



The Barber's Clever Wife

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Indian

Intermediate

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Once upon a time there lived a barber, who was such a poor silly creature that he couldn't even ply his trade decently, but snipped off his customers' ears instead of their hair, and cut their throats instead of shaving them. So of course he grew poorer every day, till at last he found himself with nothing left in his house but his wife and his razor, both of whom were as sharp as sharp could be.

For his wife was an exceedingly clever person, who was continually rating her husband for his stupidity; and when she saw they hadn't a farthing left, she fell as usual to scolding.

But the barber took it very calmly. 'What is the use of making such a fuss, my dear?' said he; 'you've told me all this before, and I quite agree with you. I never did work, I never could work, and I never will work.

That is the fact!'

'Then you must beg!' returned his wife, 'for I will not starve to please you! Go to the palace, and beg something of the King. There is a wedding feast going on, and he is sure to give alms to the poor.'

'Very well, my dear!' said the barber submissively. He was rather afraid of his clever wife, so he did as he was bid, and going to the palace, begged of the King to give him something.

‘Something?’ asked the King; ‘what thing?’

Now the barber’s wife had not mentioned anything in particular, and the barber was far too addle-pated to think of anything by himself, so he answered cautiously, ‘Oh, something!’

‘Will a piece of land do?’ said the King.

Whereupon the lazy barber, glad to be helped out of the difficulty, remarked that perhaps a piece of land would do as well as anything else.

Then the King ordered a piece of waste, outside the city, should be given to the barber, who went home quite satisfied.

‘Well! what did you get?’ asked the clever wife, who was waiting impatiently for his return. ‘Give it me quick, that I may go and buy bread!’

And you may imagine how she scolded when she found he had only got a piece of waste land.

‘But land is land!’ remonstrated the barber; ‘it can’t run away, so we must always have something now!’

‘Was there ever such a dunderhead?’ raged the clever wife. ‘What good is ground unless we can till it? and where are we to get bullocks and ploughs?’

But being, as we have said, an exceedingly clever person, she set her wits to work, and soon thought of a plan whereby to make the best of a bad bargain.

She took her husband with her, and set off to the piece of waste land; then, bidding her husband imitate her, she began walking about the field, and peering anxiously into the ground. But when any-^{*} body came that way, she would sit down, and pretend to be doing nothing at all.

Now it so happened that seven thieves were hiding in a thicket hard by, and they watched the barber and his wife all day, until they became convinced something mysterious was going on. So at sunset they sent one of their number to try and find out what it was.

‘Well, the fact is,’ said the barber’s wife, after beating about the bush for some-time, and with many

injunctions to strict secrecy, 'this field belonged to my grandfather, who buried five pots full of gold in it, and we were just trying to discover the exact spot before beginning to dig. You won't tell any one, will you?'

The thief promised he wouldn't, of course, but the moment the barber and his wife went home, he called his companions, and telling them of the hidden treasure, set them to work. All night long they dug and delved, till the field looked as if it had been ploughed seven times over, and they were as tired as tired could be; but never a gold piece, nor a silver piece, nor a farthing did they find, so when dawn came they went away disgusted.

The barber's wife, when she found the field so beautifully ploughed, laughed heartily at the success of her stratagem, and going to the corn-dealer's shop, borrowed some rice to sow in the field. This the corn-dealer willingly gave her, for he reckoned he would get it back threefold at harvest time. And so he did, for never was there such a crop!—the barber's wife paid her debts, kept enough for the house, and sold the rest for a great crock of gold pieces.

Now, when the thieves saw this, they were very angry indeed, and going to the barber's house, said, 'Give us our share of the harvest, for we tilled the ground, as you very well know.'

'I told you there was gold in the ground,' laughed the barber's wife, 'but you didn't find it. I have, and there's a crock full of it in the house, only you rascals shall never have a farthing of it!'

'Very well!' said the thieves; 'look out for yourself to-night. If you won't give us our share we'll take it!'

So that night one of the thieves hid himself in the house, intending to open the door to his comrades when the housefolk were asleep; but the barber's wife saw him with the corner of her eye, and determined to lead him a dance. Therefore, when her husband, who was in a dreadful state of alarm, asked her what she had done with the gold pieces, she replied, 'Put them where no one will find them,—under the sweetmeats, in the crock that stands in the niche by the door.'

The thief chuckled at hearing this, and after waiting till all was quiet, he crept out, and feeling about for the crock, made off with it, whispering to his comrades that he had got the prize. Fearing pursuit, they fled to a thicket, where they sat down to divide the spoil.

'She said there were sweetmeats on the top,' said the thief; 'I will divide them first, and then we can eat them,

for it is hungry work, this waiting and watching.'

So he divided what he thought were the sweetmeats as well as he could in the dark. Now in reality the crock was full of all sorts of horrible things that the barber's wife had put there on purpose, and so when the thieves crammed its contents into their mouths, you may imagine what faces they made and how they vowed revenge.

But when they returned next day to threaten and repeat their claim to a share of the crop, the barber's wife only laughed at them.

'Have a care!' they cried; 'twice you have fooled us—once by making us dig all night, and next by feeding us on filth and breaking our caste. It will be our turn to-night!'

Then another thief hid himself in the house, but the barber's wife saw him with half an eye, and when her husband asked, 'What have you done with the gold, my dear? I hope you haven't put it under the pillow?' she answered, 'Don't be alarmed; it is out of the house. I have hung it in the branches of the nîm tree outside. No one will think of looking for it there!'

The hidden thief chuckled, and when the house-folk were asleep he slipped out and told his companions.

'Sure enough, there it is!' cried the captain of the band, peering up into the branches. 'One of you go up and fetch it down.' Now what he saw was really a hornets' nest, full of great big brown and yellow hornets.

So one of the thieves climbed up the tree; but when he came close to the nest, and was just reaching up to take hold of it, a hornet flew out and stung him on the thigh. He immediately clapped his hand to the spot.

'Oh, you thief!' cried out the rest from below, 'you're pocketing the gold pieces, are you? Oh! shabby! shabby!'—For you see it was very dark, and when the poor man clapped his hand to the place where he had been stung, they thought he was putting his hand in his pocket.

'I assure you I'm not doing anything of the kind!' retorted the thief; 'but there is something that bites in this tree!'

Just at that moment another hornet stung him on the breast, and he clapped his hand there.

'Fie! fie for shame! We saw you do it that time!' cried the rest.

‘Just you stop that at once, or we will make you!’

So they sent up another thief, but he fared no better, for by this time the hornets were thoroughly roused, and they stung the poor man all over, so that he kept clapping his hands here, there, and everywhere.

‘Shame! Shabby! Ssh-sh!’ bawled the rest; and then one after another they climbed into the tree, determined to share the booty, and one after another began clapping their hands about their bodies, till it came to the captain’s turn. Then he, intent on having the prize, seized hold of the hornets’ nest, and as the branch on which they were all standing broke at the selfsame moment, they all came tumbling down with the hornets’ nest on top of them. And then, in spite of bumps and bruises, you can imagine what a stampede there was!

After this the barber’s wife had some peace, for every one of the seven thieves was in hospital. In fact, they were laid up for so long a time that she began to think that they were never coming back again, and ceased to be on the look-out. But she was wrong, for one night, when she had left the window open, she was awakened by whisperings outside, and at once recognised the thieves’ voices. She gave herself up for lost; but, determined not to yield without a struggle, she seized her husband’s razor, crept to the side of the window, and stood quite still. By and by the first thief began to creep through cautiously. She just waited till the tip of his nose was visible, and then, flash!—she sliced it off with the razor as clean as a whistle.

‘Confound it!’ yelled the thief, drawing back mighty quick; ‘I’ve cut my nose on something!’

‘Hush-sh-sh-sh!’ whispered the others, ‘you’ll wake some one. Go on!’

‘Not I!’ said the thief; ‘I’m bleeding like a pig!’

‘Pooh!—knocked your nose against the shutter, I suppose,’ returned the second thief. ‘I’ll go!’

But, swish!—off went the tip of his nose too.

‘Dear me!’ said he ruefully, ‘there certainly is something sharp inside!’

‘A bit of bamboo in the lattice, most likely,’ remarked the third thief. ‘I’ll go!’

And, flick!—off went his nose too.

‘It is most extraordinary!’ he exclaimed, hurriedly retiring; ‘I feel exactly as if some one had cut the tip of my

nose off!

‘Rubbish!’ said the fourth thief. ‘What cowards you all are! Let me go!’

But he fared no better, nor the fifth thief, nor the sixth.

‘My friends!’ said the captain, when it came to his turn, ‘you are all disabled. One man must remain unhurt to protect the wounded. Let us return another night.’—He was a cautious man, you see, and valued his nose.

So they crept away sulkily, and the barber’s wife lit a lamp, and gathering up all the nose tips, put them away safely in a little box.

Now before the robbers’ noses were healed over, the hot weather set in, and the barber and his wife, finding it warm sleeping in the house, put their beds outside; for they made sure the thieves would not return. But they did, and seizing such a good opportunity for revenge, they lifted up the wife’s bed, and carried her off fast asleep. She woke to find herself borne along on the heads of four of the thieves, whilst the other three ran beside her. She gave herself up for lost, and though she thought, and thought, and thought, she could find no way of escape; till, as luck would have it, the robbers paused to take breath under a banyan tree. Quick as lightning, she seized hold of a branch that was within reach, and swung herself into the tree, leaving her quilt on the bed just as if she were still in it.

‘Let us rest a bit here,’ said the thieves who were carrying the bed; ‘there is plenty of time, and we are tired. She is dreadfully heavy!’

The barber’s wife could hardly help laughing, but she had to keep very still, for it was a bright moonlight night; and the robbers, after setting down their burden, began to squabble as to who should take first watch.

At last they determined that it should be the captain, for the others had really barely recovered from the shock of having their noses sliced off; so they lay down to sleep, while the captain walked up and down, watching the bed, and the barber’s wife sat perched up in the tree like a great bird.

Suddenly an idea came into her head, and drawing her white veil becomingly over her face, she began to sing softly. The robber captain looked up, and saw the veiled figure of a woman in the tree. Of course he was a little surprised, but being a goodlooking young fellow, and rather vain of his appearance, he jumped at once to the

conclusion that it was a fairy who had fallen in love with his handsome face. For fairies do such things sometimes, especially on moonlight nights. So he twirled his moustaches, and strutted about, waiting for her to speak. But when she went on singing, and took no notice of him, he stopped and called out, 'Come down, my beauty! I won't hurt you!'

But still she went on singing; so he climbed up into the tree, determined to attract her attention. When he came quite close, she turned away her head and sighed.

'What is the matter, my beauty?' he asked tenderly. 'Of course you are a fairy, and have fallen in love with me, but there is nothing to sigh at in that, surely?'

'Ah—ah—ah!' said the barber's wife, with another sigh, 'I believe you're fickle! Men with long-pointed noses always are!'

But the robber captain swore he was the most constant of men; yet still the fairy sighed and sighed, until he almost wished his nose had been shortened too.

'You are telling stories, I am sure!' said the pretended fairy. 'Just let me touch your tongue with the tip of mine, and then I shall be able to taste if there are fibs about!'

So the robber captain put out his tongue, and, snip!—the barber's wife bit the tip off clean!

What with the fright and the pain, he tumbled off the branch, and fell bump on the ground, where he sat with his legs very wide apart, looking as if he had come from the skies.

'What is the matter?' cried his comrades, awakened by the noise of his fall.

'Bul-ul-a-bul-ul-ul!' answered he, pointing up into the tree; for of course he could not speak plainly without the tip of his tongue.

'What—is—the—matter?' they bawled in his ear, as if that would do any good.

'Bul-ul-a-bul-ul-ul!' said he, still pointing upwards.

'The man is bewitched!' cried one; 'there must be a ghost in the tree!'

Just then the barber's wife began flapping her veil and howling; whereupon, without waiting to look, the thieves in a terrible fright set off at a run, dragging their leader with them; and the barber's wife, coming down from the tree, put her bed on her head, and walked quietly home.

After this, the thieves came to the conclusion that it was no use trying to gain their point by force, so they went to law to claim their share. But the barber's wife pleaded her own cause so well, bringing out the nose and tongue tips as witnesses, that the King made the barber his Wazîr, saying, 'He will never do a foolish thing as long as his wife is alive!'

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