



Mighty Mikko: The Story of a Poor Woodsman and a Grateful Fox

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Finnish

Easy

19 min read

There was once an old woodsman and his wife who had an only son named Mikko. As the mother lay dying the young man wept bitterly.

“When you are gone, my dear mother,” he said, “there will be no one left to think of me.”

The poor woman comforted him as best she could and said to him:

“You will still have your father.”

Shortly after the woman’s death, the old man, too, was taken ill.

“Now, indeed, I shall be left desolate and alone,” Mikko thought, as he sat beside his father’s bedside and saw him grow weaker and weaker.

“My boy,” the old man said just before he died, “I have nothing to leave you but the three snares with which

these many years I have caught wild animals. Those snares now belong to you. When I am dead, go into the woods and if you find a wild creature caught in any of them, free it gently and bring it home alive.”

After his father’s death, Mikko remembered the snares and went out to the woods to see them. The first was empty and also the second, but in the third he found a little red Fox. He carefully lifted the spring that had shut down on one of the Fox’s feet and then carried the little creature home in his arms. He shared his supper with it and when he lay down to sleep the Fox curled up at his feet. They lived together some time until they became close friends.

“Mikko,” said the Fox one day, “why are you so sad?”

“Because I’m lonely.”

“Pooh!” said the Fox. “That’s no way for a young man to talk! You ought to get married! Then you wouldn’t feel lonely!”

“Married!” Mikko repeated. “How can I get married? I can’t marry a poor girl because I’m too poor myself and a rich girl wouldn’t marry me.”

“Nonsense!” said the Fox. “You’re a fine well set up young man and you’re kind and gentle. What more could a princess ask?”

Mikko laughed to think of a princess wanting him for a husband.

“I mean what I say!” the Fox insisted. “Take our own Princess now. What would you think of marrying her?”

Mikko laughed louder than before.

“I have heard,” he said, “that she is the most beautiful princess in the world! Any man would be happy to marry her!”

“Very well,” the Fox said, “if you feel that way about her then I’ll arrange the wedding for you.”

With that the little Fox actually did trot off to the royal castle and gain audience with the King.

“My master sends you greetings,” the Fox said, “and he begs you to loan him your bushel measure.”

“My bushel measure!” the King repeated in surprise. “Who is your master and why does he want my bushel

measure?”

“Ssh!” the Fox whispered as though he didn’t want the courtiers to hear what he was saying. Then slipping up quite close to the King he murmured in his ear:

“Surely you have heard of Mikko, haven’t you?—Mighty Mikko as he’s called.”

The King had never heard of any Mikko who was known as Mighty Mikko but, thinking that perhaps he should have heard of him, he shook his head and murmured:

“H’m! Mikko! Mighty Mikko! Oh, to be sure! Yes, yes, of course!”

“My master is about to start off on a journey and he needs a bushel measure for a very particular reason.”

“I understand! I understand!” the King said, although he didn’t understand at all, and he gave orders that the bushel measure which they used in the storeroom of the castle be brought in and given to the Fox.

The Fox carried off the measure and hid it in the woods. Then he scurried about to all sorts of little out of the way nooks and crannies where people had hidden their savings and he dug up a gold piece here and a silver piece there until he had a handful. Then he went back to the woods and stuck the various coins in the cracks of the measure. The next day he returned to the King.

“My master, Mighty Mikko,” he said, “sends you thanks, O King, for the use of your bushel measure.”

The King held out his hand and when the Fox gave him the measure he peeped inside to see if by chance it contained any trace of what had recently been measured. His eye of course at once caught the glint of the gold and silver coins lodged in the cracks.

“Ah!” he said, thinking Mikko must be a very mighty lord indeed to be so careless of his wealth; “I should like to meet your master. Won’t you and he come and visit me?”

This was what the Fox wanted the King to say but he pretended to hesitate.

“I thank your Majesty for the kind invitation,” he said, “but I fear my master can’t accept it just now. He wants to get married soon and we are about to start off on a long journey to inspect a number of foreign princesses.”

This made the King all the more anxious to have Mikko visit him at once for he thought that if Mikko should

see his daughter before he saw those foreign princesses he might fall in love with her and marry her. So he said to the Fox:

“My dear fellow, you must prevail on your master to make me a visit before he starts out on his travels! You will, won’t you?”

The Fox looked this way and that as if he were too embarrassed to speak.

“Your Majesty,” he said at last, “I pray you pardon my frankness. The truth is you are not rich enough to entertain my master and your castle isn’t big enough to house the immense retinue that always attends him.”

The King, who by this time was frantic to see Mikko, lost his head completely.

“My dear Fox,” he said, “I’ll give you anything in the world if you prevail upon your master to visit me at once! Couldn’t you suggest to him to travel with a modest retinue this time?”

The Fox shook his head.

“No. His rule is either to travel with a great retinue or to go on foot disguised as a poor woodsman attended only by me.”

“Couldn’t you prevail on him to come to me disguised as a poor woodsman?” the King begged. “Once he was here, I could place gorgeous clothes at his disposal.”

But still the Fox shook his head.

“I fear Your Majesty’s wardrobe doesn’t contain the kind of clothes my master is accustomed to.”

“I assure you I’ve got some very good clothes,” the King said. “Come along this minute and we’ll go through them and I’m sure you’ll find some that your master would wear.”

So they went to a room which was like a big wardrobe with hundreds and hundreds of hooks upon which were hung hundreds of coats and breeches and embroidered shirts. The King ordered his attendants to bring the costumes down one by one and place them before the Fox.

They began with the plainer clothes.

“Good enough for most people,” the Fox said, “but not for my master.”

Then they took down garments of a finer grade.

“I’m afraid you’re going to all this trouble for nothing,” the Fox said. “Frankly now, don’t you realize that my master couldn’t possibly put on any of these things!”

The King, who had hoped to keep for his own use his most gorgeous clothes of all, now ordered these to be shown.

The Fox looked at them sideways, sniffed them critically, and at last said:

“Well, perhaps my master would consent to wear these for a few days. They are not what he is accustomed to wear but I will say this for him: he is not proud.”

The King was overjoyed.

“Very well, my dear Fox, I’ll have the guest chambers put in readiness for your master’s visit and I’ll have all these, my finest clothes, laid out for him. You won’t disappoint me, will you?”

“I’ll do my best,” the Fox promised.

With that he bade the King a civil good day and ran home to Mikko.

The next day as the Princess was peeping out of an upper window of the castle, she saw a young woodsman approaching accompanied by a Fox. He was a fine stalwart youth and the Princess, who knew from the presence of the Fox that he must be Mikko, gave a long sigh and confided to her serving maid:

“I think I could fall in love with that young man if he really were only a woodsman!”

Later when she saw him arrayed in her father’s finest clothes—which looked so well on Mikko that no one even recognized them as the King’s—she lost her heart completely and when Mikko was presented to her she blushed and trembled just as any ordinary girl might before a handsome young man.

All the Court was equally delighted with Mikko. The ladies went into ecstasies over his modest manners, his fine figure, and the gorgeousness of his clothes, and the old graybeard Councilors, nodding their heads in approval, said to each other:

“Nothing of the coxcomb about this young fellow! In spite of his great wealth see how politely he listens to us when we talk!”

The next day the Fox went privately to the King, and said:

“My master is a man of few words and quick judgment. He bids me tell you that your daughter, the Princess, pleases him mightily and that, with your approval, he will make his addresses to her at once.”

The King was greatly agitated and began:

“My dear Fox—”

But the Fox interrupted him to say:

“Think the matter over carefully and give me your decision to-morrow.”

So the King consulted with the Princess and with his Councilors and in a short time the marriage was arranged and the wedding ceremony actually performed!

“Didn’t I tell you?” the Fox said, when he and Mikko were alone after the wedding.

“Yes,” Mikko acknowledged, “you did promise that I should marry the Princess. But, tell me, now that I am married what am I to do? I can’t live on here forever with my wife.”

“Put your mind at rest,” the Fox said. “I’ve thought of everything. Just do as I tell you and you’ll have nothing to regret. To-night say to the King: ‘It is now only fitting that you should visit me and see for yourself the sort of castle over which your daughter is hereafter to be mistress!’”

When Mikko said this to the King, the King was [38] overjoyed for now that the marriage had actually taken place he was wondering whether he hadn’t perhaps been a little hasty. Mikko’s words reassured him and he eagerly accepted the invitation.

On the morrow the Fox said to Mikko:

“Now I’ll run on ahead and get things ready for you.”

“But where are you going?” Mikko said, frightened at the thought of being deserted by his little friend.

The Fox drew Mikko aside and whispered softly:

“A few days’ march from here there is a very gorgeous castle belonging to a wicked old dragon who is known as the Worm. I think the Worm’s castle would just about suit you.”

“I’m sure it would,” Mikko agreed. “But how are we to get it away from the Worm?”

“Trust me,” the Fox said. “All you need do is this: lead the King and his courtiers along the main highway until by noon to-morrow you reach a crossroads. Turn there to the left and go straight on until you see the tower of the Worm’s castle. If you meet any men by the wayside, shepherds or the like, ask them whose men they are and show no surprise at their answer. So now, dear master, farewell until we meet again at your beautiful castle.”

The little Fox trotted off at a smart pace and Mikko and the Princess and the King attended by the whole Court followed in more leisurely fashion.

The little Fox, when he had left the main highway at the crossroads, soon met ten woodsmen with axes over their shoulders. They were all dressed in blue smocks of the same cut.

“Good day,” the Fox said politely. “Whose men are you?”

“Our master is known as the Worm,” the woodsmen told him.

“My poor, poor lads!” the Fox said, shaking his head sadly.

“What’s the matter?” the woodsmen asked.

For a few moments the Fox pretended to be too overcome with emotion to speak. Then he said:

“My poor lads, don’t you know that the King is coming with a great force to destroy the Worm and all his people?”

The woodsmen were simple fellows and this news threw them into great consternation.

“Is there no way for us to escape?” they asked.

The Fox put his paw to his head and thought.

“Well,” he said at last, “there is one way you might escape and that is by telling every one who asks you that you are the Mighty Mikko’s men. But if you value your lives never again say that your master is the Worm.”

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!” the woodsmen at once began repeating over and over. “We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

A little farther on the road the Fox met twenty grooms, dressed in the same blue smocks, who were tending a hundred beautiful horses. The Fox talked to the twenty grooms as he had talked to the woodsmen and before he left them they, too, were shouting:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

Next the Fox came to a huge flock of a thousand sheep tended by thirty shepherds all dressed in the Worm’s blue smocks. He stopped and talked to them until he had them roaring out:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

Then the Fox trotted on until he reached the castle of the Worm. He found the Worm himself inside lolling lazily about. He was a huge dragon and had been a great warrior in his day. In fact his castle and his lands and his servants and his possessions had all been won in battle. But now for many years no one had cared to fight him and he had grown fat and lazy.

“Good day,” the Fox said, pretending to be very breathless and frightened. “You’re the Worm, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” the dragon said, boastfully, “I am the great Worm!”

The Fox pretended to grow more agitated.

“My poor fellow, I am sorry for you! But of course none of us can expect to live forever. Well, I must hurry along. I thought I would just stop and say good-by.”

Made uneasy by the Fox’s words, the Worm cried out:

“Wait just a minute! What’s the matter?”

The Fox was already at the door but at the Worm’s entreaty he paused and said over his shoulder:

“Why, my poor fellow, you surely know, don’t you? that the King with a great force is coming to destroy you and all your people!”

“What!” the Worm gasped, turning a sickly green with fright. He knew he was fat and helpless and could never again fight as in the years gone by.

“Don’t go just yet!” he begged the Fox. “When is the King coming?”

“He’s on the highway now! That’s why I must be going! Good-by!”

“My dear Fox, stay just a moment and I’ll reward you richly! Help me to hide so that the King won’t find me! What about the shed where the linen is stored? I could crawl under the linen and then if you locked the door from the outside the King could never find me.”

“Very well,” the Fox agreed, “but we must hurry!”

So they ran outside to the shed where the linen was kept and the Worm hid himself under the linen. The Fox locked the door, then set fire to the shed, and soon there was nothing left of that wicked old dragon, the Worm, but a handful of ashes.

The Fox now called together the dragon’s household and talked them over to Mikko as he had the woodsmen and the grooms and the shepherds.

Meanwhile the King and his party were slowly covering the ground over which the Fox had sped so quickly. When they came to the ten woodsmen in blue smocks, the King said:

“I wonder whose woodsmen those are.”

One of his attendants asked the woodsmen and the ten of them shouted out at the top of their voices:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

Mikko said nothing and the King and all the Court were impressed anew with his modesty.

A little farther on they met the twenty grooms with [43] their hundred prancing horses. When the grooms were questioned, they answered with a shout:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

“The Fox certainly spoke the truth,” the King thought to himself, “when he told me of Mikko’s riches!”

A little later the thirty shepherds when they were questioned made answer in a chorus that was deafening to hear:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

The sight of the thousand sheep that belonged to his son-in-law made the King feel poor and humble in comparison and the courtiers whispered among themselves:

“For all his simple manner, Mighty Mikko must be a richer, more powerful lord than the King himself! In fact it is only a very great lord indeed who could be so simple!”

At last they reached the castle which from the blue smocked soldiers that guarded the gateway they knew to be Mikko’s. The Fox came out to welcome the King’s party and behind him in two rows all the household servants. These, at a signal from the Fox, cried out in one voice:

“We are Mighty Mikko’s men!”

Then Mikko in the same simple manner that he would have used in his father’s mean little hut in the woods bade the King and his followers welcome and they all entered the castle where they found a great feast already prepared and waiting.

The King stayed on for several days and the more he saw of Mikko the better pleased he was that he had him for a son-in-law.

When he was leaving he said to Mikko:

“Your castle is so much grander than mine that I hesitate ever asking you back for a visit.”

But Mikko reassured the King by saying earnestly:

“My dear father-in-law, when first I entered your castle I thought it was the most beautiful castle in the world!”

The King was flattered and the courtiers whispered among themselves:

“How affable of him to say that when he knows very well how much grander his own castle is!”

When the King and his followers were safely gone, the little red Fox came to Mikko and said:

“Now, my master, you have no reason to feel sad and lonely. You are lord of the most beautiful castle in the world and you have for wife a sweet and lovely Princess. You have no longer any need of me, so I am going to bid you farewell.”

Mikko thanked the little Fox for all he had done and the little Fox trotted off to the woods.

So you see that Mikko’s poor old father, although he had no wealth to leave his son, was really the cause of all Mikko’s good fortune, for it was he who told Mikko in the first place to carry home alive anything he might find caught in the snares.

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