

## The rich brother's poor mother-in-law

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE fifteenth story in J F Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" is a classic of black humour called *Am Bràthair Bochd 's am Bràthair Beairteach*, "The Poor Brother and the Rich Brother". It was told by James MacQueen, Tirneagan, Islay, to Flora Macintyre, Kilmeny, who told it in May 1859 to Hector MacLean, who wrote it down and gave it to Campbell.

Briefly, the rich brother has inherited the family farm, and the poor brother digs drains for a living. The poor brother takes on a servant (*gille*) who soon tires of eating his master's dry bread (*aran tur*) and suggests they go and steal one of the rich brother's cows.

The rich brother suspects who has stolen the cow, so he puts his mother-in-law (*màthair-chéile*) in a chest with a spy-hole in it, along with a supply of bread and cheese, and asks his brother to look after it for a while. The servant spots the *cailleach* in the chest and throws wet sacks (*saic*) over it to prevent her hearing anything.

That night the servant goes to the chest. *Eil thu cluinntinn?* he says. "Can you hear?"

*Chan eil.* "No."

*Eil thu 'g ith' a bheag?* "Are you eating anything?"

*Chan eil.* "No."

*Thoir dhòmhsa piosa den chàise 's gearraidh mi dhuit e.* "Give me a bit of the cheese and I'll cut it for you."

He cuts the cheese, forces it down her throat and chokes her. When the rich brother fetches the chest back he finds her dead and buries her with very little outlay (*cha d'rinn iad ach costas beag urra*).

That night the servant says to his master, "Isn't it disgraceful (*déisneach*) for so much linen to go with the *cailleach* to the grave (*don chill*) when the children need shirts so badly?"

He goes to the churchyard, digs up the body and removes the *ais-aodach*. I think this is the same as Alexander Carmichael's word *ath-aodach* meaning "secondary clothing" or "underclothes". Then he brings the corpse to the rich brother's house and sets it up at the fire 's *an clobha eadar a dà chois* – with the tongs between her two feet. This will be to show that, wherever the old lady has been, she's cold. The Celtic hell is cold.

The maid finds the body in the morning and faints. The rich brother thrashes his wife because of her mother, saying she is *a' brath a sgrìos* – "trying to ruin him". He goes to see his brother, and his fears are confirmed: *O nach do chost thu r'a beò e*, says the servant, *costaidh tu r'a marbh e*. *Chunnaic mise leithid seo roimhid. Feumaidh tu costas math a dheanadh urra!* "Since you didn't spend it when she was alive, you'll spend it when she's dead. I've seen the likes of this before. You'll have to lay out a lot on her!"

The rich brother lays out a lot on the next funeral, leaving half of it in the poor brother's house. The servant plays the trick again, except that this time he points out how much his master needs a shirt, and props up the corpse *aig ceann an dreasair*, 's *a cròg làn do chàith às an t-soitheach chabhrach, mar gum biodh i ga itheadh*: "at the end of the dresser, with her paw full of chaff from the sowans dish, as if she were eating it".

This is the worst of all food, hinting that, wherever she has been, she's starving. The same scene ensues, but this time the rich brother leaves the funeral arrangements to the servant, who buys a lot of stuff, leaves half of it at his master's house, then points out that he himself needs a shirt. This time he brings the corpse to the rich brother's stable and mounts it on a yearling colt (*bliadhnach eich*).

When the family gets up in the morning they're delighted to see no sign of the *cailleach*. The rich brother is going on a trip, and mounts his usual mare (*capall*). Off he goes, but the colt follows, 's *a' chailleach a' glaiseileis air a mhuin* – with the old lady clattering on its back.

The rich brother nearly kills his wife, then goes to the poor brother's house and tells the servant to spend as much as necessary, *ach cum air folbh i!* "Keep her away!"

The servant obliges, invites everyone in the district to the next funeral, and lets the old wife rest in peace, because by now the poor brother is as well off as the rich one.

In his notes, Campbell concentrates on the traditional importance of a decent funeral, so I'll focus instead on the poor old mother-in-law. Why is she the butt of so many jokes?

Long ago social anthropologists noticed that "mother-in-law avoidance" was common to primitive societies all over Australia, Melanesia, Indonesia, South Asia, Africa and America, but the evidence provided by Sir James Frazer in his massive work "Totemism and Exogamy" suggests that its origins are the opposite of what we would expect.

Let me try and explain. In early society there were two controlling principles. First, maternity was more identifiable than paternity. Second, sexual relationships must be organised into a system of marriage capable of excluding connections between blood relatives.

This gave rise to matriarchal societies practising exogamy (the division of tribes into groups so that no individual could ever marry a member of the same group). According to Frazer, a man who lived in a matriarchal society practising two-group exogamy was in the same group as his mother-in-law, and would thus be free to marry her unless some special taboo were imposed. A man who lived in a more “developed” society (a patriarchal one, or one practising multiple-group exogamy) would find himself in a different group from his mother-in-law.

In other words “mother-in-law avoidance” came about not because primitive man disliked his mother-in-law, but because he might like her too much! This was a particular risk under matriarchy, in which the young husband moved into his mother-in-law’s household and was obliged to help provide it (and her) with food.

By the nineteenth century there were hardly any matriarchal societies left, but plenty of exogamous ones. The Garo of Assam were still matriarchal, however – women were dominant and property went through them. It was found that a Garo man who married a favourite daughter (or, according to another account, a youngest daughter) had also to marry his mother-in-law in the event of the death of his father-in-law, and through her he, or rather his daughter, succeeded to all the property. “It is consequently not uncommon to see a young Garo introducing as his wife a woman who is old enough to be his mother, and who is in point of fact his mother-in-law and sometimes his aunt to boot.”

Stone-Age stuff. More commonly, anthropologists found men avoiding their mothers-in-law with the same degree of courteous dignity and personal sacrifice as a Calvinist upholding the Sabbath.

In Australia a man and his mother-in-law could not look at each other. Among the Kamilaroi if they met by chance they should turn round, back to back, and remain at a distance. In south-west Victoria, if a man came to his in-laws’ camp he lodged in a friend’s hut, as he was not allowed to go within fifty yards of them. If he met them on a path, they left it, clapped their hands, covered up their heads with rugs, walked in a stooping posture, and spoke in whispers till he had passed.

Among the Chepara, in the presence of her son-in-law a woman kept her head covered by an opossum rug. Her camp faced in a different direction from his; a screen of high bushes was erected between their huts so that nobody could see over it, and the young couple conversed quietly so that the girl’s mother couldn’t hear them. When the mother-in-law went for firewood she covered her head and crouched down. If the son-in-law climbed a tree to take a hive of bees, his wife sat at the foot of it, but her mother had to stay a long way off with her head muffled up. Only after the man had got the hive, climbed down and gone away could the mother-in-law come and help her daughter cut up the comb and carry it away.

“Avoidance” applied to all kinds of contact. One man nearly died of fright when his mother-in-law’s shadow fell on his legs as he slept under a tree. A man could not eat food that his mother-in-law had prepared. At Vanua Lava in Melanesia he would not follow her along the beach until the tide had washed her footprints from the sand.

From Africa, too, we learn what happened when a man met his mother-in-law by accident. They must both cover their faces, she perhaps hiding behind a bush while he screened his face with his shield. If the woman had no other way to cover herself she tied a wisp of grass round her head as a token of ceremonial avoidance.

From America it was reported that “rather than face his mother-in-law a desperate Apache, the bravest of the brave, has been seen clinging to rocks, from which had he fallen he must inevitably have been dashed to pieces or at least broken several of his limbs”. Sophisticated textiles and housing made life easier, however. When a Ponka chief entered a room in which his mother-in-law was seated, he was seen to throw his blanket over his head, turn quickly and go into another part of the house. Among the Arawaks of Guiana, if a man was in the same house as his mother-in-law they must be separated by a screen or partition-wall, and if she travelled with him in a canoe she stepped in first so that she could turn her back to him.

In matters of food, also, things were not quite so fraught as in Australia. A Sioux woman could give her son-in-law something to eat by passing it to her daughter first, or leaving it on the ground.

All in all you can see why, when digging for clams (which withdraw rapidly into the sand), the Tlingit of British Columbia would say: “Don’t go down so fast or you’ll hit your mother-in-law in the face!”

Likewise, “The Poor Brother and the Rich Brother” is a mother-in-law joke – and, judging from its view of the afterlife, an old one at that.

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