

# *The Old Woman and the Old*

## *Man*

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Romanian

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*Intermediate*

*4 min read*

Once upon a time there was an old man and an old woman, who had not a single child in their old age, and it was very hard for them, because they had no help, not even to light the fire; when they came home from working in the fields, they were obliged to begin with lighting the fire and then prepare their food.

One day, when they were fretting and consulting each other, they determined to look for children whatever might happen.

The old man went one way, the old woman another, to find a child somewhere.

The old man met a dog, the old woman a mouse. When they met again the old woman asked:

“Husband, what have you found?”

“A little dog. And you, wife?”

“A little mouse.”

They now agreed to adopt the mouse for a child and drive the dog away, so the couple returned with the mouse, greatly delighted because they had found what they sought, that is, a child.

On reaching home the old woman began to make a fire; then she set the pot of sour buttermilk on to boil, and left the mouse to watch that it did not fall over, while she went to work with the old man in the fields.

After she had gone, the porridge boiled and splashed over the top of the pot; the mouse, which was sitting on the hearth, said:

“Porridge, don’t jump on me or I’ll jump on you.” But the buttermilk did not stop and still splashed over the brim. When the mouse saw this, it grew angry and leaped straight into the pot.

When the old people returned from hoeing and called their child, there was no child to be found. After searching for it a long time without success, they sat sadly down to eat their dinner. Yet they ate the porridge with great relish until, when the old woman emptied the dish she found at the bottom—what? The little mouse, their child, dead! She began:

“Husband, husband, here it is, our child is drowned in the buttermilk.”

“How is that possible, wife!” replied the bearded old fellow.

When they saw this terrible accident, they began to weep and lament bitterly; the old man in his grief tore his beard, and the old woman pulled the hair out of her head.

The old man left the house with tearful eyes and touzled beard; on the bough of a tree, in front of the hut, perched a magpie, which seeing him asked:

“Why have you pulled out your beard, old man?”

“Oh, my dear bird, how can I help tearing my beard, when my little child has drowned itself in the pot of porridge and is dead?”

When the magpie heard this, it tore out all its feathers, leaving nothing but the tail.

The old woman set off with her bald head to the well, to get a jug of water to wash the dead body of her child.

By the well stood a girl with a pitcher, who had come to draw water; when she saw the old woman she asked:

“My, old woman, why have you torn the hair out of your head till you are perfectly bald?”

“Alas, my darling, how can I help tearing my hair and making myself bald, when my little mouse is dead?”

The girl, in her grief, smashed her pitcher in two, then she hurried to the empress to tell her the story; the royal lady, as soon as she heard it, fell down from the balcony, broke her ankle, and died, while the emperor, out of love for his wife, went away and became a monk in the monastery of Lies, beyond the Country of Truth; while I acquaintance made with grandsires old, To whom this simple tale I told, It seemed to them such perfect chaff, That its bare memory raised a laugh.

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