

## Halfway up the Mountain – Theo Gilchrist

Over the green hill and across the blue river, in a shack halfway up the mountain, there lived an old man and an old woman. Though the old man was slow of movement, the old woman didn't mind. Though the old woman was almost blind, the old man didn't mind. Hand in hand they greeted the sunrise. Hand in hand they greeted the sunset.

They were happy except for one thing. Day after day the old woman cooked the very same meal. It was "salt the beef, pepper the beef, push the garlic bits inside, boil, and flavor with vinegar water." Now this the old man did mind.

"Woman," he said, "fried chicken would taste good. Roast pork even better. Why can't you change?"

The old woman replied softly, "I know the salt shaker by the nick on the side. I know the pepper by its rough wood holder. The garlic I find by its powerful perfume, the vinegar by its tang. And you cut a slab of beef for me each morning. How could I change?"

Now this sameness was making the old man techy. He decided to go down the mountain a piece and ask advice of the spirit who lived in the oldest aspen tree. Slowly he approached the tree and said, "Oh, great one, listen."

The tree quaked in a silver whisper and said, "Speak, old man."

"My old woman is a good woman, but every day she makes the same food. It's salt the beef, pepper the beef, push the garlic inside, boil and flavor with vinegar water. How can I get her to change?"

The leaves trembled, and with a wisp of a sigh, the tree said, "There are worse things than beef." And it said no more.

The old man was disappointed, and dragged himself back home. That night he lay on the pallet on the floor beside the old woman. In her sweet sleep, she saw red berries and blue larkspur. He dreamed of baked ham. But when he tried to eat some, it turned into a monstrous pig. It rushed at him with a snort and a snuffle, until he begged to wake. As he lay there, the old man heard sounds far away – twigs snapping, little stones chipping loose and rolling down the mountain. The noise became louder. A cannon of a voice boomed out a song: "With a jingle of gold and a gurgle of rum – fall to your knees Bloodcoe has come! I'm beastly, I'm bloody, I'm bad."

The old man trembled with fear. He had heard tales of Bloodcoe the bandit. Bloodcoe had burned barns and broken bones. It was saw he was more monster than man.

"Oh, criminey!" now the voice was very near. "Where's me bottle? Come good rum, give strength to me walking and sound to me singing: 'I'm the terror of the countryside; gold's me business, booze me bride. I'm beastly. I'm bloody. I'm bad.'"

With a crash, the door swung open. The huge outline of the bandit swayed in the doorway. "Ho, now, what's this?" Bloodcoe poked the bottle into the old man's side.

"It's just me, an old man, and my old wife," the old man cried. "Don't hurt us."

“We’ll see about that. Now, out with you. There’s no room for three in here.”

The old man helped the old woman up and led her to the cattle shed. “We’ll sleep in the straw here, good old woman,” he said. She didn’t seem to waken at all. The old man lay trembling. He heard crashing and cursing. “This blasted floor’s too cold for sleeping. The stove’s the place. The coals inside are still warm. Bully for you, Bloodcoe!”

Soon snores came thundering from the shack. The old man finally fell asleep. A little before dawn, the old woman wakened. She felt the straw and heard the noises of the cattle. She realized she was in the shed. “Old man,” she whispered, “why are we here?” But the old man slept on.

The old woman sighed and sat a while. “I’ll let him be,” she reasoned, “and do as usual.” The old woman pushed open the door and found her way to the stove. The old man must have been up very early, for there was already a mound of beef lying on the stove. She rolled up her sleeves. She found the nick in the side of the salt shaker and shook it hard. She fingered the rough wood of the pepper shaker and showered pepper all around. Then she started to push bits of garlic inside the beef.

All at once came a great scream and such sneezing as she had never heard. Bloodcoe leapt down from the stove and tore out the door. “Me eyes are burning out of me head. Me ribs are broken. And the smell, the smell! The devil himself is in that place!” He ran and bawled and shouted and stumbled until the wind brought back only a faint, distant wail.

The old man was startled by the noise. He sat upright and blinked. He reached for his wife’s hand but found her gone. As best he could, he hurried to the shack. “What happened, old woman?”

“Old man, the beef for today’s dinner wasn’t dead yet. I did as usual, but before I could put the vinegar on to boil, the beef got itself up off the stove. It ran out the door with the noise of a whole herd.”

On the stove lay an empty rum bottle and two bags. The old man shook one of the bags. There was a cheerful clink.

“Well done, old woman!” he said. “That wasn’t beef you treated with pepper and garlic. That was the bandit Bloodcoe himself. He forced us out of our home last night, but he paid well for his lodging. He left two bags of gold.”

“Well then, old man, you can go down the mountain. Buy yourself some chicken or pork if that’s what you fancy.”

“Some other day, maybe” he said. “But for now, old woman, one thing I know.”

“What is that?”

He put his arm around her. “I know, old woman, that there are worse things than beef.” Hand in hand they greeted the sunrise, thankful for each other, thankful for the start of a new day.