

49. The Hermit and the Drunkard

Two brothers were born in a country town. One of them became a hermit and went to live on a mountaintop where the angel of mercy dropped down at mealtimes to give him his daily bread. The other brother became a hopeless drunkard, and from that time on he had a special place in the underworld, where he slept on a bed made of iron, though he didn't realize it, having convinced himself he was still living in his own house. Every day he went out with enough money in his pockets to buy a bottle and cover his other expenses.

Along the route that he always took, day after day, there was a picture of the Virgin of Lourdes hanging from an urn in front of the house of a devout family. As he passed by, he never failed to tip his hat, saying, "Dear Virgin, don't forget me."

Sometimes he was so drunk he missed her completely. But if he did, he would ask a passerby for directions and retrace his steps in order to greet her, always with the same words, "Dear Virgin, don't forget me."

One day as he passed through a particular neighborhood, he heard the sound of weeping. He stopped to see what was the matter. A man had died, and there was a wake in progress. Entering the house he asked to speak to the widow. When she came forward, he reached into his pocket and gave her a handful of money. "Take this," he said, "and feed your children. Don't be afraid. I'm going to help you."

Then he saw that the widow was pregnant and in the last stages at that, and he added, "When your child is born, he'll be my son. I'll take care of him."

From then on, every time he passed that way, he left money for the widow. When she gave birth to a little boy, he paid all the expenses. As the child grew and began to speak, he was taught by his mother to say "Papa" whenever they saw the drunkard, until finally the mother said, "Here, he's yours." The drunkard picked up the boy and carried him off in his poncho.

As soon as they got to the drunkard's home in the underworld, the man passed out on his iron bed, while the boy ran round and round the

bed, saying, "This is some place to sleep!" Then he touched it and burned his finger. Astounded, he looked under the bed and saw a fire burning.

He shook his adopted father to wake him up. "Papa, your bed is on fire!"

Suddenly the man saw what he had never seen before. In a panic he scooped up the boy and ran with him back to his mother's house. "You must take care of your son yourself," he said, "for I may never return."

In desperation he ran on until he came to a river. He threw himself into the water, picked up a heavy stone, and began pounding it against his chest. He begged the Virgin of Lourdes to forgive his sin. In answer, two angels descended and carried him into the sky.

About the same time, his brother the hermit started wasting away with hunger. The angel of mercy had stopped the daily deliveries. After a week God himself took stock of the situation and gave the angel an order. "Here, take some bread to the hermit. Tell him his brother was saved, and we were so busy celebrating we forgot all about him."

Hearing this from the angel, the jealous brother cried out, "Don't you know my brother's a mugger and a thief? If he can be saved, I should be saved twice over."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the hermit was handed to the demons in the underworld, where from then on he slept in the same iron bed that had formerly been reserved for his brother the thief.

Ecuador / Isabel Rivadeneira

50. The Noblewoman's Daughter and the Charcoal Woman's Son

In a faraway country—I can't remember which one—there was a rushing river with a castle beside it and beautiful gardens in every direction.

In the castle lived a noblewoman named María, who was expecting a child any day. This child, she thought, would be all her happiness, and she was predicting great things for its future. One afternoon, while walking in the gardens, she passed a woman of the village who had just delivered some charcoal. The charcoal woman was also expecting a child. When she saw the noblewoman, she stopped and said, "Milady, how good it would be if you had a daughter and I had a son! They would marry each other!"

The haughty noblewoman said nothing and turned her back. But she could not get the charcoal woman's words out of her head. A few days later she in fact gave birth to a daughter. Then she summoned a trusted servant and said, "Go immediately to the charcoal woman. If she has had a daughter, let her be. But if it's a son, you must put the child to death. As proof, bring me the tongue and the little finger."

The servant made his way to the charcoal woman's hut. And what should be there but a pretty little boy all ruddy and blue-eyed, just like an angel. In a moment the poor mother realized why the servant had come. She clung to the child with all her force, but the man snatched him and ran off.

The trusty servant raised his knife, but in that instant he was struck with shame. He could not kill the child. Yet he knew that her ladyship would put him to death if he failed her, so he cut off the baby's little finger. Then he killed a puppy that was passing by, and cut out its tongue. Gently he laid the child in a basket, padded it with straw, and placed it on the river so that the current would carry it off somewhere. When he returned, his mistress asked, "Did you do what I told you?"

"Milady, here's proof."

The noblewoman was well satisfied and had a sign put up at the castle gate: WHAT GOD MADE, I DESTROYED.

Now, the king and the queen of this country were wise rulers who lived well. Yet their happiness was not complete, for they had been unable to have a child. One day, as it happened, the king went walking by the river and found the basket with the charcoal woman's little boy. He brought the child to the queen and said, "Look what I found in the river. This will be our son."

The queen was overjoyed and ordered a little gold finger to be made for the child.

In time the boy grew into a manly young prince. When he reached the age of twenty, the king and queen took him aside for a talk. They told him how he had been found in the river and how they had come to love him as their own flesh and blood and had made him their heir.

The prince adored the king and the queen. But now he began wishing he could find his real parents. He wanted to help them, and the thought that they might be poor, suffering somewhere, made him sad.

"What's troubling you?" asked the king.

"Sire, you know how much I love you. But I must search the kingdom for my parents. I'm sure I can find them. When I do, I'll bring them home with me, and there'll be happiness all around."

The king consulted with the queen. They ended up giving permission for the search and sent the prince off with an escort of twenty knights and twenty squires.

The prince was received with open arms in all the towns he rode through. Yet he himself was sad. His parents were nowhere to be found. At last he reached the town where the noblewoman lived and took lodgings at an inn across the street from her castle. The first thing he noticed was the sign on the castle gate: WHAT GOD MADE, I DESTROYED. He asked at the inn what the sign might mean, but no one could tell him.

That afternoon, as he stood at his window staring at the inscription, a radiant young beauty appeared on one of the castle balconies. The prince was dazzled. "Who is she?" he asked. "Milady's daughter," he was told.

His heart leaped. Her ladyship had invited him to the castle that evening for a reception in his honor. Naturally he would be introduced to her daughter.

The hour arrived, and when the daughter met the prince she fell in love with him just as he had fallen in love with her, for as I have said, he was handsome and manly.

And with everything else this prince was naturally good. He mingled not only with the guests but with the servants. When he talked with the old retainer who had set him afloat on the river, he happened to ask, "Tell me, what is the meaning of that sign at the castle gate?" Having noticed the prince's gold finger, the servant knew without asking that he was speaking to the son of the charcoal woman.

"I'll explain," he said, "if you promise to keep this quiet." When the story had been told, the two made plans to meet the following morning. "Wait for me at the edge of the woods," said the prince, "then take me to the charcoal woman's hut. But don't tell a soul, do you hear?"

"I hear," said the old retainer.

The next morning, when the charcoal woman saw the two men approaching, she went up to them warily and asked, "What do you want?" The prince said, "Madam, remember the little son, who was taken from you at birth? I am that son." The poor woman couldn't speak. She threw her arms around the prince. "But don't tell a soul," he said. "Wait here until I send for you."

The prince returned to the castle to ask the noblewoman for her daughter's hand in marriage. The answer was an immediate yes. It had been her ladyship's dream for her daughter to marry the royal heir and become his princess.

On the day of the wedding a mysterious guest arrived, heavily veiled. When the ceremony was over, the prince said, "Madam, remove your veil." And there she stood, the charcoal woman, face to face with her son's new mother-in-law. "And this," said the charcoal woman, "is the son you tore from my arms. God saved him from death."

Her ladyship, hearing the truth, choked on her own rage and fell over dead. The princess at first was sad, for this was her mother. But she dried her tears, and she and the prince, together with the king and the queen—and the charcoal woman—lived happily from that day on.

Cuba

51. The Enchanted Cow

If you learn it you'll know it, so listen and learn how to tell it; now, don't pick the fig until it's big; if you want a pear you'll need a ladder; and if you'd like a melon, marry a man with a big nose.

There was a woman called Dolores who had two children, a boy, twelve, whose name was Joaquín, and a baby girl, Chabelita. Dolores had had a husband, but not now.

And such a good-looking, hardworking, honorable husband! But one day, not long before Chabelita was born, this husband went off to the fair in Chillán to sell a fatted cow and never came back. The cow showed up the following day with a rope caught in its horns and its hide all wet. The husband, they thought, must have drowned crossing the river, and the cow somehow got away. But when they looked for the body, they found nothing.

A few days later some workmen mentioned they'd seen the husband and a woman who lived near the river, riding off together on a horse. This woman was the one they called the Lost Soul, because she had commerce with the Devil, it was said, and at night you could hear singing and carrying on at her ranch.

In spite of it, Dolores could not believe that her Pancho, for that was his name, would leave his family and run off with another woman. But how could she argue? Her husband was gone without a trace. Originally she'd come from a small village near Constitución, so she decided to go back there with her son and her newborn baby. She sold off what little land she had, and the few animals, keeping only the cow that had come home that day from the river. She loved this cow. When it looked her in the eye, it seemed human. Besides, it gave plenty of rich milk, and she was using it to feed Chabelita.

With the money she'd gotten from the sale, she bought a little farm not far from her old home village, close to the sea. She could gather shellfish to make ends meet, and with the milk from the cow there would be cheese. Joaquín helped, too, watching after his little sister.

One day while his mother was in the village, Joaquín decided to take the baby for a bath in the ocean. He picked her up in his arms and waded in. In a flash a giant wave pulled him head over heels, and what happened to the baby he had no idea. When he could breathe again, he let out with a scream, then plunged into the water. But there was no sign of his baby sister. Wild with grief, he fell down on the beach and sobbed.

Suddenly he heard his name called. He raised his head, and there was the cow, speaking to him with a human voice. It said, "I knew this