



The Magic Cap

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Easy

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There was once a poor countryman, of whom his neighbours said that he had no more wits than he was born with, and that was not many. He was, indeed a simple-minded fellow, and anybody could get the better of him. One day the countryman's wife said to him: "Jan, put on your best smock and your soundest clogs, and go to the market to try and sell our calf. She is a good calf and you ought to get at least a hundred francs for her."

Away went Jan, along the road to the market town, with the calf behind him. He felt quite glad to be out on this fine spring day, and he hummed a merry tune as he plodded along. Three students who were lounging at the door of an inn saw him pass, and, marking his air of simplicity, thought it would be good fun to play a joke upon him, so one of them went up to him and said:

"Good-morning, friend! How much are you asking for your goat?"

"Goat?" answered the peasant in surprise. "This is not a goat, but a calf!"

"Indeed!" said the student politely. "And who told you that?"

"It was my wife," answered the peasant. "'Jan,' she said, 'go to the market and try to sell our calf.' I am sure she said calf. I could not make a mistake about such a thing!"

“Your wife was playing a joke on you,” said the student. “Anybody can see that is a goat. If you don’t believe me, ask the next person you meet on the road.” And he went off, laughing.

Jan continued his walk, a little troubled in his mind, and before very long he saw the second of the students coming towards him. “Stay a minute, sir,” he cried. “Do you mind looking at this animal of mine and telling me what sort of a creature it is?”

“Why, a goat, of course,” answered the student.

“You’re wrong,” said the peasant. “It’s a calf. My wife says so, and she could not be mistaken!”

“Have it your own way!” replied the student, “but if you’ll take my advice you won’t pretend that animal is a calf when you get to the market, unless you want to be hooted out of the town!”

“Ah!” said Jan, and he went on his way, muttering to himself, and casting many a troubled glance at the innocent calf who ambled along peacefully behind him. “If it is a goat it ought to have horns,” he said to himself. “And it hasn’t got any horns. But if it is a calf it will have horns when it grows to be a cow. Perhaps it is a goat-calf. I wonder whether goat-calves have horns!” And he continued to puzzle his poor brains about the matter until he was suddenly interrupted by a shout from the side of the road. The shout came from the third student, who had been waiting for him.

“Hallo, you there!” cried the student. “How much do you want for your goat?”

“Goat? Goat?” murmured the peasant in dismay. “Here, take the thing. If it’s a goat, I don’t want it, for I was sent to market to sell a calf. You may have it for nothing—I’ll make you a present of it!” And so saying, he pushed the cord into the student’s hand. Then turning his back without another word, he retraced his steps towards his home.

When his wife heard what had happened she was furious. “You stupid lout!” she cried, “could you not see that you were being made a fool of?” And she called him all the names she could lay her tongue to, until the poor fellow blushed and hung his head for shame. Her anger did not last long, however, for she was a good woman and she knew that her husband’s simplicity was not his fault, but his misfortune. Fortunately, she had quite enough wits for them both, and instead of wasting more time in reproaches, she set to work to think how she might pay back the practical jokers in their own coin. It did not take her long to think of a plan, and as the first

step towards carrying it out, she put on her bonnet and went off to the town, where she called at three inns, paying at each of them for a dinner for four persons, the dinner to be eaten on the next market day. Returning home, she explained the plan to her husband and gave him very exact instructions as to the part he was to play.

When the next market day came round Jan set off for the town, and by the door of the very first inn on the road he met the three students. They exchanged a sly smile when they saw him, and one of them said: "Good morning, good fellow. And how do you find yourself to-day? I notice that you have no goat with you this time."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jan, "that was a good joke you played on me, but I bear you no ill-will for it. Come in and drink a glass of wine. I'm in funds this morning and I'll willingly stand treat."

The students accepted Jan's offer with enthusiasm, for they belonged to that class of men who are always thirsty. Accordingly the four went into the tavern; and Jan called for wine. When the time came to pay for it, he called the serving-maid, and taking off his cap, spun it round three times on his finger. "Madam," said he, "everything is paid for, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, and thank you very much," answered the serving-maid.

The three students watched this procedure with a good deal of surprise, but Jan carried off the whole affair as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Now, my friends," said he, "the doctors say it is bad to drink on an empty stomach. What do you say to a good meal?"

"Excellent," cried the students.

"Very well then, come along with me to the next inn, and you shall have one."

Laughing in their sleeves at the peasant's simplicity, the students followed. Arrived at the inn, Jan ordered dinner for four, and a heap of good things were put upon the table. After the repast, he called the serving-maid to him, took off his cap as before, and twirled it round three times on his finger. "Now then," said he, "everything is paid for, isn't that so?"

"Certainly, sir," answered the serving-maid, "and I am very much obliged to you."

At this the three students opened their eyes even wider than before, but Jan took not the slightest notice of their astonishment.

“What do you say, friends,” he asked, “shall we go on to the town together and wash the dinner down with a glass of ale apiece?”

“As many as you please,” answered the students joyfully, and so they followed Jan to the town, where he entered a third tavern and ordered drinks all round. Then, taking off his cap once again, he twirled it round three times on his finger, and said to the innkeeper: “Everything is paid for, isn’t it, my good man?”

“Certainly, sir,” said the innkeeper, bowing.

But this was more than the curiosity of the students could stand.

“Look here, gossip,” said one of them, “how is it that you are able to get food and drink for nothing everywhere you go, simply by twirling your cap in people’s faces?”

“Oh, that’s easily explained,” answered Jan, “This cap of mine is a magic cap, which was left to me by my great-great-grandmother, who was a witch, so I have heard say. If I twirl it on my finger, and say, ‘Everything is paid for,’—well, everything is paid for! You understand me?”

“Perfectly,” said the student. “My faith, but that is a wonderful cap—the very thing to have when one goes a journey! Will you sell it to me?”

“How much will you give me for it?” asked Jan.

“Two hundred francs!”

“Nonsense! Do you think I am going to brave my wife’s anger for a paltry two hundred francs?”

“Well then, three hundred.”

“Not enough! My wife says it is worth a fortune.”

“Four hundred.”

Jan shook his head doubtfully, and, seeing his hesitation, the student cried:

“Come now, we’ll give you five hundred, and not a penny more. You’d better accept, or you’ll lose your chance.”

“Well then, hand over the money. I don’t know what my wife will say, but....”

“She’ll give you a kiss for making such a splendid bargain,” cried the student, pushing a bag of coins into Jan’s hand and snatching the magic cap. “Hurry off home as fast as you can to tell her the good news!” Then the three went away, laughing, slapping each other on the back in their joy at having got the better of the simple peasant.

That afternoon the students, eager to take advantage of the qualities of the magic cap, invited about fifty of their friends to a splendid feast at the largest inn in the town. Everybody who was invited came, as you may imagine, and the resources of the innkeeper were taxed to the utmost to supply the hungry and thirsty crowd with all that they wanted. When the feast was ended, the student who had Jan’s cap called the host, and twirling it three times round his finger, said: “Now, sir, everything is paid for, isn’t it?”

“Paid for?” cried the innkeeper. “What do you mean? I’ve not seen the colour of your money yet.”

At this reply the student’s face fell, but one of his companions snatched the cap from his hands. “Idiot,” said he, “you twirled the cap the wrong way! I was watching the peasant carefully, and he twisted it like this.” So saying, he gave the cap a twirl and said: “Now then, my good sir, I think you will agree that everything is paid for.”

“I don’t know whether you are trying to play a joke on me?” answered the innkeeper grimly, “but your idea of humour is not mine. You had better pay up at once, before I call the police!”

“Here, let me try,” cried the third; and in his turn he twirled the cap, and, fixing the host with his eye, repeated that everything was paid for.

At this the innkeeper flew into a passion, and made such a fuss that the room was in an uproar. It was only by promising to pay him at once that the innkeeper could be quietened down, and prevented from putting his threat of calling the police into execution. The banquet cost a good round sum, and as the three students had no money left, their invited guests were obliged to subscribe the money between them, which they did with much grumbling. Afterwards they took their three hosts outside and dipped them into the horse-trough to punish them for their bad taste in playing practical jokes on their friends.

And a few miles away, in their little cottage, Jan and his wife sat counting the five hundred francs he had got for his greasy old cap, which indeed had not been left him by his great-great-grandmother, but which was as old and ragged as though it had!

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