



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Rich Brother And The Poor Brother

Andrew Lang

There was once a rich old man who had two sons, and as his wife was dead, the elder lived with him, and helped him to look after his property. For a long time all went well; the young man got up very early in the morning, and worked hard all day, and at the end of every week his father counted up the money they had made, and rubbed his hands with delight, as he saw how big the pile of gold in the strong iron chest was becoming. 'It will soon be full now, and I shall have to buy a larger one,' he said to himself, and so busy was he with the thought of his money, that he did not notice how bright his son's face had grown, nor how he sometimes started when he was spoken to, as if his mind was far away.

One day, however, the old man went to the city on business, which he had not done for three years at least. It was market day, and he met with many people he knew, and it was getting quite late when he turned into the inn yard, and bade an ostler saddle his horse, and bring it round directly. While he was waiting in the hall, the landlady came up for a gossip, and after a few remarks about the weather and the vineyards she asked him how he liked his new daughter-in-law, and whether he had been surprised at the marriage.

The old man stared as he listened to her. 'Daughter-in-law? Marriage?' said he. 'I don't know what you are talking about! I've got no daughter-in-law, and nobody has been married lately, that ever I heard of.'

Now this was exactly what the landlady, who was very curious, wanted to find out; but she put on a look of great alarm, and exclaimed:

'Oh, dear! I hope I have not made mischief. I had no idea—or, of course, I would not have spoken—but'—and here she stopped and fumbled with her apron, as if she was greatly embarrassed.

'As you have said so much you will have to say a little more,' retorted the old man, a suspicion of what she meant darting across him; and the woman, nothing loth, answered as before.

'Ah, it was not all for buying or selling that your handsome son has been coming to town every week these many months past. And not by the shortest way, either! No, it was over the river he rode, and across the hill and past the cottage of Miguel the vine-keeper, whose daughter, they say, is the prettiest girl in the whole country side, though she is too white for my taste,' and then the landlady

paused again, and glanced up at the farmer, to see how he was taking it. She did not learn much. He was looking straight before him, his teeth set. But as she ceased to talk, he said quietly, 'Go on.'

'There is not much more to tell,' replied the landlady, for she suddenly remembered that she must prepare supper for the hungry men who always stopped at the inn on market days, before starting for home, 'but one fine morning they both went to the little church on top of the hill, and were married. My cousin is servant to the priest, and she found out about it and told me. But good-day to you, sir; here is your horse, and I must hurry off to the kitchen.'

It was lucky that the horse was sure-footed and knew the road, for his bridle hung loose on his neck, and his master took no heed of the way he was going. When the farm-house was reached, the man led the animal to his stable, and then went to look for his son.

'I know everything—you have deceived me. Get out of my sight at once—I have done with you,' he stammered, choking with passion as he came up to the young man, who was cutting a stick in front of the door, whistling gaily the while.

'But, father——'

'You are no son of mine; I have only one now. Begone, or it will be the worse for you,' and as he spoke he lifted up his whip.

The young man shrank back. He feared lest his father should fall down in a fit, his face was so red and his eyes seemed bursting from his head. But it was no use staying: perhaps next morning the old man might listen to reason, though in his heart the son felt that he would never take back his words. So he turned slowly away, and walked heavily along a path which ended in a cave on the side of the hill, and there he sat through the night, thinking of what had happened.

Yes, he had been wrong, there was no doubt of that, and he did not quite know how it had come about. He had meant to have told his father all about it, and he was sure, quite sure, that if once the old man had seen his wife, he would have forgiven her poverty on account of her great beauty and goodness. But he had put it off from day to day, hoping always for a better opportunity, and now this was the end!

If the son had no sleep that night, no more had the father, and as soon as the sun rose, he sent a messenger into the great city with orders to bring back the younger brother. When he arrived the farmer did not waste words, but informed him that he was now his only heir, and would inherit all his lands and money, and that he was to come and live at home, and to help manage the property.

Though very pleased at the thought of becoming such a rich man—for the brothers had never cared much for each other—the younger would rather have

stayed where he was, for he soon got tired of the country, and longed for a town life. However, this he kept to himself, and made the best of things, working hard like his brother before him.

In this way the years went on, but the crops were not so good as they had been, and the old man gave orders that some fine houses he was building in the city should be left unfinished, for it would take all his savings to complete them. As to the elder son, he would never even hear his name mentioned, and died at last without ever seeing his face, leaving to the younger as he had promised, all his lands, as well as his money.

Meanwhile, the son whom he had disinherited had grown poorer and poorer. He and his wife were always looking out for something to do, and never spent a penny that they could help, but luck was against them, and at the time of his father's death they had hardly bread to eat or clothes to cover them. If there had been only himself, he would have managed to get on somehow, but he could not bear to watch his children becoming weaker day by day, and swallowing his pride, at length he crossed the mountains to his old home where his brother was living.

It was the first time for long that the two men had come face to face, and they looked at each other in silence. Then tears rose in the eyes of the elder, but winking them hastily away, he said:

'Brother, it is not needful that I should tell you how poor I am; you can see that for yourself. I have not come to beg for money, but only to ask if you will give me those unfinished houses of yours in the city, and I will make them water-tight, so that my wife and children can live in them, and that will save our rent. For as they are, they profit you nothing.'

And the younger brother listened and pitied him, and gave him the houses that he asked for, and the elder went away happy.

For some years things went on as they were, and then the rich brother began to feel lonely, and thought to himself that he was getting older, and it was time for him to be married. The wife he chose was very wealthy, but she was also very greedy, and however much she had, she always wanted more. She was, besides, one of those unfortunate people who invariably fancy that the possessions of other people must be better than their own. Many a time her poor husband regretted the day that he had first seen her, and often her meanness and shabby ways put him to shame. But he had not the courage to rule her, and she only got worse and worse.



After she had been married a few months the bride wanted to go into the city and buy herself some new dresses. She had never been there before, and when she had finished her shopping, she thought she would pay a visit to her unknown sister-in-law, and rest for a bit. The house she was seeking was in a broad street, and ought to have been very magnificent, but the carved stone portico enclosed a mean little door of rough wood, while a row of beautiful pillars led to nothing. The dwellings on each side were in the same unfinished condition, and water trickled down the walls. Most people would have considered it a wretched place, and turned their backs on it as soon as they could, but this lady saw that by spending some money the houses could be made as splendid as they were originally intended to be, and she instantly resolved to get them for herself.

Full of this idea she walked up the marble staircase, and entered the little room where her sister-in-law sat making clothes for her children. The bride seemed full of interest in the houses, and asked a great many questions about them, so that her new relations liked her much better than they expected, and hoped they might be good friends. However, as soon as she reached home, she went straight to her husband, and told him that he must get back those houses from his brother, as they would exactly suit her, and she could easily make them into a palace as fine as the king's. But her husband only told her that she might buy houses in some other part of the town, for she could not have those, as he had long since made a gift of them to his brother, who had lived there for many years past.

At this answer the wife grew very angry. She began to cry, and made such a noise that all the neighbours heard her and put their heads out of the windows, to see what was the matter. 'It was absurd,' she sobbed out, 'quite unjust. Indeed, if you came to think of it, the gift was worth nothing, as when her

husband made it he was a bachelor, and since then he had been married, and she had never given her consent to any such thing.' And so she lamented all day and all night, till the poor man was nearly worried to death; and at last he did what she wished, and summoned his brother in a court of law to give up the houses which, he said, had only been lent to him. But when the evidence on both sides had been heard, the judge decided in favour of the poor man, which made the rich lady more furious than ever, and she determined not to rest until she had gained the day. If one judge would not give her the houses another should, and so time after time the case was tried over again, till at last it came before the highest judge of all, in the city of Evora. Her husband was heartily tired and ashamed of the whole affair, but his weakness in not putting a stop to it in the beginning had got him into this difficulty, and now he was forced to go on.

On the same day the two brothers set out on their journey to the city, the rich one on horseback, with plenty of food in his knapsack, the poor one on foot with nothing but a piece of bread and four onions to eat on the way. The road was hilly and neither could go very fast, and when night fell, they were both glad to see some lights in a window a little distance in front of them.

The lights turned out to have been placed there by a farmer, who had planned to have a particularly good supper as it was his wife's birthday, and bade the rich man enter and sit down, while he himself took the horse to the stable. The poor man asked timidly if he might spend the night in a corner, adding that he had brought his own supper with him. Another time permission might have been refused him, for the farmer was no lover of humble folk, but now he gave the elder brother leave to come in, pointing out a wooden chair where he could sit.

Supper was soon served, and very glad the younger brother was to eat it, for his long ride had made him very hungry. The farmer's wife, however, would touch nothing, and at last declared that the only supper she wanted was one of the onions the poor man was cooking at the fire. Of course he gave it to her, though he would gladly have eaten it himself, as three onions are not much at the end of a long day's walk, and soon after they all went to sleep, the poor man making himself as comfortable as he could in his corner.

A few hours later the farmer was aroused by the cries and groans of his wife.

'Oh, I feel so ill, I'm sure I'm going to die,' wept she. 'It was that onion, I know it was. I wish I had never eaten it. It must have been poisoned.'

'If the man has poisoned you he shall pay for it,' said her husband, and seizing a thick stick he ran downstairs and began to beat the poor man, who had been sound asleep, and had nothing to defend himself with. Luckily, the noise aroused the younger brother, who jumped up and snatched the stick from the farmer's hand, saying:

'We are both going to Evora to try a law-suit. Come too, and accuse him there if he has attempted to rob you or murder you, but don't kill him now, or you will get yourself into trouble.'

'Well, perhaps you are right,' answered the farmer, 'but the sooner that fellow has his deserts, the better I shall be pleased,' and without more words he went to the stables and brought out a horse for himself and also the black Andalusian mare ridden by the rich man, while the poor brother, fearing more ill-treatment, started at once on foot.

Now all that night it had rained heavily, and did not seem likely to stop, and in some places the road was so thick with mud that it was almost impossible to get across it. In one spot it was so very bad that a mule laden with baggage had got stuck in it, and tug as he might, his master was quite unable to pull him out. The muleteer in despair appealed to the two horsemen, who were carefully skirting the swamp at some distance off, but they paid no heed to his cries, and he began to talk cheerfully to his mule, hoping to keep up his spirits, declaring that if the poor beast would only have a little patience help was sure to come.

And so it did, for very soon the poor brother reached the place, bespattered with mud from head to foot, but ready to do all he could to help the mule and his master. First they set about finding some stout logs of wood to lay down on the marsh so that they could reach the mule, for by this time his frantic struggles had broken his bridle, and he was deeper in than ever. Stepping cautiously along the wood, the poor man contrived to lay hold of the animal's tail, and with a desperate effort the mule managed to regain his footing on dry ground, but at the cost of leaving his tail in the poor man's hand. When he saw this the muleteer's anger knew no bounds, and forgetting that without the help given him he would have lost his mule altogether, he began to abuse the poor man, declaring that he had ruined his beast, and the law would make him pay for it. Then, jumping on the back of the mule, which was so glad to be out of the choking mud that he did not seem to mind the loss of his tail, the ungrateful wretch rode on, and that evening reached the inn at Evora, where the rich man and the farmer had already arrived for the night.

Meanwhile the poor brother walked wearily along, wondering what other dreadful adventures were in store for him.

'I shall certainly be condemned for one or other of them,' thought he sadly; 'and after all, if I have to die, I would rather choose my own death than leave it to my enemies,' and as soon as he entered Evora he looked about for a place suitable for carrying out the plan he had made. At length he found what he sought, but as it was too late and too dark for him to make sure of success, he curled himself up under a doorway, and slept till morning.

Although it was winter, the sun rose in a clear sky, and its rays felt almost warm when the poor man got up and shook himself. He intended it to be the day of his death, but in spite of that, and of the fact that he was leaving his wife and children behind him, he felt almost cheerful. He had struggled so long, and was so very, very tired; but he would not have minded that if he could have proved his innocence, and triumphed over his enemies. However, they had all been too clever for him, and he had no strength to fight any more. So he mounted the stone steps that led to the battlements of the city, and stopped for a moment to gaze about him.

It happened that an old sick man who lived near by had begged to be carried out and to be laid at the foot of the wall so that the beams of the rising sun might fall upon him, and he would be able to talk with his friends as they passed by to their work. Little did he guess that on top of the battlements, exactly over his head, stood a man who was taking his last look at the same sun, before going to his death that awaited him. But so it was; and as the steeple opposite was touched by the golden light, the poor man shut his eyes and sprang forward. The wall was high, and he flew rapidly through the air, but it was not the ground he touched, only the body of the sick man, who rolled over and died without a groan. As for the other, he was quite unhurt, and was slowly rising to his feet when his arms were suddenly seized and held.

'You have killed our father, do you see? do you see?' cried two young men, 'and you will come with us this instant before the judge, and answer for it.'

'Your father? but I don't know him. What do you mean?' asked the poor man, who was quite bewildered with his sudden rush through the air, and could not think why he should be accused of this fresh crime. But he got no reply, and was only hurried through the streets to the court-house, where his brother, the muleteer, and the farmer had just arrived, all as angry as ever, all talking at once, till the judge entered and ordered them to be silent.

'I will hear you one by one,' he said, and motioned the younger brother to begin.

He did not take long to state his case. The unfinished houses were his, left him with the rest of the property by his father, and his brother refused to give them up. In answer, the poor man told, in a few words, how he had begged the houses from his brother, and produced the deed of gift which made him their owner.

The judge listened quietly and asked a few questions; then he gave his verdict.

'The houses shall remain the property of the man to whom they were given, and to whom they belong. And as you,' he added, turning to the younger brother, 'brought this accusation knowing full well it was wicked and unjust, I order you, besides losing the houses, to pay a thousand pounds damages to your brother.'

The rich man heard the judge with rage in his heart, the poor man with surprise and gratitude. But he was not safe yet, for now it was the turn of the farmer. The judge could hardly conceal a smile at the story, and inquired if the wife was dead before the farmer left the house, and received for answer that he was in such a hurry for justice to be done that he had not waited to see. Then the poor man told his tale, and once more judgment was given in his favour, while twelve hundred pounds was ordered to be paid him. As for the muleteer, he was informed very plainly that he had proved himself mean and ungrateful for the help that had been given him, and as a punishment he must pay to the poor man a fine of fifty pounds, and hand him over the mule till his tail had grown again.

Lastly, there came the two sons of the sick man.

'This is the wretch who killed our father,' they said, 'and we demand that he should die also.'

'How did you kill him?' asked the judge, turning to the accused, and the poor man told how he had leaped from the wall, not knowing that anyone was beneath.

'Well, this is my judgment,' replied the judge, when they had all spoken: 'Let the accused sit under the wall, and let the sons of the dead man jump from the top and fall on him and kill him, and if they will not do this, then they are condemned to pay eight hundred pounds for their false accusation.'

The young men looked at each other, and slowly shook their heads.

'We will pay the fine,' said they, and the judge nodded.

So the poor man rode the mule home, and brought back to his family enough money to keep them in comfort to the end of their days.

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