

## Old Aeson – Pre-Intermediate Level

Judge between me and my guest, the stranger inside my gates, the man whom in his great suffering I clothed and fed.

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I remember well the time of his coming. It happened at the end of five days and nights during which the year passed from summer to winter. An east wind blew that stopped the growth in the trees. Their leaves did not change from green to red then yellow as usual, but turned straight to brown and fell to the ground.

I looked out at five o'clock in the morning of the sixth day. The wind was still blowing strongly, but there were no clouds. Stars shone brightly in the sky. Half-way up in the east the moon, now in her last quarter and weak, climbed with the sun close behind. And at this hour they brought in the Stranger and asked if I could give him warm clothing and somewhere to sleep and rest.

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Nobody knew where he came from, other than that it was from the wind and the night. He spoke in a strange language, and we could see that his journey must have been long and difficult. His legs bent under him, and he could not stand when he tried to get out of bed. As it useless to question him for the time, I asked the servants what they had to tell. They had come upon him, just a few minutes before, lying on his face on my

land. He had no walking stick, bag or hat. He was too weak to get up, and crying for help in his foreign tongue. They had picked him up and brought him to me.

Now for the look of this man. He seemed a hundred years old. All his hair had fallen out and he had many lines on his face. There were wide holes where the teeth should be. The skin of his cheeks was hanging down. What colour he had could have come only from being out in that terribly cold night. But it was his eyes which mostly spoke of his great age. They were blue and deep, and filled with the wisdom of years. And when he turned them towards me they appeared to look through me, back in time upon years of sadness and suffering. It was as if his troubles that night were but a small item in a long list. They frightened me. Perhaps they carried a warning of what was to happen to me at their owner's hands. But I felt sorry for him. I ordered the servants to take him to my wife, with word that I wished her to give him food and see that he was able to eat it.

All this I did for this Stranger. Now learn how he thanked me.

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He has taken my youth from me, and most of what I owned, and the love of my wife.

From the hour that he tasted food in my house, he sat there without a sign of going. Whether by design, or because of his age and sufferings, he came back slowly to life and warmth. For many days he seemed unable

to stand up. During this time he lived on our great kindness. My wife took care of him, and my servants did as he asked. He had managed early to make them understand some words of his language, but seemed slow in learning ours. I believe this was planned, in case someone should ask his business (which was a mystery) or talk to him about when he might leave. I myself often visited the room he had taken over and sit, watching those bottomless eyes, while I tried to understand what he was saying. When my wife and I were alone, we used to try to guess what he did for a living. Was he a merchant, an old seaman, a beggar, a thief? We could never decide, and he never told us.

Then I came to understand what was happening. I sat one day in the chair beside his, wondering as usual. I had felt heavy of late, with a soreness and tiredness in my body. It was as if a great weight hung continually on my shoulders, and another rested on my heart. A warmer colour in the Stranger's cheek came to my notice. I bent towards him and saw that his eyes were livelier and less deep looking. The sadness was passing from them. He was growing younger. Jumping up, I ran across the room to the mirror.

There were two white hairs and, at the corner of either eye, several new lines were growing outward. I was becoming an old man.

Turning, I looked carefully at the Stranger as he calmly sat there. In my mind I felt the young blood flowing from my own heart and turning red in his cheeks. Minute by minute I watched the slow miracle of the old

man made beautiful. He took on a lovely youthful look and, drop by drop, left me winter.

I ran from the room. Going to my wife, I told her of my thoughts. "This man we have been taking care of is a demon," I said. "He is sucking my best blood, and has everyone in the house under his spell." She put down the book she was reading and laughed at me. My wife was beautiful, and her eyes were the light of my life. Think, then, how I felt as she laughed, taking the Stranger's side against me. When I left her, it was with a new worry in my heart. "How shall it be," I thought, "if after robbing me of my youth, he goes on to take the one thing that is better?"

I thought about this day after day in my room. I hated the way I had changed and scared that worse was to come. With the Stranger there was no longer any way to hide what was happening. His head was covered in curls; white teeth filled the holes in his mouth. His cheeks were full and a healthy color. It was Aeson made young again and thankless. And he sat on, eating away at my life.

When he had tested my weakness, and was sure that I was no longer strong enough to send him away, he started to speak in English. He, who had forced his language upon us, seemed to learn ours so quickly that I knew that he had tricked us. From then on English was the only language he used. Of his past life he said nothing. But he did tell me that he wanted to become a soldier as soon as he was tired of living under my roof.

I cried to myself in my room about what was happening. He was making open love to my wife. The eyes with which he looked at her, and the lips with which he kissed her, had been mine. And I was an old man. Judge now between me and this guest.

One morning I went to my wife, for I needed to know how she felt about this man. I found her taking care of the plants outside her window. When she turned, I saw that years had not taken from her beauty at all. And I was old.

So I asked her about this Stranger, saying this and that, and how I had cause to believe he loved her.

“I am sure that he does,” she answered, and smiled.

“By my head, I believe his feelings are returned!” I cried.

And her smile grew brighter, as, looking me in the face, she answered, “I tell you truly, husband, They are.”

Then I went from her, down into my garden. I sat and looked around at the flowers, but could find no way out of the problem that worked in my heart. And then I lifted my head and saw him coming across the flower beds, walking on my plants as if he cared nothing for them. He came with a light step and a smile. I waited for him.

“Give me your watch!” he called out, as he came near.

“Why should I give you my watch?” I asked.

“Because I wish it; because it is gold; because you are too old, and won’t want it much longer.”

“Take it,” I cried, pulling the watch out and pushing it into his hand. “Take it – you who have taken all that is better! Take everything from me, spoil me...”

A soft laugh sounded above, and I turned. My wife was looking down on us from the window, and her eyes were both wet and happy.

“Excuse me,” she said, “it is you who are spoiling the child.”