

The Rat's Wedding

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Indian

Intermediate

5 min read

Once upon a time a fat sleek Rat was caught in a shower of rain, and being far from shelter he set to work and soon dug a nice hole in the ground, in which he sat as dry as a bone while the raindrops splashed outside, making little puddles on the road.

Now in the course of his digging he came upon a fine bit of root, quite dry and fit for fuel, which he set aside carefully—for the Rat is an economical creature—in order to take it home with him. So when the shower was over, he set off with the dry root in his mouth. As he went along, daintily picking his way through the puddles, he saw a poor man vainly trying to light a fire, while a little circle of children stood by, and cried piteously.

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed the Rat, who was both soft-hearted and curious, “what a dreadful noise to make! What *is* the matter?”

“The bairns are hungry,” answered the man; “they are crying for their breakfast, but the sticks are damp, the fire won’t burn, and so I can’t bake the cakes.”

“If that is all your trouble, perhaps I can help you,” said the good-natured Rat; “you are welcome to this dry root, and I’ll warrant it will soon make a fine blaze.”

The poor man, with a thousand thanks, took the dry root, and in his turn presented the Rat with a morsel of dough, as a reward for his kindness and generosity.

“What a remarkably lucky fellow I am!” thought the Rat, as he trotted off gaily with his prize, “and clever too! Fancy making a bargain like that—food enough to last me five days in return for a rotten old stick! *Wah! wah! wah!* what it is to have brains!”

Going along, hugging his good fortune in this way, he came presently to a potter’s yard, where the potter, leaving his wheel to spin round by itself, was trying to pacify his three little children, who were screaming and crying as if they would burst.

“My gracious!” cried the Rat, stopping his ears, “what a noise!—do tell me what it is all about.”

“I suppose they are hungry,” replied the potter ruefully; “their mother has gone to get flour in the bazaar, for there is none in the house. In the meantime I can neither work nor rest because of them.”

“Is that all!” answered the officious Rat; “then I can help you. Take this dough, cook it quickly, and stop their mouths with food.”

The potter overwhelmed the Rat with thanks for his obliging kindness, and choosing out a nice well-burnt pipkin, insisted on his accepting it as a remembrance.

The Rat was delighted at the exchange, and though the pipkin was just a trifle awkward for him to manage, he succeeded after infinite trouble in balancing it on his head, and went away gingerly, *tink-a-tink, tink-a-tink*, down the road, with his tail over his arm for fear he should trip on it. And all the time he kept saying to himself, “What a lucky fellow I am! and clever too! Such a hand at a bargain!”

By and by he came to where some neatherds were herding their cattle. One of them was milking a buffalo, and having no pail he used his shoes instead.

“Oh fie! oh fie!” cried the cleanly Rat, quite shocked at the sight. “What a nasty dirty trick!—why don’t you use a pail?”

“For the best of all reasons—we haven’t got one!” growled the neatherd, who did not see why the Rat should put his finger in the pie.

“If that is all,” replied the dainty Rat, “oblige me by using this pipkin, for I cannot bear dirt!”

The neatherd, nothing loath, took the pipkin, and milked away until it was brimming over; then turning to the Rat, who stood looking on, said, “Here, little fellow, you may have a drink, in payment.”

But if the Rat was good-natured he was also shrewd. “No, no, my friend,” said he, “that will not do! As if I could drink the worth of my pipkin at a draught! My dear sir, *I couldn’t hold it!* Besides, I never make a bad bargain, so I expect you at least to give me the buffalo that gave the milk.”

“Nonsense!” cried the neatherd; “a buffalo for a pipkin! Who ever heard of such a price? And what on earth could *you* do with a buffalo when you got it? Why, the pipkin was about as much as you could manage.”

At this the Rat drew himself up with dignity, for he did not like allusions to his size.

“That is my affair, not yours,” he retorted; “your business is to hand over the buffalo.”

So just for the fun of the thing, and to amuse themselves at the Rat’s expense, the neatherds loosed the buffalo’s halter and began to tie it to the little animal’s tail.

“No! no!” he called, in a great hurry; “if the beast pulled, the skin of my tail would come off, and then where should I be? Tie it round my neck, if you please.”

So with much laughter the neatherds tied the halter round the Rat’s neck, and he, after a polite leave-taking, set off gaily towards home with his prize; that is to say, he set off with the *rope*, for no sooner did he come to the end of the tether than he was brought up with a round turn; the buffalo, nose down grazing away, would not budge until it had finished its tuft of grass, and then seeing another in a different direction marched off towards it, while the Rat, to avoid being dragged, had to trot humbly behind, willy-nilly.

He was too proud to confess the truth, of course, and, nodding his head knowingly to the neatherds, said, “Ta-ta, good people! I am going home this way. It may be a little longer, but it’s much shadier.”

And when the neatherds roared with laughter he took no notice, but trotted on, looking as dignified as possible.

“After all,” he reasoned to himself, “when one keeps a buffalo one has to look after its grazing. A beast must get a good bellyful of grass if it is to give any milk, and I have plenty of time at my disposal.”

So all day long he trotted about after the buffalo, making believe; but by evening he was dead tired, and felt truly thankful when the great big beast, having eaten enough, lay down under a tree to chew the cud.

Just then a bridal party came by. The bridegroom and his friends had evidently gone on to the next village, leaving the bride’s palanquin to follow; so the palanquin bearers, being lazy fellows and seeing a nice shady tree, put down their burden, and began to cook some food.

“What detestable meanness!” grumbled one; “a grand wedding, and nothing but plain rice pottage to eat! Not a scrap of meat in it, neither sweet nor salt! It would serve the skinflints right if we upset the bride into a ditch!”

“Dear me!” cried the Rat at once, seeing a way out of his difficulty, “that is a shame! I sympathise with your feelings so entirely that if you will allow me I’ll give you my buffalo. You can kill it, and cook it.”

“*Your* buffalo!” returned the discontented bearers, “what rubbish! Whoever heard of a rat owning a buffalo?”

“Not often, I admit,” replied the Rat with conscious pride; “but look for yourselves. Can you not see that I am leading the beast by a string?”

“Oh, never mind the string!” cried a great big hungry bearer; “master or no master, I mean to have meat to my dinner!”

Whereupon they killed the buffalo, and, cooking its flesh, ate their dinner with relish; then, offering the remains to the Rat, said carelessly, “Here, little Rat-skin, that is for you!”

“Now look here!” cried the Rat hotly; “I’ll have none of your pottage, nor your sauce either. You don’t suppose I am going to give my best buffalo, that gave quarts and quarts of milk—the buffalo I have been feeding all day—for a wee bit of rice? No!—I got a loaf for a bit of stick; I got a pipkin for a little loaf; I got a buffalo for a pipkin; and now I’ll have the bride for my buffalo—the bride, and nothing else!”

By this time the servants, having satisfied their hunger, began to reflect on what they had done, and becoming alarmed at the consequences, arrived at the conclusion it would be wisest to make their escape whilst they could. So, leaving the bride in her palanquin, they took to their heels in various directions.

The Rat, being as it were left in possession, advanced to the palanquin, and drawing aside the curtain, with the sweetest of voices and best of bows begged the bride to descend. She hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry, but as any company, even a Rat's, was better than being quite alone in the wilderness, she did as she was bidden, and followed the lead of her guide, who set off as fast as he could for his hole.

As he trotted along beside the lovely young bride, who, by her rich dress and glittering jewels, seemed to be some king's daughter, he kept saying to himself, "How clever I am! What bargains I do make, to be sure!"

When they arrived at his hole, the Rat stepped forward with the greatest politeness, and said, "Welcome, madam, to my humble abode! Pray step in, or if you will allow me, and as the passage is somewhat dark, I will show you the way."

Whereupon he ran in first, but after a time, finding the bride did not follow, he put his nose out again, saying testily, "Well, madam, why don't you follow? Don't you know it's rude to keep your husband waiting?"

"My good sir," laughed the handsome young bride, "I can't squeeze into that little hole!"

The Rat coughed; then after a moment's thought he replied, "There is some truth in your remark—you *are* overgrown, and I suppose I shall have to build you a thatch somewhere. For to-night you can rest under that wild plum-tree."

"But I am so hungry!" said the bride ruefully.

"Dear, dear! everybody seems hungry to-day!" returned the Rat pettishly; "however, that's easily settled—I'll fetch you some supper in a trice."

So he ran into his hole, returning immediately with an ear of millet and a dry pea.

"There!" said he, triumphantly, "isn't that a fine meal?"

"I can't eat that!" whimpered the bride; "it isn't a mouthful; and I want rice pottage, and cakes, and sweet eggs, and sugar-drops. I shall die if I don't get them!"

"Oh dear me!" cried the Rat in a rage, "what a nuisance a bride is, to be sure! Why don't you eat the wild plums?"

"I can't live on wild plums!" retorted the weeping bride; "nobody could; besides, they are only half ripe, and I can't reach them."

"Rubbish!" cried the Rat; "ripe or unripe, they must do you for to-night, and to-morrow you can gather a basketful, sell them in the city, and buy sugar-drops and sweet eggs to your heart's content!"

So the next morning the Rat climbed up into the plum-tree, and nibbled away at the stalks till the fruit fell down into the bride's veil. Then, unripe as they were, she carried them into the city, calling out through the streets—

"Green Plums I Sell! Green Plums I Sell!

Princess am I, Rat's bride as well!"

As she passed by the palace, her mother the Queen heard her voice, and, running out, recognised her daughter. Great were the rejoicings, for every one thought the poor bride had been eaten by wild beasts. In the midst of the feasting and merriment, the Rat, who had followed the Princess at a distance, and had become alarmed at her long absence, arrived at the door, against which he beat with a big knobby stick, calling out fiercely, "Give me my wife! give me my wife! She is mine by fair bargain. I gave a stick and I got a loaf; I gave a loaf and I got a pipkin; I gave a pipkin and I got a buffalo; I gave a buffalo and I got a bride. Give me my wife! give me my wife!" "La! son-in-law! what a fuss you do make!" said the wily old Queen, through the door, "and all about nothing! Who wants to run away with your wife? On the contrary, we are proud to see you, and I only keep you waiting at the door till we can spread the carpets, and receive you in style."

Hearing this, the Rat was mollified, and waited patiently outside whilst the cunning old Queen prepared for his reception, which she did by cutting a hole in the very middle of a stool, putting a red-hot stone underneath, covering it over with a stew-pan-lid, and then spreading a beautiful embroidered cloth over all.

Then she went to the door, and receiving the Rat with the greatest respect, led him to the stool, praying him to be seated.

“Dear! dear! how clever I am! What bargains I do make, to be sure!” said he to himself as he climbed on to the stool. “Here I am, son-in-law to a real live Queen! What will the neighbours say?”

At first he sat down on the edge of the stool, but even there it was warm, and after a while he began to fidget, saying, “Dear me, mother-in-law! how hot your house is! Everything I touch seems burning!”

“You are out of the wind there, my son,” replied the cunning old Queen; “sit more in the middle of the stool, and then you will feel the breeze and get cooler.”

But he didn't! for the stewpan-lid by this time had become so hot, that the Rat fairly frizzled when he sat down on it; and it was not until he had left all his tail, half his hair, and a large piece of his skin behind him, that he managed to escape, howling with pain, and vowing that never, never, never again would he make a bargain!

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