

## The mysterious stranger

Once upon a time, there was a very poor family that lived in the country. One day the parents handed all their money over to their eldest son and sent him to the village to buy an ox. They thought the animal would help make plowing the land a lot easier so that they could have a better life. The boy got up very early that morning because he had to cross a big forest and so he set off for the village, singing and whistling along the way.

After he had been walking for quite a while, he was surprised when he came across two potted plants sitting alongside the path, one with a cactus and the other with strange red flowers. While he was wondering what they were doing there in the middle of the forest, a strange man - even stranger than the flowers - suddenly appeared on horseback. He asked the boy if he would mind giving him the pot with the red flowers in it. He said it would help him win the heart of a certain person.

The boy didn't quite understand what he meant by all that about winning the heart of a person, but since he was always willing to help, he picked up the pot and... what a surprise! Underneath it, he found a bag full of gold coins. But the stranger wasn't at all surprised. He asked him to give him the flowers and told him to keep the bag of money. But before leaving, he gave the boy two pieces of advice. First, he told him not to stay at the governor's house when he got to the village. And second, he said that if one day he found himself in a bind, he should just call out for "Tanàs!" and he'd be there to help. Then the boy saw him disappear among the trees : "The Mysterious Stranger".

The boy was very happy because with that money he could buy the best ox in the market. He reached the village at night, all tuckered out from the journey. He knocked on the first door he saw without even realizing that it was none other than the governor's.

That night, while the boy was fast asleep and dreaming of oxen and cows, the governor stole his bag of money. He was sure that if the boy accused him of the theft, no one would believe him because the word of a poor lad like that boy would never hold up against the word of such a powerful, important man.

And so it was. The next morning, when the boy realized that his bag had been stolen, he was totally upset and he accused the governor, which shocked and enraged the town's authorities.

"This is slanderous," cried the governor in a rage, and he immediately had the boy arrested and jailed.

In those days, it was very dangerous to stand up to a governor. It could even cost you your life. A few days later, the judge, who had been paid off by the governor, sentenced the boy to the gallows.

While waiting to be executed the boy, sad and desperate, remembered the second piece of advice given to him by the stranger. And without hesitating a moment, he exclaimed, "Tanàs!" As soon as he said the name, the stranger appeared before him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

And the boy told him what had happened. When he finished his story, the stranger reminded him that he had warned him not to stay at the governor's house, but that he should not fear because he would help him anyway.

"Look," he said, "all prisoners who are sentenced to death are granted one final wish. Well, when the rope is placed around your neck, say my name again out loud and I'll help set you free."

Having said these words, the man vanished. The boy did everything the stranger had told him to do. They granted him three days of grace before taking him to the gallows set up in the village square where he was to be hung in front of all the villagers and the authorities. But at the last minute, when the rope was placed around the boy's neck, he cried out, "Tanàs!" Suddenly, a very well-dressed man appeared in the square. He approached the governor and asked him why they were hanging his brother. The governor told him that his brother had slandered him, the governor, the highest authority, and had accused him of having stolen his money. That was why he was to receive the punishment he deserved.

Then the stranger looked the governor straight in the eye and said,

"Since you are innocent, I am sure you will not object to saying, out loud and in front of everyone, that the devil should take you if you've stolen the money!"

Then the governor broke the silence and blurted out in front of everyone,

"Let the devil take me this minute if I've stolen the money!"

As soon as he uttered these words, a diabolical grin crossed the stranger's face as he grabbed hold of the governor's leg as if he were a mere chicken, and tossed him onto his cart as he shouted out,

"Then so be it! I'll take you this very minute, Mr. Governor!"

That was how the devil won the governor's heart and soul. He then lashed his whip into the air and shouted, "Off to hell!"

And they both vanished like magic without leaving a trace behind them except for a strange smell of sulphur.

The boy got up very early the next morning because he had to cross a big forest and he set off for home. As he was walking along, leading a magnificent ox, he couldn't help thinking that sometimes life brought with it some strange surprises.

*Script: Manel Riera-Eures*



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