

Father Grumbler

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

African

Intermediate
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Once upon a time there lived a man who had nearly as many children as there were sparrows in the garden. He had to work very hard all day to get them enough to eat, and was often tired and cross, and abused everything and everybody, so that people called him 'Father Grumbler.'

By-and-by he grew weary of always working, and on Sundays he lay a long while in bed, instead of going to church. Then after a time he found it dull to sit so many hours by himself, thinking of nothing but how to pay the rent that was owing, and as the tavern across the road looked bright and cheerful, he walked in one day and sat down with his friends. 'It was just to chase away Care,' he said; but when he came out, hours and hours after, Care came out with him.

Father Grumbler entered his house feeling more dismal than when he left it, for he knew that he had wasted both his time and his money.

'I will go and see the Holy Man in the cave near the well,' he said to himself, 'and perhaps he can tell me why all the luck is for other people, and only misfortunes happen to me.' And he set out at once for the cave.

It was a long way off, and the road led over mountains and through valleys; but at last he reached the cave where the Holy Man dwelt, and knocked at the door.

'Who is there?' asked a voice from within.

'It is I, Holy Man, Father Grumbler, you know, who has as many children as sparrows in the garden.'

'Well, and what is it that you want?'

'I want to know why other people have all the luck, and only misfortunes happen to me!'

The Holy Man did not answer, but went into an inner cave, from which he came out bearing something in his hand. 'Do you see this basket?' said he. 'It is a magical basket, and if you are hungry you have only got to say: "Little basket, little basket, do your duty," and you will eat the best dinner you ever had in your life. But when you have had enough, be sure you don't forget to cry out: "That will do for to-day." Oh!—and one thing more—you need not show it to everybody and declare that I have give it to you. Do you understand?'

Father Grumbler was always accustomed to think of himself as so unlucky that he did not know whether the Holy Man was not playing a trick upon him; but he took the basket without being polite enough to say either 'Thank you,' or 'Good-morning,' and went away. However, he only waited till he was out of sight of the cave before he stooped down and whispered: 'Little basket, little basket, do your duty.'

Now the basket had a lid, so that he could not see what was inside, but he heard quite clearly strange noises, as if a sort of scuffling was going on. Then the lid burst open, and a quantity of delicious little white rolls came tumbling out one after the other, followed by a stream of small fishes all ready cooked. What a quantity there were to be sure! The whole road was covered with them, and the banks on each side were beginning to disappear. Father Grumbler felt quite frightened at the torrent, but at last he remembered what the Holy Man had told him, and cried at the top of his voice: 'Enough! enough! That will do for to-day!' And the lid of the basket closed with a snap.

Father Grumbler sighed with relief and happiness as he looked around him, and sitting down on a heap of stones, he ate till he could eat no more. Trout, salmon, turbot, soles, and a hundred other fishes whose names he did not know, lay boiled, fried, and grilled within reach of his hands. As the Holy Man had said, he had never eaten such a dinner; still, when he had done, he shook his head, and grumbled; 'Yes, there is plenty to eat, of course, but it only makes me thirsty, and there is not a drop to drink anywhere.'

Yet, somehow, he could never tell why, he looked up and saw the tavern in front of him, which he thought was

miles, and miles, and miles away.

‘Bring the best wine you have got, and two glasses, good mother,’ he said as he entered, ‘and if you are fond of fish there is enough here to feed the house. Only there is no need to chatter about it all over the place. You understand? Eh?’ And without waiting for an answer he whispered to the basket: ‘Little basket, little basket, do your duty.’ The innkeeper and his wife thought that their customer had gone suddenly mad, and watched him closely, ready to spring on him if he became violent; but both instinctively jumped backwards, nearly into the fire, as rolls and fishes of every kind came tumbling out of the basket, covering the tables and chairs and the floor, and even overflowing into the street.

‘Be quick, be quick, and pick them up,’ cried the man. ‘And if these are not enough, there are plenty more to be had for the asking.’

The innkeeper and his wife did not need telling twice. Down they went on their knees and gathered up everything they could lay hands on. But busy though they seemed, they found time to whisper to each other:

‘If we can only get hold of that basket it will make our fortune!’

So they began by inviting Father Grumbler to sit down to the table, and brought out the best wine in the cellar, hoping it might loosen his tongue. But Father Grumbler was wiser than they gave him credit for, and though they tried in all manner of ways to find out who had given him the basket, he put them off, and kept his secret to himself. Unluckily, though he did not SPEAK, he did drink, and it was not long before he fell fast asleep. Then the woman fetched from her kitchen a basket, so like the magic one that no one, without looking very closely, could tell the difference, and placed it in Father Grumbler’s hand, while she hid the other carefully away.

It was dinner time when the man awoke, and, jumping up hastily, he set out for home, where he found all the children gathered round a basin of thin soup, and pushing their wooden bowls forward, hoping to have the first spoonful. Their father burst into the midst of them, bearing his basket, and crying:

‘Don’t spoil your appetites, children, with that stuff. Do you see this basket? Well, I have only got to say, “Little basket, little basket, do your duty,” and you will see what will happen. Now you shall say it instead of me, for a treat.’

The children, wondering and delighted, repeated the words, but nothing happened. Again and again they tried, but the basket was only a basket, with a few scales of fish sticking to the bottom, for the innkeeper’s wife had taken it to market the day before.

‘What is the matter with the thing?’ cried the father at last, snatching the basket from them, and turning it all over, grumbling and swearing while he did so, under the eyes of his astonished wife and children, who did not know whether to cry or to laugh.

‘It certainly smells of fish,’ he said, and then he stopped, for a sudden thought had come to him.

‘Suppose it is not mine at all; supposing— Ah, the scoundrels!’

And without listening to his wife and children, who were frightened at his strange conduct and begged him to stay at home, he ran across to the tavern and burst open the door.

‘Can I do anything for you, Father Grumbler?’ asked the innkeeper’s wife in her softest voice.

‘I have taken the wrong basket—by mistake, of course,’ said he. ‘Here is yours, will you give me back my own?’

‘Why, what are you talking about?’ answered she. ‘You can see for yourself that there is no basket here.’

And though Father Grumbler DID look, it was quite true that none was to be seen.

‘Come, take a glass to warm you this cold day,’ said the woman, who was anxious to keep him in a good temper, and as this was an invitation Father Grumbler never refused, he tossed it off and left the house.

He took the road that led to the Holy Man’s cave, and made such haste that it was not long before he reached it.

‘Who is there?’ said a voice in answer to his knock.

‘It is me, it is me, Holy man. You know quite well. Father Grumbler, who has as many children as sparrows in

the garden.'

'But, my good man, it was only yesterday that I gave you a handsome present.'

'Yes, Holy Man, and here it is. But something has happened, I don't know what, and it won't work any more.'

'Well, put it down. I will go and see if I can find anything for you.'

In a few minutes the Holy Man returned with a cock under his arm.

'Listen to me,' he said, 'whenever you want money, you only have to say: "Show me what you can do, cock," and you will see some wonderful things. But, remember, it is not necessary to let all the world into the secret.'

'Oh no, Holy Man, I am not so foolish as that.'

'Nor to tell everybody that I gave it to you,' went on the Holy Man. 'I have not got these treasures by the dozen.'

And without waiting for an answer he shut the door.

As before, the distance seemed to have wonderfully shortened, and in a moment the tavern rose up in front of Father Grumbler. Without stopping to think, he went straight in, and found the innkeeper's wife in the kitchen making a cake.

'Where have you come from, with that fine red cock in your basket,' asked she, for the bird was so big that the lid would not shut down properly.

'Oh, I come from a place where they don't keep these things by the dozen,' he replied, sitting down in front of the table.

The woman said no more, but set before him a bottle of his favourite wine, and soon he began to wish to display his prize.

'Show me what you can do, cock,' cried he. And the cock stood up and flapped his wings three times, crowing 'coquerico' with a voice like a trumpet, and at each crow there fell from his beak golden drops, and diamonds as large as peas.

This time Father Grumbler did not invite the innkeeper's wife to pick up his treasures, but put his own hat under the cock's beak, so as to catch everything he let fall; and he did not see the husband and wife exchanging glances with each other which said, "That would be a splendid cock to put with our basket."

"Have another glass of wine?" suggested the innkeeper, when they had finished admiring the beauty of the cock, for they pretended not to have seen the gold or the diamonds. And Father Grumbler, nothing loth, drank one glass after another, till his head fell forward on the table, and once more he was sound asleep. Then the woman gently coaxed the cock from the basket and carried it off to her own poultry yard, from which she brought one exactly like it, and popped it in its place.

Night was falling when the man awoke, and throwing proudly some grains of gold on the table to pay for the wine he had drunk, he tucked the cock comfortably into his basket and set out for home.

His wife and all the children were waiting for him at the door, and as soon as she caught sight of him she broke out:

"You are a nice man to go wasting your time and your money drinking in that tavern, and leaving us to starve! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"You don't know what you are talking of," he answered. "Money? Why, I have gold and diamonds now, as much as I want. Do you see that cock? Well, you have only to say to him, "Show me what you can do, cock," and something splendid will happen."

Neither wife nor children were inclined to put much faith in him after their last experience; however, they thought it was worth trying, and did as he told them. The cock flew round the room like a mad thing, and crowed till their heads nearly split with the noise; but no gold or diamonds dropped on the brick floor— not the tiniest grain of either.

Father Grumbler stared in silence for an instant, and then he began to swear so loudly that even his family, accustomed as they were to his language, wondered at him.

At last he grew a little quieter, but remained as puzzled as ever.

'Can I have forgotten the words? But I KNOW that was what he said! And I saw the diamonds with my own eyes!' Then suddenly he seized the cock, shut it into the basket, and rushed out of the house.

His heavy wooden shoes clattered as he ran along the road, and he made such haste that the stars were only just beginning to come out when he reached the cave of the Holy Man.

'Who is that knocking?' asked a voice from within.

'It is me! It is me! Holy Man! you know! Father—'

'But, my good fellow, you really should give some one else a chance. This is the third time you have been—and at such an hour, too!'

'Oh, yes, Holy Man, I know it is very late, but you will forgive me! It is your cock—there is something the matter. It is like the basket. Look!'

'THAT my cock? THAT my basket? Somebody has played you a trick, my good man!'

'A trick?' repeated Father Grumbler, who began to understand what had happened. 'Then it must have been those two—'

'I warned you not to show them to anybody,' said the Holy Man. 'You deserve—but I will give you one more chance.' And, turning, he unhooked something from the wall.

'When you wish to dust your own jacket or those of your friends,' he said, 'you have only got to say, "Flack, flick, switch, be quick," and you will see what happens. That is all I have to tell you.' And, smiling to himself, the Holy Man pushed Father Grumbler out of the cave.

'Ah, I understand now,' muttered the good man, as he took the road home; 'but I think I have got you two rascals!' and he hurried on to the tavern with his basket under his arm, and the cock and the switch both inside.

'Good evening, friends!' he said, as he entered the inn. 'I am very hungry, and should be glad if you would roast this cock for me as soon as possible. THIS cock and no other—mind what I say,' he went on. 'Oh, and another thing! You can light the fire with this basket. When you have done that I will show you something I have in my

bag,' and, as he spoke, he tried to imitate the smile that the Holy Man had given HIM.

These directions made the innkeeper's wife very uneasy. However, she said nothing, and began to roast the cock, while her husband did his best to make the man sleepy with wine, but all in vain.

After dinner, which he did not eat without grumbling, for the cock was very tough, the man struck his hand on the table, and said: 'Now listen to me. Go and fetch my cock and my basket, at once. Do you hear?'

'Your cock, and your basket, Father Grumbler? But you have just- -'

'MY cock and MY basket!' interrupted he. 'And, if you are too deaf and too stupid to understand what that means, I have got something which may help to teach you.' And opening the bag, he cried: 'Flack, flick, switch, be quick.'

And flack! flick! like lightening a white switch sprang out of the bag, and gave such hearty blows to the innkeeper and his wife, and to Father Grumbler into the bargain, that they all jumped as high as feathers when a mattress is shaken.

'Stop! stop! make it stop, and you shall have back your cock and basket,' cried the man and his wife. And Father Grumbler, who had no wish to go on, called out between his hops: 'Stop then, can't you? That is enough for to-day!'

But the switch paid no attention, and dealt out its blows as before, and MIGHT have been dealing them to this day, if the Holy Man had not heard their cries and come to the rescue. 'Into the bag, quick!' said he, and the switch obeyed.

'Now go and fetch me the cock and the basket,' and the woman went without a word, and placed them on the table.

'You have all got what you deserved,' continued the Holy Man, 'and I have no pity for any of you. I shall take my treasures home, and perhaps some day I may find a man who knows how to make the best of the chances that are given to him. But that will never be YOU,' he added, turning to Father Grumbler.

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