

## **The Stone by Lloyd Alexander**

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There was a cottager named Maibon, and one day he was driving down the road in his horse and cart when he saw an old man hobbling along, so frail and feeble he doubted the poor soul could go many more steps. Though Maibon offered to take him in the cart, the old man refused; and Maibon went his way home, shaking his head over such a pitiful sight, and said to his wife, Modrona:

“Ah, ah what a sorry thing it is to have your bones creaking and cracking, and dim eyes, and dull wits. When I think this might come to me, too! A fine, strong-armed, sturdy-legged fellow like me? One day to go tottering and have his teeth rattling in his head and live on porridge like a baby? There’s no fate worse in all the world.”

“There is,” answered Modrona, “and that would be to have neither teeth nor porridge.”

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Get on with you, Maibon, and stop borrowing trouble. Hoe your field or you’ll have no crop to harvest and no food for you, or me, or the little ones.”

Sighing and grumbling, Maibon did as his wife bade him. Although the day was fair and cloudless, he took no pleasure in it. His ax blade was notched, the wooden handle splintery; his saw had lost its edge; and his hoe once shining new, had begun to rust. None of his tools, it seemed to him, cut or chopped or delved as well as they once had done.

“They’re as worn-out as that old codger I saw on the road,” Maibon said to himself. He squinted up at the sky. “Even the sun isn’t as bright as it used to be and doesn’t warm me half as well. It’s gone threadbare as my cloak. And no wonder, for it’s been there longer than I can remember. Come to think of it, the moon’s been looking a little wilted around the edges, too.”

“As for me,” went on Maibon, in dismay, “I’m even a worse state. My appetite’s faded, especially after meals. Mornings, when I wake, I can hardly keep myself from yawning. And at night, when I go to bed, my eyes are so heavy I can’t hold them open. If that’s the way things are now, the older I grow, the worse it will be!”

In the midst of his complaining, Maibon glimpsed something bouncing and tossing back and forth beside a fallen tree in a corner of the field. Wondering if one of his piglets had squeezed had squeezed out of the sty and gone rooting for acorns, Maibon hurried across the turf. Then he dropped his ax and gaped in astonishment.

There, struggling to free his leg, which had been caught under the log, lay a short, thickset figure: a dwarf with red hair bristling in all directions beneath his round, close-fitting leather cap. At the sight of Maibon, the dwarf squeezed shut his bright red eyes and began holding his breath. After a

moment the dwarf's face went redder than his hair; his cheeks puffed out and soon turned purple. Then he opened one eye and blinked rapidly at Maibon, who was staring at him, speechless.

"What," snapped the dwarf, "you can still see me?"

"That I can," replied Maibon, more than ever puzzled, "and I can see very well you've got yourself tight as a wedge under that log, and all your kicking only makes it worse."

At this the dwarf blew out his breath and shook his fists. "I can't do it!" he shouted. "Not matter how I try! I can't make myself invisible! Everyone in my family can disappear---poof! Gone! Vanished! But not me! Not Doli! Believe me, if I could have done, you never would have found me in such a plight. Worse luck! Well, come on. Don't stand there goggling like an idiot. Help me get loose!"

At this sharp command Maibon began tugging and heaving at the log.

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Then he stopped, wrinkled his brow, and scratched his head, saying:

"Well now, just a moment, friend. The way you look, and all your talk about turning yourself invisible—I'm thinking you might be one of the Fair Folk."

"Oh clever!" Doli retorted. "Oh, brilliant! Great clodhopper! Giant beanpole! Of course I am! What else! Enough gabbling. Get a move on. My leg's going to sleep."

"If a man does the Fair Folk a good turn," cried Maibon, his excitement growing, "it's told they must do one for him."

"I knew sooner or later you'd come round to that," grumbled the dwarf. "That's the way of it with you ham-handed, heavy-footed oafs. Time was, you humans got along well with us. But nowadays you no sooner see a Fair Folk than its grab, grab, grab! Gobble, gobble, gobble! Grant my wish! Give me this, give me that! As if we had nothing better to do!

"Yes, I'll give you a favor," Doli went on. "That's the rule; I'm obliged to. Now, get on with it."

Hearing this, Maibon pulled and pried and chopped away at the log as fast as he could and soon and soon freed the dwarf.

Doli heaved a sigh of relief, rubbed his shin, and cocked a red eye at Maibon, saying:

"All right. You've done your work; you'll have your reward. What do you want? Gold, I suppose. That's the usual. Jewels? Fine clothes? Take my advice, go for something practical. A hazelwood twig to help you find water if you're well ever goes dry? An ax that never needs sharpening? A cook pot always brimming with food?"

“None of those!” cried Maibon. He bent down to the dwarf and whispered eagerly, “but I’ve heard tell that you Fair Folk have magic stones that can keep a man young forever. That’s what I want. I claim one for my reward.”

Doli snorted. “I might have known you’d pick something like that. As to be expected, you humans have it all muddled. There’s nothing can make a man young again. That’s even beyond the best of our skills. Those stones you’re babbling about? Well, yes, there are such things. But greatly overrated. All they’ll do is keep you from growing any older.”

“Just as good!” Maibon exclaimed. “I want no more than that!”

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Doli hesitated and frowned. “Ah—between the two of us, take the cook pot. Better all around. Those stones—we’d sooner not give them away. There’s a difficulty----“

“Because you’d rather keep them for yourselves,” Maibon broke in. “No, no, you shan’t cheat me of my due. Don’t put me off with excuses. I told you what I want, and that’s what I’ll have. Come, hand it over and not another word.”

Doli shrugged and opened a leather pouch that hung from his belt. He spilled a number of brightly colored pebbles into his palm, picked out one of the larger stones, and handed it to Maibon. The dwarf then jumped up, took to his heels, raced across the field, and disappeared into a thicket.

Laughing and crowing over his good fortune and his cleverness, Maibon hurried back to the cottage. There he told his wife what had happened and showed her the stone he had claimed from the Fair Folk.

“As I am now, so I’ll always be!” Maibon declared, flexing his arms and thumping his chest. “A fine figure of a man! Oh no, no gray beard and wrinkled brow for me!”

Instead of a sharing her husband’s jubilation, Modrono flung up her hands and burst out:

“Maibon, you’re a greater fool than ever I supposed! And selfish into the bargain! You’ve turned down treasures! You didn’t even ask that dwarf for so much as new jackets for the children! Nor a new apron for me!

You could have had the roof mended. Or the walls plastered. No, a stone is what you ask for! A bit of rock no better than you’ll dig up in the cow pasture!”

Crestfallen and sheepish, Maibon began thinking his wife was right and the dwarf had indeed given him no more than a common field stone.

“Eh, well, it’s true,” he stammered; “I feel no different than I did this morning, no better or worse, but ever way the same. The red-headed little wretch! He’ll rue the day if I ever find him again!”

So saying, Maibon threw the stone into the fireplace. That night he grumbled his way to bed, dreaming revenge on the dishonest dwarf.

Next morning, after a restless night, he yawned, rubbed his eyes and scratched his chin. Then he sat bolt upright in bed patting his cheeks in amazement.

“My beard!” he cried, tumbling out and hurrying to tell his wife.

“It hasn’t grown! Not by a hair! Can it be the dwarf didn’t cheat me after all?”

“Don’t talk to me about beards,” declared his wife as Maibon went to the fireplace, picked out the stone, and clutched it safely in both hands. “There’s trouble enough in the

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chicken roost. Those eggs should have hatched by now, but the hen is still brooding on her nest.”

“Let the chickens worry about that,” answered Maibon. “Wife, don’t you see what a grand thing’s happened to me? I’m not a minute older than I was yesterday. Bless that generous-hearted dwarf!”

“Let me lay hands on him and I’ll bless him,” retorted Modrona. “That’s all well and good for you. But what of me? You’ll stay as you are, but I’ll turn old and gray, and worn and wrinkled, and go doddering into my grave! And what of our little ones? They’ll grow up and have children of their own. And grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And you, younger than any of them. What a foolish sight you’ll be!”

But Maibon, gleeful over his good luck, paid his wife no heed and only tucked the stone deeper into his pocket.

Next day, however, the eggs had still not hatched.

“And that cow!” Modrona cried. “She’s long past due to calve, and no sign of a young one ready to be born!”

“Don’t bother me with cows and chickens,” replied Maibon. “They’ll all come right, in time. As for time, I’ve got all the time in the world!”

Having no appetite for breakfast, Maibon went out into his field. Of all the seeds he had sown there, however, he was surprised to see not one had sprouted. The field, which by now should have been covered with green shoots, lay bare and empty.

“Eh, things do seem a little late these days,” Maibon said to himself. “Well, no hurry. It’s that much less for me to do. The wheat isn’t growing, but neither are the weeds.”

Some days went by and still the eggs had not hatched, the cow had not calved, the wheat had not sprouted. And now Maibon saw that his apple tree showed no sign of even the smallest, greenest fruit.

“Maibon, it’s the fault of that stone!” wailed his wife. “Get rid of the thing!”

“Nonsense,” replied Maibon. “The season’s slow, that’s all.”

Nevertheless, his wife kept at him and kept at him so much that Maibon at last, and very reluctantly, threw the stone out the cottage window. Not too far, though, for he had it in the back of his mind to go later and find it again.

Next morning he had no need to go looking for it, for there was the stone, sitting on the window ledge.

“You see?” said Maibon to his wife. “Here it is, back again, so it’s a gift meant for me to keep.”

“Maibon! Cried his wife. “Will you get rid of it! We’ve had nothing but trouble since you brought it into the house. Now the baby’s fretting and fuming. Teething, poor little thing. But not a tooth to be seen! Maibon, the stone’s bad luck and I want no part of it!”

Protesting it was none of his doing that the stone had come back; Maibon carried it into the vegetable patch. He dug a hole, not a very deep one, and put the stone into it.

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Next day, there was the stone, above ground, winking and glittering.

“Maibon!” cried his wife. “Once and for all, if you care for your family, get rid of that cursed thing!”

Seeing no other way to keep to keep peace in the household, Maibon regretfully and unwillingly took the stone and threw it down the well, where it splashing into the water and sank from sight.

But that night, while he was trying vainly to sleep, there came such a rattling and clattering that Maibon clapped his hands over his ears, jumped out of bed, and went stumbling into the yard. At the well the bucket was jiggling back and forth and up and down at the end of the rope, and in the bottom of the bucket was the stone.

Now Maibon began to be truly distressed, not only for the toothless baby; the calfless cow, the fruitless tree, and the hen sitting desperately on her eggs, but for himself as well.

“Nothing’s moving along as it should,” he groaned. “I can’t tell one day from another. Nothing changes, there’s nothing to look forward to, nothing to show for my work. Why sow if the seeds don’t sprout? Why plant if there’s never a harvest? Why eat if I don’t get hungry? Why go to bed at night, or get up in the morning, or do anything at all? And the way it looks, so it will stay for ever and ever! I’ll shrivel from boredom if nothing else!”

“Maibon,” pleaded his wife, “for all our sakes, destroy the dreadful thing!”

Maibon tried now to pound the stone to dust with his heaviest mallet, but he could not so much as knock a chip from it. He put it against his grindstone without so much as scratching it. He set it on his anvil and belabored it with hammer and tongs, all to no avail.

At last he decided to bury the stone again, this time deeper than before. Picking up his shovel, he hurried to the field. But he suddenly halted and the shovel dropped from his hands. There, sitting cross-legged on a stump was the dwarf.

“You!” shouted Maibon, shaking his fist. “Cheat! Villain! Trickster! I did you a good turn, and see how you’ve repaid it!”

The dwarf blinked at the furious Maibon. “You mortals are an ungrateful crew. I gave you what you wanted.”

“You should have warned me!” burst out Maibon.

“I did,” Doli snapped back. “You wouldn’t listen. No, you yapped and yammered, bound to have your way. I told you we didn’t like to give away those stones. When you mortals get hold of one, you stay just as you are—but so does everything around you. Before you know it, you’re mired in time like a rock in the mud. You take my advice. Get rid of that stone as fast as you can.”

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do?” blurted Maibon. “I’ve buried it, thrown it down the well, pounded it with a hammer---it keeps coming back to me!”

“That’s because you really didn’t want to give it up,” Doli said. “In the back of your mind and the bottom of your heart, you didn’t want to change along with the rest of the world. So long as you feel that way, the stone is yours.”

“No, no!” cried Maibon. “I want no more of it. Whatever may happen, let it happen. That’s better than nothing happening at all. I’ve had my share of being young; .....

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I’ll take my share of being old. And when I come to the end of my days, at least I can say I’ve lived each one of them.”

“If you mean that,” answered Doli, “toss the stone onto the ground right there at the stump. Then get home and be about your business.”

Maibon flung down the stone, spun around, and set off as fast as he could. When he dared at last to glance back over his shoulder, fearful the stone might be bouncing along at his heels, he saw no sign of it, or of the redheaded dwarf.

Maibon gave a joyful cry, for at that same instant the fallow field was covered with green blades of wheat, the branches of the apple tree bent to the ground, so laden they were with fruit. He ran to

the cottage, threw his arms around his wife and children, and told them the good news. The hen hatched her chicks; the cow bore her calf. And Maibon laughed with glee when he saw the first tooth in the baby's mouth.

Never again did Maibon meet any of the Fair Folk, and he was just as glad of it. He and his wife and children and grandchildren lived many years, and Maibon was proud of his white hair and long beard as he had been of his sturdy arms and legs.

"Stones are all right in their way," said Maibon. "But the trouble with them is, they don't grow."