

The ferrymen and the magic purse

COMPREHENSION
CRUISER

Narrative

There once lived a poor but content father, who was blessed with three sons. He earned a meagre living rowing people across the river in a small wooden boat. Bad luck followed him like a shadow. One night, the wind howled and the water raged, but he still set to work. Alas, the waves lashed the boat... it capsized and the good ferryman was lost to the river forever.

As the sons sat outside their shabby hut mourning their father and their ruined future, a stranger approached – an old man in ragged clothes, his eyes bright with kindness. Learning of their misfortune, he soothed their misery.

“Do not worry, all will be well in time,” he explained. “Come...”

He led the brothers to the river. “Why, look... a new boat!” he declared.

To the sons’ astonishment, a fine boat was gently bobbing upon the quiet water. It was tied to their jetty and a queue of customers stood waiting beside it. Bewildered, but grateful for the miracle, the siblings agreed to share the work and the profits equally.

The brothers were very different: the elder two lacked conscience and refused passage to anyone who couldn’t pay the fare. In contrast, the youngest was sympathetic and ferried penniless passengers for free. He even pressed a coin from his own pocket into their palm when he helped them ashore.

One evening, as the falling sun streaked the sky with pinks and purples, a familiar figure approached the eldest brother, who was taking his turn as ferryman.

“I wish to cross the river, but I have no money ... only this empty purse,” the gentleman mumbled with embarrassment.

The brother sneered. “Well, find something to put in it!” he spat irritably. “Only then can you board.”

The following morning, the same event occurred; this time it was the middle sibling who cruelly rejected the old man. But on the third day, when the youngest brother was captain, the traveller was greeted with respect and kindness.

“Why, of course,” he said without hesitation. “Get in –”

“But what fare do you charge?” interrupted the man.

“That depends on what you have,” came the warm response. “If you can’t afford to pay, the journey will be free.”

When they reached the far bank, the man said, “You will be rewarded for your compassion. Take this purse... It is empty now, but all is not what it seems.” He paused whilst the confused ferryman examined the drawstring pouch. “If you shake it and say:

‘For the sake of the man who gave it,
this purse I hold,
I wish will always be full of gold,’
then, dear fellow, you will never be poor again.”

That evening, the elder brothers refused to share their evening meal, for the youngest had earned nothing that day. Whilst his brothers jeered wickedly, their sibling turned... clasped the mysterious purse... shook it and whispered the charm.

Stunned silence fell as a shower of coins, bright as morning sunlight, clinked and danced across the table. His gaping elder brothers promptly reinstated the ‘share and share alike’ bargain and greedily grabbed at the gold. The youngest took none, breathing thanks to his generous passenger instead.

Over time, greed poisoned the oldest two. They longed to control the purse, so they stole it, fled and each amassed a fortune. One brother bought a fine ship laden with treasures and embarked on a trading voyage. Before reaching foreign shores, the ship struck rock and was swallowed by the sea. The second brother travelled through a forest, where robbers stole his riches and left him for dead.

Alone at home, the third brother became as poor as before, yet he did not grieve the loss of the purse: it had torn his family apart. He continued to ferry passengers – rich and poor alike – without prejudice or demands.

One morning, as the river lay beneath curls of mist, the old man returned. After hearing the young ferryman’s tale, he smiled and placed in his hands a golden fishing rod with a silver line and diamond hook.

“This will serve you better than coins,” he promised. “Cast it well, my dear friend.”

