



The Crane's Purse

Russia

Long ago, in a cold northern region, an old woman and an old man lived in a ramshackle hut on the outskirts of a village. They were very poor, and they no longer had much strength to cultivate the little piece of land surrounding their house. As a result, they were beginning to doubt whether they could survive the following winter.

But it happened that the old man came across a small sack of barley on the road, apparently it had fallen from one of the carts that went to the city. So, after showing the precious gift from heaven to his wife, they both set about planting the seeds, little by little, with great care and as their strength allowed.

Perhaps, that future barley harvest would prevent them from starving in winter.

The barley slowly grew to the relief of the elderly couple who did not dare envisage the harvest at the end of summer, lest any inclement weather spoil their hopes.

But lo and behold, one day, shortly before the end of summer, the old woman saw through the window of their cabin a huge crane eating the grains of barley and, what was worse, crushing the stalks of cereals with its claws.

The woman, without alerting her husband, rushed to the door of the cabin and went towards the crane with the intention of frightening it away and preventing it from coming near the field again. But, to her

surprise, the crane was not scared, although she came yelling, so that, when she reached it, the woman did not dare to shoo it away.

It was a huge crane, taller than herself, and seemed to look at her with a mixture of compassion and gentleness.

And then, before her eyes, and those of her husband, who was now at the door watching what was happening, the crane was transformed into a handsome gentleman, with an elegant bearing and a smiling face.

‘He must be a wizard!’ thought the old woman, who, like her husband standing further back, could not believe her eyes.

‘Good morning, my good lady!’ said the crane wizard with exquisite affability. ‘Does this barley, by any chance, belong to you and your husband?’

The old woman did not react. In fact, she remained still and open-mouthed, so it was the husband who, approaching little by little with a crazy expression, replied:

‘Yes sir. This barley is ours.’

‘I have tasted it and I like it very much’, said the crane wizard. ‘How much would you want for your barley crop?’

‘Whatever... your lordship... wants to give us’, the old woman answered, when she was finally able to say something.

‘Well, please, follow the green path that crosses the silky meadow and there you will find a great castle’, said the crane wizard. ‘Go up the steps and when the guard comes out to ask you what you want, tell him that you are looking for the crane, and he will let you pass’.

And, after saying goodbye to them with a graceful bow of his head, he transformed into a crane again and took flight, flying away over the treetops until he was out of sight.

The elderly couple stared at each other in amazement, as if wondering whether some kind of madness had afflicted both of them at the same time.

‘We’ve seen the same thing, right?’ she said.

‘Yes’, he replied. ‘By the look of amazement on your face, you must have seen the same as me.’

‘What shall we do?’

‘How can you say what are we going to do?’ he replied. ‘To see where this madness takes us. We’ve got nothing to lose!’

And, when they turned around, they saw that, beyond their little field of barley, a green path opened up, which had not been there an hour before. So, holding hands, they began to walk along the path into the forest, and they walked a long way through the trees, until exhaustion began to take its toll on them both.

When they were about to give up and forget about the madness – ‘Who would follow the instructions of a talking giant crane?’ – the path opened onto a silky looking meadow. And there, in the middle of this immense meadow, stood a great castle, just as the crane had told them.

They headed there, climbed the steps, and a guard met them.

‘What do you want, venerable elders?’ asked the guard.

‘We’re looking for the crane’, the old woman answered without thinking twice.

So the guard let them in and pointed to the door of a hall, where they found the crane wizard again. He welcomed them and took them from room to room, each one more impressive, until finally they reached another hall where a large table had been set, laden with food and drink of all kinds.

The crane wizard invited them to eat and drink until they were full, and the elderly couple, willing to continue with such a strange adventure, began to eat and drink as they had not done for many years.

When they had finished, the wizard, with a huge smile, said:

‘And now, please, tell me how much you want for your barley.’

The couple looked at each other without knowing how to answer, until, finally, the old man humbly replied:

‘Give us, Your Honour, what you think is fair’.

The wizard went to another room and, when he came back, he carried a small silk purse in his hands.

‘This purse will provide you with food whenever you ask. You will simply have to say to it: “Little purse, give me food and drink”. When you do this, food and drink of all types and for all palates will appear. Tables and chairs will also appear, and all the necessary garnishes for a feast.’

‘And when you have finished eating and drinking, you just have to say: “Food, drink, tables, chairs and garnishes, all go back to the purse”, and everything will disappear inside the purse until the next time you need to eat.

‘And now, take the purse, go home and try to be happy.’

The old woman timidly took the purse from the wizard's hands, then the couple bowed to their benefactor in appreciation. But when they stood up again, everything was gone: the wizard, the food, tables, chairs and the hall, even the guard and the castle.

The couple did not understand what had happened, but the old woman looked at her hands and saw that the crane's purse had not vanished along with everything else.

They started on their way home, but in the middle of the forest, after they had been walking for a long time, they felt hungry and thought about putting the purse to the test.

‘Little purse ...’ said the old woman trembling, ‘give us food and drink’.

And, just as the crane wizard had said, they suddenly found themselves before a table spread with delicacies and drink, flanked by two gilded chairs, and in the middle of a palatial room. Mad with joy, the old couple quenched their thirst and satisfied their hunger. Then, again, they followed the wizard's instructions to ‘clear the table’ and, when everything disappeared again, the forest disappeared too, and they were in front of the door of their cabin.

From that day on, the elderly couple ate their three daily meals without having to worry about winter or the future. But the appearance

of the couple –which had improved a lot since their times of hardship– and the fact that they did not even work the fields, led the neighbours in the village to suspect that perhaps they had found treasure and had told to nobody.

However, this rumour reached the ears of a duke, lord of the entire region, who thought that, if this were so, the treasure must be in his hands, and not in those of an old peasant couple. So, one day, he went to the old people's hut to to check it out.

‘Good morning, my lord’, the old man, who was at front door weaving a basket, said in greeting to the lord.

‘Good morning, old man’, the duke replied. ‘People have spoken highly of you, and I thought about coming to meet you and see, how my subjects are living’.

‘Very well, as far as we are concerned, very good, sir.’

‘And what is the reason for such a good life?’ asked the duke in a sly and shifty way.

And the old man, in his naivety, made the biggest mistake of his life.

‘Stay and eat with us, sir, and you'll understand.’

‘Well ... we can also eat out here’, objected the duke, looking at the cabin somewhat apprehensively because he did not want to enter a place that seemed so seedy.

‘Lord, don’t be fearful of my home’, said the old man. ‘Inside it’s a palace’.

So they entered the cabin and, once inside, the old man took the crane’s purse and said:

‘Little purse, give us food and drink.’

And the miracle happened again, but before the eyes of an evil man like the duke, who, as soon as he saw the miracle, decided that the purse must be his.

‘My dear old man’, said the duke in a fatherly tone when they finished eating, ‘it’s not fair that you have a better table than your master's. Do you not agree?’

At that moment, the old man realised his terrible mistake.

‘We’ll make a deal’, the duke continued. ‘You give me the little bag and I’ll provide you and your wife with everything you need: meat, beer and vodka, barley, milk, butter and bread. And, furthermore, I’ll send you a cow and a pig as a gift, as well as a maid and a servant to attend to you both. And I’ll send you my carpenter to fix this old cabin for you!’, he finally added.

The old man did not want to part with the purse for anything in the world, but he feared the duke.

At that moment his wife came from the washing place in the village, and met the duke in her own home. The old man took the woman aside and told her what had happened. And, despite the fact that she was about to strangle him for his naivety, she finally said to him:

‘Now we can't do anything anymore. If we refuse to give him the purse, he’ll take it from us anyway, and we’ll be left with nothing at all. Better to accept his deal and hope he complies.’

They did so, and the duke emerged from the old hut with the silk purse in his pocket, smiling triumphantly and thinking how much he was going to impress the rest of the nobles in the kingdom.

Everything went well for a while, until one day, when the supplies that the duke had sent were running out, the old woman sent the maid to the duke's castle to ask for more, but the duke angrily replied to the young maid:

‘What do those old people want? Have I not given them enough? What they have to do is work to make a living and eat, like everyone else. And, if they can’t work, let them beg in the streets!’

And then he ordered the maid and the other servant to return to the castle, and to bring the cow and the pig with them.

The old man fell into a deep depression, for it was he who had revealed the secret of the crane's purse to the duke.

'What are we going to do now?' he said to his wife, saddened. 'I've failed you, and I've condemned you to a life of misery in our old age.'

'No way!' exclaimed the old woman with anger. 'Right now I'm going to see the wizard ... the crane, or whatever ... and I'm going to tell him what happened. Maybe he'll take pity on us and give us another purse.'

And the old woman went into the woods following the route she had taken with her husband almost a year before, although this time she had the feeling that the path was much longer. Finally, when she thought that she would not be able to find the place and that her strength would not be able to take her back to her cabin, the castle appeared again in the middle of a meadow of silky grass.

The old woman climbed the steps, the guard stopped her in her path. She told him that she was looking for the crane, as on the previous occasion, and the guard let her in.

'My dear lady', the crane wizard greeted her. 'Welcome!'

The wizard took her through various rooms, each more luxurious and magnificent, until they finally reached the banqueting hall, where the host invited her to sit, rest, and recharge with an abundant supply of food and drink.

But the old woman hesitated, and the crane wizard asked worriedly:

'What's the matter, my lady? Has something happened to your husband?'

'No, nothing has happened to him', she replied. 'Well ... yes, something has happened to us ... We no longer have the magic purse that you gave us, sir. The duke found out about everything and took it from us.'

And, immediately afterwards, she told him in detail what had happened, finally asking him:

‘Can’t you, sir, give us another purse like that, so we don’t go hungry?’

‘No, I can’t do that, my dear’, the crane wizard replied with profound sadness. ‘I don’t have any more purses like that, but I can give you something else.’

The wizard went to the same room where he had come from the previous time and came out with a larger bag, this time made of velvet and tied with a silk cord.

‘Take this bag and take it home’, said the wizard. ‘Let your husband go to the duke and tell him that you now have a bigger bag, and ask him to come to your cabin. And when the duke enters your cabin, untie the bag and say, “You twelve heroes, step out and give the duke what he deserves!” And once the duke has been given what he deserves, say, ‘You twelve heroes, hold your ranks steady and let no one in’. And then he added, “please remember my words well and only then should you tell the duke to return the other bag’.

The old woman wanted to kneel to thank the crane wizard, but he prevented her.

‘You mustn’t kneel before anyone, ma'am’, he told her.

And the old woman left, tears of gratitude in her eyes. She walked through the forest the rest of the afternoon and all night. The road seemed very long to her, but finally at sunrise, she arrived at the cabin, exhausted but hopeful.

She told her husband what had happened and showed him the new velvet bag that the magician had given her, and gave him the precise instructions about how to lure the duke to the old cabin.

The old man did so, tempting the duke's greed to such an extent that he immediately wanted to leave his castle for the ramshackle hut.

On arrival, he ordered the coachman to wait in the carriage and entered the hut with the old man.

‘Very good, dear friend!’ the duke exclaimed once inside. ‘What kind of wonders does your new bag bring us?’

‘Well, I don't know, my lord’, the old man replied. ‘My wife and I don't know very well, but we'll see ...’

And at that moment, the old woman said:

‘You twelve heroes, step out of the bag and give the duke what he deserves!’

And twelve enormous warriors emerged from the bag, grabbing the duke, quickly putting him inside the bag, then knotting it with the silk tie.

‘And now, you twelve heroes’, the woman raised her voice again, ‘keep your formation and don't let anyone in!’

And the warriors ranked in two rows on both sides of the door, so that no one could enter it.

‘Now, my lord’, said the old man, addressing the bag that his wife was holding in her hand, ‘give us back the purse that belongs to us’.

‘How dare you treat me like this?’ the duke yelled from inside the velvet bag in a reedy voice. ‘I'll make you hang for this!’

But the old man did not allow himself to be overwhelmed by the duke.

‘Lord, you have already seen what our benefactor's magic is capable of, and you will have seen that not all of your troops would be capable of defeating these twelve warriors who protect us. So if you have any sense left, you'll agree to our request and then leave us alone forever.

There was a heavy silence in the cabin, during which the duke seemed to be reconsidering.

‘The purse is in my castle, locked up. If you let me out, I'll go and bring it to you.’

‘Lord, I saw how, before leaving your castle, you hid it in your garments’, the old man divulged to the duke. ‘Give us the purse back and leave us alone... or our warriors will take it from you by force.’

Eventually, the duke had to give in, so they let him out of the velvet bag and, sulkily, he handed them the silk purse. Then he tried to

leave the hut, but the immense warriors stepped forward to prevent him.

‘One more thing, my lord’, the old man said to him. ‘From now on, and taking into account our small army of warriors, you’ll stop mistreating and beating your servants and the peasants who cultivate your lands. Otherwise, we’ll put you back in the bag and hide you in the shed ... and no one will ever hear from you again.’

The duke looked anxiously at the old man, knowing that this was a real possibility, having already been stuffed into the small bag.

‘My heroes’, said the old woman at last, ‘open ranks and let the duke pass!’

The warriors obeyed, and the duke left the cabin like a soul pursued by the devil, climbing into his carriage and ordering the coachman to gallop away from the hut.

‘Thank you, my twelve heroes’, the woman said when all danger had passed. ‘You can go back to the bag again.’

And the crane wizard’s huge warriors slipped back (no one knows how), into the velvet bag, which the old woman then tied with the silk bow and kept under her petticoat.

The old man gave his wife a kiss and, after apologising for his naivety, lifted the silk purse and, unlacing it, exclaimed:

‘And now, how about celebrating? Little purse, give us food and drink!’ ❑

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

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Comments

We have had to make some changes in the adaptation of this old Russian story in order to bring it into line with the standards set by the Earth Charter and the complex-systems worldview that we advocate.

In the first place, we have changed the duke's punishment. This is because, in Keding's version (2008), which we have taken as a guide, the duke is beaten to a pulp twice by the twelve heroes; the first, when arriving at the cabin and the second when leaving. Aiming to comply with Principle 16 of the Charter, which urges us to 'Promote a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace', we have transformed the warriors' punishment of beating with clubs and whips into temporary confinement in the velvet bag. Thus we have made it possible to reach the same conclusion.

On the other hand, in the Keding story –and we assume in the original Russian tale– the leading role is played by the old man, while his wife occupies a more marginal role. In this version we wanted to equalise the couple and give the wife a little prominence in the second part of the story, simply to promote gender equality –Principle 11 of the Charter– in a subtle way.

It is these small changes to original versions of tales that allow educators or storytellers to highlight the values and worldview of the stories we offer in The Earth Stories Collection. Feel free, therefore, to vary the versions we offer here if you feel that you can still make one more twist to effectively educate your audience on the complex-systems worldview and the principles and values of the Earth Charter. Remember that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) defines 'the myth as consisting of all its versions; to put it otherwise: a myth remains the same as long as it felt as such' (p. 435). In other words, you would not be betraying the supposed 'original' or 'authentic' traditional story.

Sources

Keding, D. (2008). The Crane's Purse. In *Elder Tales: Stories of Wisdom and Courage from Around the World* (pp. 122-127). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1955). The structural study of myth. *Journal of American Folklore*, 68, 270, Myth: A Symposium (Oct-Dec 1955), 428-444.

Manning-Sanders, R. (1974). The Crane's Purse. In *Sir Green Hat and the Wizard*. London: Methuen.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 13e: Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

