

**Modern History Sourcebook:
A Magyar Folk-Tale:
The Poor Man and the King of the Crows**

From: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/magyar-crows.html>

THERE was once a very poor man; and he had two lean cows. The two cows were to the poor man as their mother's breast to children; for not only did they give milk and butter, for which he got a few coppers to buy salt, but he tilled his patch of land with them.

Now, he was ploughing one day at the edge of the woods with the two cows, when, from wherever it came, a six-horse coach stood before him, and in it sat no other than the King of the Crows, who found this to say to the poor man,--"Listen, poor man; I will tell you one thing, and two will come of it. Sell me those lean cows; I'll give you good money for them. I'll pay double price. My army hasn't tasted a morsel for three days, and the soldiers will die of hunger and thirst unless you will save them." "In that case," said the poor man to the King of the Crows, "if it be that Your Highness's army hasn't eaten anything for three days, I don't mind the difficulty. I'll let you have the cows, not for money; let Your Highness return a cow for a cow." "Very good, poor man, let it be as you say. I will give you a cow for a cow; more than that, for two you will get four cows. For that purpose find me in my kingdom, for I am the King of the Crows. You have but to look in the north for the black castle; you'll be sure to find it."

With that the King of the Crows vanished as if he had never been there,--as if the earth had swallowed him. The poor man kept on ploughing with the two lean cows, till, all at once, the army of the King of the Crows appeared like a black cloud approaching through the air with mighty cawing, and seizing the two cows tore them bit from bit. When they had finished, the dark legions with tumultuous cawing moved on their way like a cloud. The poor man watched the direction in which they flew, so that he might know the way.

Now he strolled home in great sadness, took leave of his two handsome sons and his dear wife, in the midst of bitter tears, and set out into the world to find the black castle. He traveled and journeyed over forty-nine kingdoms, beyond the Operentsia Sea and the glass mountains, and beyond that, where the little short-tailed pig roots, and beyond that, and still farther on, till he came to an ocean-great sand-plain.

Nowhere for gold was a town, a village, or a cabin to be seen where he might recline his head for a night's rest, or beg a morsel of bread or a cup of water. Food had long since left his bag, and he might have struck fire in the gourd, which hung at his side. What was he to do? Where could he save his life? Here he must perish of hunger and thirst in the midst of this ocean-great desert, and then at home let them wait for him till the Day of Judgment. Here the poor man's power of walking decreased, and he floundered about like a dazed fish, like a man struck on the head. While stumbling along, he sees on a sudden a shepherd's fire. He moves towards the light, creeping on all fours. At last he arrives there with great difficulty, and sees that three or four men are lying around the fire, boiling

pasta in a pot. He salutes them with, "God give you a good evening." "God receive you, poor man; how is it that you are journeying in this strange land where even a bird does not go?"

"I am looking for the black castle in the north. Have you heard nothing of it in your world-beautiful lives?" "How not? Of course we have. Are we not the shepherds of that king who rigorously and mercilessly enjoined that, if such and such a man, who sold him two lean cows for his army, should find us, to treat him well with meat and drink, and then to show him the right road? Maybe you are the man!" "I am, indeed." "Is it possible?" "I am no one else." "In that case, sit here on the sheepskin; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself, for the Pasta will be ready this minute." As they said, he did. The poor man sat by the fire, ate, drank, and satisfied himself, then lay down and fell asleep. When he rose in the morning, they gave him a round cheese, and drove the air out of his bottle; then they let him go his way, showing him the right road.

The poor man traveled and journeyed along the right road; and now, when he was hungry and dry, he had his bag, and his bottle too. Towards evening, he sees again a shepherd's fire. He draws near the great fire, and sees the horseherds of the King of the Crows sitting around it cooking a meat stew. He wishes them, "God give you a good-day, my lords, the horseherds." "God guard you, poor man," said the chief herdsman; "where are you going here in this strange land?"

"I am looking for the black castle of the lying of the Cronos. Have you never heard of it, brother, in your world-beautiful life?" "How not heard of it? Of course I have. Are we not the servants of him who commanded rigorously and unflinchingly that if such and such a poor man, who sold him two lean cows for his army, should wander along, to receive him kindly? Therefore, this is my word and speech to you. Are you, perchance, that man?" "Of course I am." "Is it possible?" "I am no one else."

"In that case, sit down here by the fire, drink, and be filled." The poor man sat down by the fire, ate, drank, and satisfied himself; then lying on the sheepskin, he fell asleep. When he rose in the morning the horseherds entertained the poor man again, wished him happiness, and showing the right road, let him go his way; but they left neither his bag nor his bottle empty.

Then he went along the right road. But why multiply words?--for there is an end even to a hundred words; it is enough to know that towards evening he came to the ground of the swineherds of the King of the Crows. He saluted them with, "God give you a good evening." "God guard you," said the reckoning swineherd "How is it you are journeying in this strange land, where even a bird does not go?" "I am looking for the black castle of the King of the Crows. Has my lord elder brother never heard of it in his world-beautiful life?"

"Haho, poor man! How not heard of it? Are we not the servants of the lord of that castle? But are you not the poor man who sold His Highness the two lean cows?" "Well, what's the use in delay or denial? I am, indeed, he." "Are you in truth?" "I am no one else." "But

how will you enter the black castle, since it is covered all around with a stone wall, and whirls unceasingly on a golden cock's foot? But make no account of that. Here is a shining axe. Just strike the wall with it so sparks will fly, and you will come upon the door, which will spring open. Then jump in. Have a care, though; for if you slip and fall, no man can save you. When you are once inside, the King of the Crows will come forward and receive you kindly. He won't put his soul on the palm of his hand at once; but when His Highness inquires what your wish is, ask for nothing else but the salt-mill which stands in the corner."

Well, the talk ended there. In the morning the poor man moved on towards the black castle. When he arrived there, he saw that it whirled of itself on a golden cock's foot, like some infernal spindle; and nowhere could he see either window or door upon it,--nothing but the naked wall. He took the swineherd's axe and struck the wall, and sparks flew from the axe in such style that it could not be better. After a time he came upon the door; it flew open, and he jumped in. If he had delayed but one flash of an eye, the stone wall door would have crushed him; as it was, the edge of his trousers was carried off.

As soon as the poor man got in, he saw that the castle turned only on the outside. At this moment the King of the Crows was standing by the window, and saw the poor man coming for the price of the cows. He went to meet him, shook his hand, treated him as tenderly as an egg; then he led him into the most beautiful chamber, and seated him at his side on a golden couch. The poor man saw not a soul anywhere, although it was midday, the time of eating. All at once the table began to spread, and was soon bending under its load, so much food was on it. The poor man shook his head; for, I say, though no one was to be seen anywhere, neither cook nor kitchen-boy nor servant, still, wasn't the table spread? It was surely witchcraft, surely some infernal art, but not the work of a good spirit,--maybe the salt-mill had something to do with it. That, however, did not come into the poor man's mind, though the mill stood there in the corner.

He was there three days, the guest of the King of the Crows, who received him with every kindness he could offer, so that no man's son could raise a complaint against His Highness. Morning, noon, and night the poor man's food appeared in proper form, but the roast and the wine had no taste for him; for it came to his mind that while he was feasting there, most likely his wife and children had not bread enough. I say it came into his mind; he began to be restless and uneasy. The King of the Crows noticed this, and said to him: "Well, poor man, I see that you do not wish to stay longer with me, because your heart is at home, therefore I ask what do you wish for the two lean cows?--believe me, brother, you did save me from great trouble that time; if you had not taken pity on me, I should have lost my whole army from famine."

"I want nothing else," said the poor man, "but that salt-mill standing there in the corner."
"Oh, poor man, have you lost your wits? Tell me, what good could you get of the mill?"
"Oh, I could grind corn or a little wheat from time to time; if I did not, some one else might; so there would be something to take to the kitchen." "Ask for something else; ask for all the cattle which in coming hither you did see." "What should I do with such a tremendous lot of cattle? If I should drive them home, people would think evil of me;

besides, I have neither stable nor pasture."

"But I'll give you money. How much do you wish? Would you be content with three bags of it?" "What could I do with such an ocean-great lot of money? My evil fate would use it to kill me; people would think that I stole the coin, or murdered some man for it; besides, I might be stopped with it on the road." "But I'll give you a soldier as a guard." "What good is one of Your Highness's soldiers?" asked the poor man, smiling; "a hen, I think, would drive him away." "What! One of my soldiers?" Here the King of the Crows blew a small whistle; straightway a crow appeared which shook itself, and became such a gallant young fellow that he was not only so, but just so. "That's the kind of soldiers I have," said the king, and commanded the young man out of the room. The soldier shook himself, became a crow, and flew away.

"It's all the same to me what kind of soldiers Your Highness has. Your Highness promised to give me what I want, and I ask for nothing else but the salt-mill." "I will not give it. Ask for all my herds, but not for that." "I need not herds; all I want is the mill." "Well, poor man, I have refused you three times, and three times you have asked for the mill; now, whether I will or not, I must give it. But know that you are not to grind corn or wheat with the mill, for it has this virtue,--that it accomplishes all wishes. Here it is, take it, though my heart bleeds after it. You did me a good deed, therefore let it be yours."

The poor man put the mill on his back, took farewell of the King of the Crows, thanking him for his hospitality, and trudged home at his leisure. On the way back he entertained the horseherds and the swineherds. All he did was to say, "Grind, my dear mill," and what food was dear to the eye, the mouth, and the taste appeared of itself; and if he said, "Draw up, my dear mill," all the food was as if the ground had swallowed it---it vanished. Then he took leave of the good herdsmen and continued his way.

As he traveled and journeyed, he came to a great wild wood; and having grown hungry, he said, "Grind, my dear mill." Straight way the table was spread, not for one, but for two persons. The mill knew at once that the poor man would have a guest; for that moment, wherever he came from, a great fat man appeared, who, without saying a word, took his seat at the table. When they had enjoyed God's blessing, the great fat man spoke and said:--"Listen, poor man. Give me that mill for this knotty club; for if your mill has the power of accomplishing all your desires [the fat man knew this already], my knotty club has this power, that you need but to say, 'Strike, my club,' and the man you have in mind is the son of Death."

What was the poor man to do? Thinking if he did not give it of his free will, the fat man would take it by force, he exchanged the mill for the knotty club; but when he had it once in his hand, he said in a low voice, for he was commanding the knotty club, "Strike, my dear club." And it so struck the fat man behind the ears that he gave forth not a sound; he didn't move his little finger. Then the poor man continued his journey homeward at his ease; and when seven years had passed, he was able to say, "Here we are!" His wife, who was weeping by the hearth, mourning over her dear lost lord and the two lean cows, scarcely knew the poor man, but still she knew him. His two sons had become large, and

had grown out of their long clothes. When the poor man put his foot into his own house, he set the mill down in the chimney-corner, loosed his mantle from his neck, hung it up on a nail, and only then did they know him.

"Well, father," said his wife, "you have come; God knows 'tis time. I never expected to see you again; but what did you get for Bimbo and Csako?" "This mill," answered he with many "See heres" and "See theres." "If that's the case, the palsy strike your work," cried the woman; "better for you to have stayed at home these seven years, and swung your feet around here, than to have dragged that good-for-nothing mill from such a distant land, just as if you had eaten the crazy-weed!" "Oh, my sweet wife, something is better than nothing; if we have no grain to grind for ourselves, we can grind for other people, if not in streams, at least in drops." "May a cancer eat your mill! I haven't a thing to put between my teeth, and still----"

"Well, my sweet wife, if you have nothing to put between your teeth, you'll soon have. Grind, my dear mill." At these words, so much meat and drink appeared on the poor man's table that half of it would have been enough. It was only then that the woman regretted her tongue-rattling. But a woman is a woman; beat her with a stone, only let her talk.

The poor man, his wife, and two sons sat down at the table, looking at the food like an army of locusts. They ate and drank to their hearts' content. Whether from wine or some other cause, a desire to dance came to the two sons; and they jumped up and danced, so it was pure delight to look at them. "Oh," said the elder one, "if we only had a gypsy!" That moment a band of gypsies by the chimney struck up their music, and played away with such variations that the poor man, too, wished to dance, and so whirled his wife around that better could not be asked for. The neighbors knew not what to think of the affair. How was it that music was sounding in the poor man's house?

"What is this?" said one to another, coming nearer and nearer, till they came up to the door and the windows. Only then did they see that a band of gypsies were fiddling away with might and main, and the old man, his wife, and their two sons were dancing, while the table was bending under loads of rich meat and drink. "Come in, cousin! Come in, friend! Come in, brother-in-law, bring your wife! Come in, brother!"--and there was no end to the invitations of the poor man. Guests collected unceasingly, and still the table was spread. "Pon my soul," said the poor man, "it's a pity my house isn't larger; for all these guests could scarcely find room in a palace." At these words, instead of the poor man's cabin, such a magnificent palace appeared, with chambers twelve in a row, that the king himself hadn't the like of it.

A multitude of grand people with the king in the midst of them were out walking just at that time. "What's this? What's this?" asked they of one another. "There has always been a poor man's cabin here, now there's a king's palace, and besides, music is sounding, and gypsies are fiddling. Let's go and have a look."

The king went in front, and after him all the grand people,--counts, dukes, barons, and so

on. The poor man came out and received the king with the great personages very kindly, and conducted them all to the head of the table as their fitting place. They ate, drank, and caroused, so that it was like a small wedding. While they were thus enjoying themselves at the feast, a great sealed letter came to the king. When he read it, he turned yellow and blue, because it was written therein that the Turk-Tartar was nearing his kingdom with a great army, destroying everything with fire and sword, and sparing not the property of innocent, weeping people, whom he puts to the point of the sword; that the earth is drinking their blood, their flesh is devoured by dogs. From great joy there was great sorrow. Then the poor man stood forth and asked the king: "If 'tis no offense, may I ask a question?" "What may it be, poor man?" "Would Your Highness tell me the contents of that great letter received just now?" "Why ask, poor man? You could not mend the affair." "But if I can?"

"Well, know then, and let the whole kingdom know, that the Turk-Tartar is moving on our country with a great army, with cruel intent; that he spares not the property of innocent, weeping people, puts them to the sword, so that the earth drinks their blood, and their flesh is devoured by dogs." "And what will be the reward of him who drives the enemy out of the country?" asked the poor man. "In truth," said the king, "great reward and honor await him; for if he should have two sons, I would give them my two daughters in marriage, with half the kingdoms. After my death they would inherit the whole kingdom." "Well, I'll drive out the enemy all alone."

But the king did not place much confidence in the poor man's promise; he hurried together all his soldiers, and marched with them against the enemy. The two armies were looking at each other with wolves' eyes, when the poor man went between the camps and commanded the club! "Strike, my dear club." And the club pommelled the Turk-Tartar army so that only one man was left to carry home the tidings.

The poor man gained half the kingdom and the two beautiful princesses, whom he married to his two stalwart sons. They celebrated a wedding which spoke to the seven worlds; and they are living now if they are not dead.

Source:

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