

What the Old Man Does is Always Right

Hans Christian Andersen

Now I'm going to tell you a story that I heard when I was a little fellow and that I like better and better the more I think of it. For it's the same with stories as with many people; the older they grow, the nicer they grow, and that is delightful.

You have been out in the country, of course. There you must have seen a really old farmhouse with a thatched roof, where moss and weeds have planted themselves; a stork's nest decorates the chimney (you can never do without the stork); the walls are slanting; the windows are low (in fact, only one of them was made to open); the baking oven sticks out like a fat little stomach; and an elderbush leans over the gate, where you can see a tiny pond with a duck or ducklings, under a gnarled willow tree. Yes, and then, of course, there's a watchdog which barks at everybody and everything.

Well, there was a farmhouse just like that out in the country, and in it there lived two people, a farmer and his wife. They had few enough possessions, but still there was one they could do without, and that was a horse, which grazed along the ditch beside the highway. The old farmer used it to ride to town and lent it to his neighbors, receiving some slight services from them in return, but still it would be much more profitable to sell the horse, or at least exchange it for something that would be more useful to them.

But which should they do, sell or trade?

"You'll know what's best, Father," said the wife. "It's market day. Come on, ride off to town, and get money for the horse, or make a good bargain with it. Whatever you do is always right; so be off for the market!"

So she tied on his neckerchief - for that was something she understood much better than he - tied it with a double bow, and made him look quite dashing. She brushed his hat with the palm of her hand, and she kissed him on the mouth, and then off he went, riding the horse that was to be either sold or bartered. Of course, he would know the right thing to do.

The sun was scorching, and there was not a cloud in the sky. The road was dusty, and crowded with people on their way to market, some in wagons, some on horseback, and some on their own two legs. Yes, it was a fierce sun, with no shade all the way.

Now a man came along, driving a cow, as pretty a cow as you could wish to see. "I'm sure she must give grand milk," thought the peasant. "It would be a pretty good bargain if I got her. Hey, you with the cow!" he said. "Let's have a little talk. Look here, I believe a horse costs more than a cow, but it doesn't matter to me, since I have more use for a cow. Shall we make a swap?"

"Fair enough," said the man with the cow; and so they swapped.

Now the farmer might just as well have turned home again, for he had finished his business. But he had planned to go to market, so to market he would go, if only to look on; hence, with his cow, he continued on his way. He walked fast, and so did the cow, and pretty soon they overtook a man who was leading a sheep; it was a fine-looking sheep, in good condition and well clothed with wool.

"I certainly would like to have that," thought the peasant. "It would find plenty of grazing beside our ditch, and in the winter we could keep it in our own room. It would really be much more sensible for us to be keeping a sheep rather than a cow. Shall we trade?"

Yes, the sheep's owner was quite willing, so the exchange was made, and now the farmer went on along the highway with his sheep. Near a road gate he met a man with a big

goose under his arm.

"Well, you've got a fine heavy fellow there!" said the farmer. "It's got plenty of feathers and fat! How nice it would be to have it tied up near our little pond, and, besides, it would be something for Mother to save the scraps for. She has often said, 'If we only had a goose.' Now she can have one - and she shall, too! Will you swap? I'll give you my sheep for your goose, and my thanks, too."

The other had no objection, so they swapped, and the farmer got the goose. By now he was close to the town; the road was getting more and more crowded, people and cattle pushing past him, thronging in the road, in the ditch, and right up to the tollkeeper's potato patch, where his one hen was tied up, in case it should lose its head in a panic and get lost. It was a bobtailed hen that winked with one eye and looked in good condition.

"Cluck, cluck," it said; what it meant by that, I wouldn't know; but what the peasant thought when he saw it was this, "She's the prettiest hen I've ever seen - much prettier than any of our parson's brood hens. I would certainly like to have her. A hen can always find a grain of corn, and she can almost provide for herself. I almost think it would be a good idea to take her instead of the goose. Shall we trade?" he asked.

"Trade?" said the other. "Well, not a bad idea!" And so they traded. The tollkeeper got the goose, and the farmer got the hen.

He had completed a good deal of business since he started for town; it was hot, and he was tired. What he needed was a drink and a bite to eat.

He had reached an inn and was ready to enter, when the innkeeper's helper met him in the doorway, carrying a sackful of something.

"What have you got there?" asked the farmer.

"Rotten apples," was the answer. "A whole sackful for the pigs."

"What a lot! Wouldn't Mother like to see so many! Why, last year we had only one single apple on the old tree by the peat shed. That apple was to be kept, and it stood on the chest of drawers till it burst. 'That is always a sign of prosperity,' Mother said. Here she could see plenty of prosperity! Yes, I only wish she could have it!"

"Well, what'll you give me for them?" asked the innkeeper's helper.

"Give for them? Why, I'll give you my hen!" So he turned over the hen, took the apples, and went into the inn, straight up to the bar; he set his sack upright against the stove, without noticing that there was a fire in it. There were a number of strangers present, horse dealers, cattle dealers, and two Englishmen so rich that their pockets were bursting with gold coins. They were fond of making bets, as Englishmen in stories always are.

"Suss! Suss! Suss!" What was that noise at the stove? It was the apples beginning to roast!

"What's that?" everybody said, and they soon found out. They were hearing the whole story of the horse that had been traded first for a cow and finally for a sack of rotten apples.

"Well, you'll get a good beating from your old woman when you go home!" said the Englishmen. "You're in for a rough time."

"I'll get kisses, not cuffs," said the farmer. "Mother will say, 'Whatever the old man does is right.'"

"Shall we bet on it?" said the Englishmen. "We have gold by the barrel! A hundred pounds sterling to a hundred-pound weight?"

"Let's say a bushelful," replied the peasant. "I can only bet my bushel of apples, and throw

in myself and the old woman, but I think that'll be more than full measure."

"That's a bet!" the Englishmen cried, and the bet was made! So the innkeeper's cart was brought out, the Englishmen got into it, the farmer got into it, the rotten apples got into it, and away they went to the old man's cottage.

"Good evening, Mother."

"Same to you, Father."

"Well, I've made the bargain."

"Yes, you know how to do business," said the wife, and gave him a big hug, forgetting both the sack and the strangers.

"I traded the horse for a cow."

"Thank God for the milk!" said the wife. "Now we can have milk, butter, and cheese on our table! What a splendid swap!"

"Yes, but I swapped the cow for a sheep."

"That's still better!" cried the wife. "You're always so thoughtful. We have plenty of grass for a sheep. But now we'll have sheep's milk, and sheep's cheese, and woolen stockings, yes, and a woolen nightgown, too. A cow couldn't give us that; she loses all her hairs. But you're always such a thoughtful husband."

"But then I exchanged the sheep for a goose."

"What! Will we really have goose for Michaelmas this year, dear Father? You always think of what would please me, and that was a beautiful thought! We can tie up the goose, and it'll grow even fatter for Michaelmas Day."

"But I traded the goose for a hen," continued the peasant.

"A hen? Well, that was a fine trade!" replied his wife. "A hen will lay eggs and sit on them and we'll have chickens. Imagine, a chicken yard! Just the thing I've always wanted most!"

Yes, but I exchanged the hen for a sack of rotten apples."

"Then I must certainly give you a kiss!" said the wife. "Thank you, my own husband. And now I have something to tell you. When you had gone I decided I'd get a fine dinner ready for you - omelet with chives. Now I had the eggs all right, but no chives. So I went over to the schoolmaster's, because I know they have chives; but that sweet woman is so stingy she wanted something in return. What could I give her? Nothing grows in our garden, not even a rotten apple; I didn't even have that for her. But now I can give her ten or even a whole sackful! Isn't it funny, Father!" she said, and kissed him right on his mouth.

"I like that!" cried both the Englishmen. "Always downhill, but always happy. That alone is worth the money!" So they were quite content to pay the bushful of gold pieces to the peasant, who had got kisses instead of cuffs for his bargains.

Yes, it always pays when the wife believes and admits that her husband is the wisest man in the world and that whatever he does is right.

Well, this is the story. I heard it when I was a youngster, and now you've heard it, too, so you know that what the old man does is always right.