

From – The Festival of Stones

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Edited extract from Chapter 24 – the illustrations have been omitted

The Burden Bull of Scotland (a Christmas Story)

There was once a bull. He wasn't a big bull – in fact, he was a small bull. He had great, shaggy hair, with long, wide, curving-up horns, and he lived in Scotland. His name was Angus – least wise, that was what his master called him – and he thought it a fine name for a shaggy bull like himself.

One day he was out on the wild moors looking for grass amongst the heather and furze. The wind was mixed with sleet, and blew fiercely, but Angus didn't mind. He was used to such weather, and his long, shaggy coat shed the rain and snow, and kept him warm no matter how hard the wind blew.

He was munching on a clump of grass left over from summertime when he heard someone crying. He searched around and found a small child underneath a gorse bush.

“Why are you crying?” asked Angus.

“I'm crying because the world is cold,” said the child.

So Angus lay down on the ground with his back to the wind and told the child to snuggle close. This the child did and soon began to feel warm.

When the storm abated Angus stood up and told the child to get up on his back. This the child did easily, for Angus was really not very big for a bull. The child hung onto his shaggy coat and across the moor they traveled. He had to be careful, for there were bog holes which could swallow up both man and beast. He avoided sharp brambles so the child would not get scratched or cut. As Angus went along the weight on his back seemed to get heavier and heavier, and he began to walk with difficulty. Still, he had to get the child to safety, so he kept on steadily.

He came at last to the sheltered valley where people lived. Down the steep sides of the valley he struggled, his burden getting heavier by the minute. The path was narrow, the cliffs treacherous, and the going so rocky and rough that he often stumbled. The child seemed so heavy now that putting even one foot before the other was the greatest effort.

At last he came to the village nestled at the head of the valley. It was a poor village, but the people were honest and good. It had been a bad summer – and a

worse winter – and famine had come upon them. They were starving for lack of food. Still, it was Christmas day, and they were all, man, woman and child, inside the church. They were celebrating the birth of the Christ Child with all the joy they could muster in their hearts.

When the service was done they hugged each other, and said ‘Merry Christmas’ to their friends and neighbors, and for a brief moment their troubles were forgotten.

As they left the church they saw a highland bull, led by a small child, walking down the street towards them. The bull was staggering as if utterly exhausted, and on his back sat a large metal chest, and from the sides of the chest hung four big bags. It was an extraordinary sight, and all they could do was stand and stare.

Finally the child and the bull stopped before the people of the village. The bull clearly could not go a step further. The child pointed to the load on the bull’s back, and the men gathered around and began to take off his burden. It took twelve men to lift the chest off – and the bags were almost as heavy. They opened the chest and found it filled with golden coins. Then they opened the bags, and one held warm clothes for all the children, another held fine clothes for the women, and yet another held stout clothes for the men.

They were astonished, but they were more astonished still when they opened the fourth bag, for out of it came the finest food. A whole feast was in the bag, and no matter how much they took out of it there was always more.

They turned to ask the child where he had found such riches, and how they had gotten onto the bull’s back, but the child was nowhere to be seen.

The villagers understood what had happened, and the greatest Christmas celebration took place. That year they built a new church, and over the door they placed a stone carving. It showed the Christ Child leading the bull, laden with gifts, into the village.

That church and that carving are there to this day, but not Angus. He died of old age long ago, happy and content. He was well looked after by the village, and always had the sweetest hay and finest water to eat and to drink.