



The Mild Man and his Cantankerous Wife

The Russian Garland

Russian

Intermediate

10 min read

There lived once upon a time, in great poverty, a countryman and his wife: he was mild as a calf, and she as cunning as a serpent. She abused and drubbed her husband for every trifle. One day she begged some corn of a neighbour to make a loaf of bread, and she sent her husband with it to the mill to have it ground. The miller ground the corn, but charged them nothing on account of their poverty; and the countryman set out on his return home with his pan full of flour. But on a sudden there arose such a strong wind that in the twinkle of an eye all the flour was blown out of the pan, which he carried on his head. So he went home and told his wife; and when she heard it she fell to scolding and beating him without mercy; and she threatened him on and on, until at length she grew tired; then she ordered him to go to the wind which had blown away the flour and get paid for it, either in money or in as much flour as there had been in the pan.

The poor countryman, whose bones ached with the blows he had received from his wife, went out of the house weeping and wringing his hands; but whither to turn his steps he knew not. And at last he came to a large and dark forest, in which he wandered here and there. At last an old woman met him and said: "My good man, where are you going, and how are you going to find your way? What has brought you into this country, where rarely a bird flies, and rarely does a beast run?"

“Good Mother,” replied the man, “force has driven me hither. I went to the mill with some corn, and when it was ground I shook the flour into a pan and went my way home; but suddenly a wind arose and carried off the flour out of the pan; and when I came without it to the house and told my wife, she beat me, and has sent me to seek the Wind, and ask him either to give me back the meal or to pay me for it in money. So now I go here and there to look for the Wind, and know not where to find it.”

“Follow me,” said the old woman: “I am the mother of the Winds, and have four sons; the first son is the East Wind, the second is the South Wind, the third is the West Wind, and the fourth the North Wind. Tell me, now, which Wind it is that has blown away your meal?”

“The South Wind, Mother dear,” answered the countryman.

Then the old woman led the man deeper into the forest, and came to a little hut, and said: “Here I live, master woodman; creep on to the stove, and wrap yourself up; my children will soon be here.”

“But why should I wrap myself up?” said the peasant.

“Because my son the North Wind is very cold, and you would be frozen,” said the old woman.

Not long after, the old woman’s sons began to assemble; and when at length the South Wind came, the old woman called the countryman from the stove and said to her sons: “South Wind, my dear son, a complaint is brought against you; why do you injure poor folks? You have blown away this man’s flour from out of his dish; pay him now for it with money, or how you will.”

“Very well, Mother,” replied the Wind, “I will pay him for his flour.” Then he called the countryman and said:

“Hark ye, my little farmer, take this basket; it contains everything you can wish for—money, bread, all kinds of food and drink; you have only to say: ‘Basket, give me this and that,’ and it will instantly give you all you desire. Go home now—you have here payment for your flour.” So the countryman made his bow to the South Wind, thanked him for the basket, and went his way home.

When the man came home, he gave the basket to his wife, saying: "Here, wife, is a basket for you, which contains everything you can wish for—only ask it." So the good woman took the basket, and said: "Basket, give me good flour for bread!" And instantly the basket gave her as much as ever she could desire. Then she asked again for this thing and that, and the basket gave her everything in the twinkling of an eye.

A few days after, it happened that a nobleman passed by the countryman's cottage; and when the good woman saw him, she said to her husband; "Go and invite this lord to be our guest; if you don't bring him here, I will beat you half dead."

The countryman dreaded a beating from his wife. So he went and invited the nobleman to dinner. Meanwhile the good woman took all kinds of food and drink out of the basket, spread the table, and then sat down patiently at the window, laying her hands in her lap, awaiting the arrival of her husband and their guest. The nobleman was astonished at receiving such an invitation and laughed, and would not go home with the man; but instead, he ordered his servants who attended him to go with the countryman, to dinner, and bring him back word how he treated them. So the servants went with the countryman, and when they entered his cottage, they were greatly amazed: for, to judge by his hut, he must be very poor, but from the dishes upon the table he was evidently a person of some consequence. Then they sat down to dinner, and made merry; but they remarked that, whenever the good woman wanted anything, she asked the basket for it, and obtained all she required. So they did not leave the room at once, and sent one of their comrades home to make as quickly as possible just such another basket and bring it to them, without letting the countryman or his wife observe it.

Thereupon the man ran as fast as he could, and got a basket just like the other; and when he brought it to the cottage, the guests secretly took the countryman's basket and put theirs in its place. Then they took leave of the man and his wife, and returned to their master and told him how daintily the countryman had treated them.

The countryman's wife threw away all the food that was left, intending to cook fresh on the morrow. The next morning she went to her basket and began to ask it for what she wanted; and when she found that the basket gave her nothing, she called her husband and said: "Old Greybeard, what basket is this you have brought me? Likely enough it has served us once and for all; and what good is it now if it gives us nothing more? Go back to the Wind and beg him to give us back our flour, or I'll beat you to death."

So the poor man went back to the Winds. When he came to the old woman, their mother, he fell to complaining of his wife. The old woman told him to wait for her son, who would soon come home.

Not long after came the South Wind, and the countryman began to complain of his wife. Then the Wind answered: "I am sorry, old man, that you have such a wicked wife; but I will assist you, and she shall not beat you any more. Take this cask, and when you get home and your wife is going to beat you, place yourself behind the cask and cry: 'Five! out of the cask and thrash my wife!' and when they have given her a good beating, then say: 'Five! back to the cask!'" Then the peasant made a low bow to the Wind, and went his way.

When he came home he said: "There, I have brought you here a cask instead of the basket."

At this the good woman flew into a rage and said: "A cask, indeed! What shall I do with it? Why have you brought back no flour?" And, so saying, she seized the poker, and was going to beat her husband. But the poor man stepped quietly behind the cask and cried: "Five! out of the cask! Thrash my wife instantly!" In a moment five stout young fellows jumped out of the cask and fell to cudgelling the woman. And when her husband saw that she was beaten enough, and she begged for mercy, he cried: "Five! back to the cask!" Then instantly they stopped beating her, and crept back into the cask.

The countryman thought over his loss and decided to go forthwith to the nobleman and challenge him to fight. The nobleman laughed outright at the folly of the man; nevertheless he would not refuse, as he wished to have some sport; so he told the man to go into the field. So he tucked his cask under his arm, betook himself to the field, and waited for the nobleman, who came riding to meet him with a number of attendants; and, when he drew near, he ordered his servants, for a joke, to thrash the peasant soundly. The man saw that they were mocking him, and he was wroth with the nobleman, and said: "Come, Sir! give me my basket back this instant, or it shall fare ill with you all, I promise!" Nevertheless they did not stop beating, so he cried out: "Out, Five to each! thrash them soundly!" Immediately five stout fellows sprang out of the cask upon every man of them and began to beat them unmercifully. Then the nobleman thought that they would kill him, and roared out with might and main: "Stop, stop, my good friend and hear me!" So the countryman, upon this, cried: "Hold! you fellows! back to the cask!" Then they all stopped beating, and crept back into the cask again. And straightways the nobleman ordered his servants to fetch the basket and give it to the countryman, who took it and hied back home, and lived ever after with his wife in peace and harmony.