

## The Woodcutter's Wife

Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived a woodcutter and his wife in a tiny little house deep in the dark forest. He was a kindly man who loved all the little things of the forest, but his wife was a wild shrewish woman who screamed and beat him with sticks or with her fists whenever she didn't get what she wanted.

Every morning when he tried to eat breakfast, she screamed at him to hurry out to work harder and earn more money, and when he set out to work she beat on

his head with a stick until he got out of the door and onto the path to the forest. Then after he was gone, she would lie down to sleep until almost time for him to return home again, and as soon as he came home, she would begin scolding him again for not making more money.

One morning as she was beating on his head with her stick, he turned and said kindly to her, "Dear wife, would that I could only give you what you want." But she beat the harder with her stick and replied, "If you would only work, we wouldn't have to live in this ugly little hut and eat stale bread and sour cheese every night and morning." Then she beat so hard that the stick broke in two, and she grabbed the other half and began beating him with both halves at once.

He wrapped his rucksack around his ears and hurried down the path until he was too far away to hear her screaming. Then he lowered his head and walked slowly and sadly, wondering how he had managed to make such a sour marriage, how he had endured such a life for so many years already, and what he might be able to do to make his wife happier.

His eyes were so full of tears and his heart so sad he scarcely saw where he was going and almost stepped on a little hedgehog crouched in the middle of the path. But as soon as he saw it, he stopped and said, "Well, now, little friend, how do you look so sad this morning." And the little hedgehog looked sadly up at him and raised a little paw. And the woodcutter knelt down, took the paw in his hand and

saw an ugly thorn stuck between two toes. Carefully he pulled the thorn out, and the hedgehog seemed to smile and licked his hand and scampered roly-poly away into the bushes.

And the woodcutter picked up his rucksack and his axe and started down the path again, his heart a little brighter and his eyes cast not quite so low. After a few minutes he heard scampering feet behind him, and when he turned around to look he saw the same little hedgehog limping along behind him.

He stopped and said, "Well now, little friend, do I see you again so soon?" And the hedgehog came up close and shyly lifted another paw, and the woodcutter saw another thorn between the toes, even larger and uglier than the first. Again

he knelt down and gently pulled the thorn, and again the hedgehog seemed to smile and licked his hand and scampered off into the bushes.

And the woodcutter picked up his rucksack and his axe and started down the path again, his heart even brighter, and his eyes almost straight ahead. But after a few minutes he heard a scampering of little feet behind him again, and when he turned around to look, he saw the same little hedgehog coming along behind yet again, with its tail pulled up strange and with a hurt look in its eyes. He stopped and said, "Well now, little friend, three times in one morning we meet in the way. What can I do for you this time?" And the little hedgehog lowered its eyes as in shame and shyly lifted its tail. Then the woodcutter

saw there was an ugly burr stuck in the bottom of the tail, all tangled up in the hair and with the spines poking into the soft white skin.

He took out his knife and whetstone, dressed up the blade to a fine sharp edge, then carefully trimmed away the hairs around the burr until nothing was holding it except a few spines stuck directly into the skin. He stroked the little beast's head and held it firmly, then with a quick, gentle pull, snapped the burr cleanly out so only the tiniest drop of blood came out and fell on his finger—where it mixed with a drop of blood from a nick he had given himself with his knife.

No sooner did the two drops of blood touch than the little beast turned and smiled to him, and he heard her say,

“Thank you, good sir. You have been so kind. Is there anything you would like to have?” And the woodcutter sat down on his heels cupped his chin in his hands and said, “My wife thinks that if she could live in a nice big house with fine linens on the bed and have fine clothes to wear and gold and silver in her hand, then she would be happy forever.” And the little beast laughed and said, “Well said, good sir. Be it as you have spoken.” And she scampered gaily into the bushes.

The woodcutter saw the little beast no more that day as he chopped away making sticks of wood to sell. And when it got close to evening, he put the sticks of wood in his rucksack and trotted off to the village, happy for the work he had done and feeling good to have the day at an end. In

the village, the wood sold quickly for a few coins, and from the baker and the goatherd he got a loaf of stale bread and some old sour cheese, the most that he could buy with the few little coins his wood had brought him, but he was glad to have earned his daily bread and went home singing.

The sun was just beginning to set when he came around the last corner to his hut. There he saw not his little hut in a small clearing, but a great castle with deer grazing in a broad meadow, swans swimming in a moat, tall pointed windows shining like silver mirrors in the sunlight, and a wide curving staircase of gold and marble leading up to the great door.

He laughed and said to himself, "Well, maybe I shall have a happy lady

tonight." When he opened the door, he found his wife sitting on a silk-covered chair just inside, but as soon as she saw him carrying the stale bread and sour cheese, she jumped up and screamed at him, "What kind of man are you to come to a house like this with such food as that in your hands. There's not a bite to eat in this whole fine house, and you dare come here with food like that?"

She jumped up and broke the chair over his head, screaming how unlucky she was to have such a poor lazy fool for a husband, and chased him all the way through the great house to the empty servants quarters out behind. There he slept alone all night, happy to have a room where he did not have to hear such complaining.

He ate his breakfast of stale bread and sour cheese all alone and meant to slip out the door to work without being seen, but his wife was waiting for him and hit him on the head with a piece of the chair left over from the night before and screamed after him that he should bring home food fit for the house she lived in.

He walked down the path singing, happy to be going out to work in the forest he loved so dear. But he had scarcely finished his third song when the hedgehog suddenly stepped out into the trail, smiled up at him and said, "Well, good sir, how was the night?"

The woodcutter sat down on his heels and said, "My poor wife was not pleased with the food I brought last night. She thinks stale bread and sour cheese are not

proper to bring into the house any more and would like something finer this evening." The hedgehog smiled and said, "May it be as you have said," and scampered off into the bushes.

The woodcutter chopped with vigor all morning and into the afternoon, then loaded a huge bundle of sticks into his rucksack and hurried into the village to buy food before the fresh bread and sweet cheese were all sold. He could only buy a small piece of each, then hurried home to give them to his wife and thought to go to bed hungry himself that night.

But as he went up the broad marble stairs and entered the great golden doors of his new home, he found his wife sitting in the great hall before a long table loaded down with all the finest things to eat and

drink, and she screamed at him, "All this good food, and not a thing to eat it with. Not a plate or a bowl or a knife or spoon in the house." And she began to wail until the margins of the table cloth shook from the noise. But the woodcutter said softly, "I'll go eat the bread and cheese alone, and I imagine you can eat with your fingers even at such a table as this if there is no one here to see you."

Then he went back out to the empty servants quarters and slept a good night's sleep and thought the whole house was a dream. In the morning his wife was not there to beat him at the door as usual, and he looked and found her slumped in her chair before the long table in the great hall with food all over her fingers and face and fine silk gown, looking for all the world

like she had eaten and drunk for twenty people.

The woodcutter slipped quietly out the door with his rucksack and his axe and started down the path, singing and whistling like he hadn't done for years, happy that for once he didn't start out of a morning with sore a head and aching ears.

Suddenly the hedgehog appeared before him in the path and said, "Well, good sir, "How was your night?" And the woodcutter sat down on his heels, cupped his chin in his hands, and said, "My poor wife thinks it a shame to eat without fine bowls and spoons, but she seems to manage all right when she gets around to it." And the hedgehog laughed and said, "Be it as you say, "and scampered off into the bushes again.

That day the woodcutter worked so much faster for not having been beaten on the head that he had his rucksack full before noon and got into the village in time to get the best bread and cheese for a very good price, Then he hurried home to see what new adventure awaited him.

As he came into the great hall, his wife sat again at the long table loaded down with the finest things to eat and drink, and spread with golden bowls, silver spoons, and long, long glasses of the finest crystal. But when she saw him, she jumped up from the table and shouted, "How can a person be expected to eat at such a table without proper servants to serve the food." And she jumped up and ran at him with a heavy serving fork in her

hand to teach him how he should provide for her needs.

But as she came near, she saw the hedgehog ambling in the front door, and she screamed that such a beast dare not come into their fine house. She ran and kicked it with her foot to roll it toward the open door, But as it tumbled over on its back and onto its feet again, the woodcutter saw it suddenly stand up as a beautiful young lady. And as he turned to look at his wife, he saw her slump down on the floor and turn into a shaggy, bristled old hedgehog fit only to wander in the forest and sleep in a hollow log. Then as he watched, the hedgehog shrank and grew smaller and grew a long tail and long teeth until it looked for all the world like a shrew.

Then the fair young lady laughed and said, "They all get what they deserve in the end," and she gently nudged the ugly new shrew out the front door with her foot and took the woodcutter's hand, and he kissed her and made her his wife, and they lived forever after in the palace loving and enjoying each other.

He hired another woodcutter from another forest to cut wood for him and paid him well and gave him a fine little cottage to live in on his promise that he would never go into the village or tell anyone he lived and worked there.

And every afternoon he put on his old clothes and carried into the village the sticks the new woodcutter prepared and brought to him, and he exchanged them for a lump of stale bread and a pot of sour

cheese, which he set out for the shrew to eat along with crumbs from their long table.

The people of the village wondered that he looked so much happier when he came to town, but since he kept bringing sticks of wood to sell and kept buying stale bread and sour cheese, they never suspected that his life had changed so much. They never saw the palace or the deer in the meadow or the swans floating in the moat, but you can see them all if you will take a thorn from a hedgehog's paw and speak to it kindly.