

## **Which was the Foolishest?**

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

In a little village that stood on a wide plain, where you could see the sun from the moment he rose to the moment he set, there lived two couples side by side. The men, who worked under the same master, were quite good friends, but the wives were always quarrelling, and the subject they quarrelled most about was--which of the two had the stupidest husband.

Unlike most women--who think that anything that belongs to them must be better than what belongs to anyone else--each thought her husband the more foolish of the two.

‘You should just see what he does!’ one said to her neighbour. ‘He puts on the baby’s frock upside down, and, one day, I found him trying to feed her with boiling soup, and her mouth was scalded for days after. Then he picks up stones in the road and sows them instead of potatoes, and one day he wanted to go into the garden from the top window, because he declared it was a shorter way than through the door.’

‘That is bad enough, of course,’ answered the other; ‘but it is really NOTHING to what I have to endure every day from MY husband. If, when I am busy, I ask him to go and feed the poultry, he is certain to give them some poisonous stuff instead of their proper food, and when I visit the yard next I find them all dead. Once he even took my best bonnet, when I had gone away to my sick mother, and when I came back I found he had given it to the hen to lay her eggs in. And you know yourself that, only last week, when I sent him to buy a cask of butter, he returned driving a hundred and fifty ducks which someone had induced him to take, and not one of them would lay.’

‘Yes, I am afraid he IS trying,’ replied the first; ‘but let us put them to the proof, and see which of them is the most foolish.’

So, about the time that she expected her husband home from work, she got out her spinning-wheel, and sat busily turning it, taking care not even to look up from her work when the man came in. For some minutes he stood with his mouth open watching her, and as she still remained silent, he said at last:

‘Have you gone mad, wife, that you sit spinning without anything on the wheel?’

‘YOU may think that there is nothing on it,’ answered she, ‘but I can assure you that there is a large skein of wool, so fine that nobody can see it, which will be woven into a coat for you.’

‘Dear me!’ he replied, ‘what a clever wife I have got! If you had not told me I should never have known that there was any wool on the wheel at all. But now I really do seem to see something.’

The woman smiled and was silent, and after spinning busily for an hour more, she got up from her stoop, and began to weave as fast as she could. At last she got up, and said to her husband: ‘I am too tired to finish it to-night, so I shall go to bed, and to-morrow I shall only have the cutting and stitching to do.’

So the next morning she got up early, and after she had cleaned her house, and fed her chickens, and put everything in its place again, she bent over the kitchen table, and the sound of her big scissors might be heard snip! snap! as far as the garden. Her husband could not see anything to snip at; but then he was so stupid that was not surprising!

After the cutting came the sewing. The woman patted and pinned and fixed and joined, and then, turning to the man, she said:

‘Now it is ready for you to try on.’ And she made him take off his coat, and stand up in front of her, and once more she patted and pinned and fixed and joined, and was very careful in smoothing out every wrinkle.

‘It does not feel very warm,’ observed the man at last, when he had borne all this patiently for a long time.

‘That is because it is so fine,’ answered she; ‘you do not want it to be as thick as the rough clothes you wear every day.’

He DID, but was ashamed to say so, and only answered: ‘Well, I am sure it must be beautiful since you say so, and I shall be smarter than anyone in the whole village. “What a splendid coat!” they will exclaim when they see me. But it is not everybody who has a wife as clever as mine.’

Meanwhile the other wife was not idle. As soon as her husband entered she looked at him with such a look of terror that the poor man was quite frightened.

‘Why do you stare at me so? Is there anything the matter?’ asked he.

‘Oh! go to bed at once,’ she cried; ‘you must be very ill indeed to look like that!’

The man was rather surprised at first, as he felt particularly well that evening; but the moment his wife spoke he became quite certain that he had something dreadful the matter with him, and grew quite pale.

‘I dare say it would be the best place for me,’ he answered, trembling; and he suffered his wife to take him upstairs, and to help him off with his clothes.

‘If you sleep well during the night there MAY be a chance for you,’ said she, shaking her head, as she tucked him up warmly; ‘but if not--’ And of course the poor man never closed an eye till the sun rose.

‘How do you feel this morning?’ asked the woman, coming in on tip-toe when her house-work was finished.

‘Oh, bad; very bad indeed,’ answered he; ‘I have not slept for a moment. Can you think of nothing to make me better?’

‘I will try everything that is possible,’ said the wife, who did not in the least wish her husband to die, but was determined to show that he was more foolish than the other man. ‘I will get some dried herbs and make you a drink, but I am very much afraid that it is too late. Why did you not tell me before?’

‘I thought perhaps the pain would go off in a day or two; and, besides, I did not want to make you unhappy,’ answered the man, who was by this time quite sure he had been suffering tortures, and had borne them like a hero. ‘Of course, if I had had any idea how ill I really was, I should have spoken at once.’

‘Well, well, I will see what can be done,’ said the wife, ‘but talking is not good for you. Lie still, and keep yourself warm.’

All that day the man lay in bed, and whenever his wife entered the room and asked him, with a shake of the head, how he felt, he always replied that he was getting worse. At last, in the evening, she burst into tears, and when he inquired what was the matter, she sobbed out:

‘Oh, my poor, poor husband, are you really dead? I must go to-morrow and order your coffin.’

Now, when the man heard this, a cold shiver ran through his body, and all at once he knew that he was as well as he had ever been in his life.

‘Oh, no, no!’ he cried, ‘I feel quite recovered! Indeed, I think I shall go out to work.’

‘You will do no such thing,’ replied his wife. ‘Just keep quite quiet, for before the sun rises you will be a dead man.’

The man was very frightened at her words, and lay absolutely still while the undertaker came and measured him for his coffin; and his wife gave orders to the gravedigger about his grave. That evening the coffin was sent home, and in the morning at nine o’clock the woman put him on a long flannel garment, and called to the undertaker’s men to fasten down the lid and carry him to the grave, where all their friends were waiting them. Just as the body was being placed in the ground the other woman’s husband came running up, dressed, as far as anyone could see, in no clothes at all. Everybody burst into shouts of laughter at the sight of him, and the men laid down the coffin and laughed too, till their sides nearly split. The dead man was so astonished at this behaviour, that he peeped out of a little window in the side of the coffin, and cried out:

‘I should laugh as loudly as any of you, if I were not a dead man.’

When they heard the voice coming from the coffin the other people suddenly stopped laughing, and stood as if they had been turned into stone. Then they rushed with one accord to the coffin, and lifted the lid so that the man could step out amongst them.

‘Were you really not dead after all?’ asked they. ‘And if not, why did you let yourself be buried?’

At this the wives both confessed that they had each wished to prove that her husband was stupider than the other. But the villagers declared that they could not decide which was the most foolish--the man who allowed himself to be persuaded that he was wearing fine clothes when he was dressed in nothing, or the man who let himself be buried when he was alive and well.

So the women quarrelled just as much as they did before, and no one ever knew whose husband was the most foolish.

[Adapted from the Neuislandische Volksmarchen.]