nothing for it but to go to his second son. It might be better for him there or worse, but stay with his eldest son any longer he could not. So the father went to his second son. But here the old man soon discovered that he had only exchanged wheat for straw. Whenever he began to eat, his second son and his daughter-in-law looked sour and murmured something between their teeth.

The woman scolded the old man. "We had as much as we could do before to make both ends meet," cried she, "and now we have old men to keep into the bargain." The old man soon had enough of it there also, and went on to his next son. So one after another all four sons took their father to live with them, and he was glad to leave them all. Each of the four sons, one after the other, cast the burden of supporting him on one of the other brothers. "It is for him to keep thee, daddy!" said they; and then the other would say, "Nay, dad, but it is as much as we can do to keep ourselves." Thus between his four sons he knew not what to do. There was quite a battle among them as to which of them should not keep their old father.

One had one good excuse and another had another, and so none of them would keep him. This one had a lot of little children, and that one had a scold for a wife, and this house was too small, and that house was too poor. "Go where thou wilt, old man," said they, "only don't come to us." And the old man, grey, grey, grey as a dove was he, wept before his sons, and knew not whither to turn. What could he do? Entreaty was in vain. Not one of the sons would take the old man in, and yet he had to be put somewhere. Then the old man strove with them no more, but let them do with him even as they would.

So all four sons met and took counsel. Time after time they laid their heads together, and at last they agreed among themselves that the best thing the old man could do was to go to school. "There will be a bench for him to sit upon there," said they; "and he can take something to eat in his knapsack." Then they told the old man about it; but the old man did not want to go to school. He begged his children not to send him there, and wept before them. "Now that I cannot see the white world," said he, "how can I see a black book? Moreover, from my youth upward I have never learnt my letters; how shall I begin to do so now? A clerk cannot be fashioned out of an old man on the point of death!" But there was no use talking, his children said he must go to school, and the voices of his children prevailed against his feeble old voice.

So to school he had to go. Now there was no church in that village, so he had to go to the village beyond it to school. A forest lay along the road, and in this forest the old man met a nobleman driving along. When the old man came near to the nobleman's carriage, he stepped out of the road to let it pass, took off his hat respectfully, and then would have gone on farther. But he heard some one calling, and, looking back, saw the nobleman beckoning to him; he wanted to ask him something.

The nobleman then got out of his carriage and asked the old man whither he was going. The old man took off his hat to the nobleman and told him all his misery, and the tears ran down the old man's cheeks. "Woe is me, gracious sir! If the Lord had left me without kith and kin, I should not complain; but strange indeed is the woe that has befallen me! I have four sons, thank God, and all four have houses of their own, and yet they send their poor old father to school to learn! Was ever the like of it known before?"

So the old man told the nobleman his whole story, and the nobleman was full of compassion for the old man. "Well, old man," said he, "'tis no use for thee to go to school, that's plain. Return home. I'll tell thee what to do so that thy children shall never send thee to school again. Fear not, old man, weep no more, and let not thy soul be troubled! God shall bless thee, and all will be well. I know well what ought to be done here." So the nobleman comforted the old man, and the old man began to be merry. Then the nobleman took out his purse, it was a real nobleman's purse, with a little sack in the middle of it to hold small change. Lord! what a lovely thing it was! The more he looked at it, the more the old man marvelled at it.

The nobleman took this purse and began filling it full with something. When he had well filled it, he gave it to the old man. "Take this and go home to thy children," said he, "and when thou hast got home, call together all thy four sons and say to them, 'My dear children, long long ago, when I was younger than I am now, and knocked about in the world a bit, I made a little money. "I won't spend it," I said to myself, "for one never knows what may happen."

So I went into a forest, my children, and dug a hole beneath an oak, and there I hid my little store of money. I did not bother much about the money afterward, because I had such good children; but when you sent me to school I came to this self-same oak, and I said to myself, "I wonder if these few silver pieces have been waiting for their master all this time! Let us dig and see." So I dug and found them, and have brought them home to you, my children. I shall keep them till I die; but after my death consult together, and whosoever shall be found

to have cherished me most and taken care of me and not grudged me a clean shirt now and then, or a crust of bread when I'm hungry, to him shall be given the greater part of my money. So now, my dear children, receive me back again, and my thanks shall be yours. You can manage it amongst you, and surely 'tis not right that I should seek a home among strangers! Which of you will be kind to your old father--for money?"

So the old man returned to his children with the purse in a casket, and when he came to the village with the casket under his arm, one could see at once that he had been in a good forest. When one comes home with a heavy casket under one's arm, depend upon it there's something in it! So, no sooner did the old man appear than his eldest daughter-in-law came running out to meet him, and bade him welcome in God's name. "Things don't seem to get on at all without thee, dad!" cried she, "and the house is quite dreary. Come in and rest, dad," she went on; "thou hast gone a long way and must be weary."

Then all the brothers came together, and the old man told them what God had done for him. All their faces brightened as they looked at the casket, and they thought to themselves, "If we keep him we shall have the money." Then the four brothers could not make too much of their dear old father. They took care of him and the old man was happy, but he took heed to the counsel of the nobleman, and never let the casket out of his hand. "After my death you shall have everything, but I won't give it you now, for who knows what may happen? I have seen already how you treated your old father when he had nothing. It shall all be yours, I say, only wait; and when I die, take it and divide it as I have said." So the brothers tended their father, and the old man lived in clover, and was somebody. He had his own way and did nothing.

So the old man was no longer ill-treated by his children, but lived among them like an emperor in his own empire, but no sooner did he die than his children made what haste they could to lay hands upon the casket. All the people were called together and bore witness that they had treated their father well since he came back to them, so it was adjudged that they should divide the treasure amongst them. But first they took the old man's body to church and the casket along with it. They buried him as God commands.

They made a rich banquet of funeral meats that all might know how much they mourned the old man; it was a splendid funeral. When the priest got up from the table, the people all began to thank their hosts, and the eldest son begged the priest to say the sorokoust (a 40 day prayer) in the church for the repose of the dead man's soul. "Such a dear old fellow as he was!" said he; "was there ever any one like him? Take this money for

the sorokoust, reverend father!” so horribly grieved was that eldest son. So the eldest son gave the priest money, and the second son gave him the like. Nay, each one gave him money for an extra half sorokoust, all four gave him requiem money. “We’ll have prayers in church for our father though we sell our last sheep to pay for them,” cried they.

Then, when all was over, they hastened as fast as they could to the money. The coffer was brought forth. They shook it. There was a fine rattling inside it. Every one of them felt and handled the coffer. That was something like a treasure! Then they unsealed it and opened it and scattered the contents—–and it was full of nothing but glass! They wouldn’t believe their eyes. They rummaged among the glass, but there was no money. It was horrible!

Surely it could not be that their father had dug up a coffer from beneath an oak of the forest and it was full of nothing but glass! “Why!” cried the brothers, “our father has left us nothing but glass!”

But for the crowds of people there, the brothers would have fallen upon and beaten each other in their wrath. So the children of the old man saw that their father had made fools of them. Then all the people mocked them: “You see what you have gained by sending your father to school! You see he learned something at school after all! He was a long time before he began learning, but better late than never. It appears to us ’twas a right good school you sent him to. No doubt they whipped him into learning so much. Never mind, you can keep the money and the casket!” Then the brothers were full of lamentation and rage. But what could they do? Their father was already dead and buried.

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