

## OUR LORD AS A BEGGAR

Long ago there was a little old woman who was dreadfully poor and in great need. She could only earn very little money, and would never beg. In fact, she always told herself “It would be better to sell my spoons than for me to go begging.”

One day, as she sat at home considering her situation, an old beggar came to her door. He was very pale and thin, and his clothes were all tattered and torn. The beggar asked her politely, in the name of God, for alms, but the poor old woman didn’t know what to do. She had nothing, except for an old hen, but she also didn’t want to send the beggar away empty handed.

She quickly came to a decision, and invited the old man to sit and rest awhile. Then she went into the kitchen, slaughtered the chicken, and cooked it. She served it, with its own strong broth, to the beggar. He ate both soup and meat heartily, and, until he left he couldn’t stop thanking the old lady.

As soon as the old man had gone out of the door, she remembered that she still had a little cloth left in her workbasket. She cut a piece, which she could give to the old beggar so he could make a new shirt, and hurried out after him. He accepted the gift, smiling and said “You have been so kind to me, please return home and cut your cloth until the sun sets”. Then his whole appearance lit up, like a cloud in the sky at sunset, and he vanished.

The little old woman, hurried home, where she started to cut and measure her cloth. She worked the whole day, without pause, only taking time to draw breath. By the time the sun fell behind the mountains, her whole house was full of snow white linen cloths, which were so fine and delicate that the emperor himself could have used them for tablecloths at his banquets. She carried on, until it was night, and too dark to continue working. At the end, she had no room left in her house, and had to ask her neighbours to keep many pieces for her. There were many, who were astonished at the beauty and quality of the cloth, and it was plain for all to see how much they would have liked to have it.

From that day on, the kind little old woman no longer lived in need, and thank God, always had enough to share with those who were less fortunate.

## WHAT IS THE PRETTIEST, THE STRONGEST, AND THE RICHEST?

Two farmers, one rich and one poor, found themselves against each other in court. They fought and bickered all day long, until the judge himself couldn't take it any more. He was, however, a very learned man who knew many clever ways to get people off his back, and out of his courtroom. He brought down his gavel, and said to the two farmers "Shut up, stop arguing, and listen. Whichever of you two gentlemen can tell me tomorrow, 'what is the prettiest, the strongest, and the richest in the world', will win this case against the other.

The rich farmer was very pleased with this decision, and with himself. As he made his way home, he happily talked, with everybody he met, about how wise and just the judge was. "It is obvious that I've won." thought this proud man, in his blinkered way, that "my wife is the prettiest in the world, my oxen are the strongest, and I, myself, am the richest. It's all as clear as day!"

On the other hand, the poor farmer listened to the judge's decision with dismay. He stood there with a long face, for a little while, before he slowly and angrily made his way home. All the way he muttered to himself about how biased and unfair the judge was. If anybody was brave enough to ask him what he was complaining about, he unleashed a storm of abuse upon them.

As he approached his home, his daughter was outside, working in the garden. When she saw how he was walking, heavy footed and still shaking, she knew that things had not gone well for him. Over the years living with him, she had long learnt how to read his moods in his face and manners, and the reasons for them. Nevertheless, she called out to him, in as good a mood as possible, "Look father! We've never had as good a crop of cabbages as this year. All with perfectly round heads, and not a worm in sight."

"Cabbage heads!" cried her furious father, "The judge has a cabbage for *his* head!"

"Didn't it go well today?" asked his daughter calmly.

"It's not my fault!" complained the old man, "Tomorrow, I have to tell the judge what in the whole wide world is: the prettiest, the strongest, and the richest. If I don't get it exactly right, then we lose everything!"

The girl laughed, and said to her father "Don't worry! The prettiest is the Spring, the earth is the strongest, and Autumn is the richest."

The old man stood a while, leaning against the fence, thinking, and then finally replied, "you could be right."

On the next day, the two farmers again appeared in court. Before the judge could say word, the rich man burst out, full of pride "The prettiest, your Honour,

is my wife, the strongest are my oxen, and I'm the richest. So, now you can decide in my favour."

"Not so fast," answered the judge and, turning to the poor farmer, he asked "what is your answer to yesterday's question? Out with it!"

"Well, your Honour," replied the other cautiously, "I think that the prettiest is the Spring, the strongest is the earth, and the richest is the Autumn."

"Good!" called out the judge in surprise "You've solved the riddle and won the case. But before you go, you must tell me if that is your own answer, or somebody else's."

"Not my own," admitted the farmer "my daughter gave me the answer."

"Then," said the judge "ask your clever daughter if, she is able to come from your farm to me in the town: neither dressed nor naked; neither by day nor by night; neither on the road nor off it. If she can, and wishes it, I will make her my wife."

The poor farmer grinned from ear to ear, and swore that he would tell his daughter exactly what the judge had told him.

Both men then made their way home, but today was different to the day before. The poor farmer happily talked, with everybody he met, about how wise and just the judge was, while the rich man muttered to himself about how biased and unfair he was. If anybody asked him what he was complaining about, he unleashed a storm of abuse upon them.

As he arrived home, the poor farmer heard his daughter call out through the open window "Well Father, did you win? Was I right?"

"Of course you were right, you clever girl!" called her father back, "But, there's something else."

"And, what was that, Father?"

"His Honour, the judge told me to ask you if, you are able to go from here to him in the town: neither dressed nor naked; neither by day nor by night; neither on the road nor off it. If you can, and wish it, he will make you his wife."

"Me, marry a judge!" cried out the girl in surprise "That would be a step up. I must find a way to show him how clever I am." So, she set to work doing what she did best — thinking.

Soon, she had found the answer, and set about carrying it out. In the late afternoon, a few hours before dark, she had wooden boards laid out on the road from the farm and into the town. Then, she covered her naked body with a

fishing net, and, in the twilight, walked over the boards, all the way to the judge's house.

The judge, who was more than pleased with how clever the girl was, and kept his word. But, being a lawyer, the judge had one condition for his bride. She must never give advice, under any circumstances, to anybody who was to appear before him. She agreed, and within a month, they celebrated their marriage with a grand ceremony.

Some time passed, before one day a different farmer came to the judge's clever wife. He told her that, his neighbour was always fighting with him, and this had brought him into serious difficulty. He needed her good advice before he went before her husband, the judge. At first, she absolutely refused, and told him about the only condition to her marriage. She may not, could not, and would not advise him. But then, the farmer started to talk about all the times she had given advice to others, and what she had said at other times. These, she reminded him, had nothing to do with any case before her husband. But, he was on the right track, and she corrected and interrupted him. Eventually, she gave up, and told him her opinion about his situation, and what arguments he could use. "But," she called out to him as he left, "don't tell *anybody* who gave you advice. Please!"

When the farmer appeared in court, his opponent had no answer to any of his arguments, and he easily won the case. But, the judge was suspicious as to how the farmer came by such clever and convincing arguments. He took him aside, and interrogated him thoroughly until he admitted that he had talked with the judge's wife. The judge was furious, and in full anger screamed "It's over, she has to go!"

His clever wife had, of course been listening, and soon made a plan. She entered the courtroom, and politely and pleasantly asked him two favours before she left. She would have one last meal with him, and when she left he would allow her to take with her that which she loved the most. He agreed on both counts.

At dinner, she couldn't resist making an occasional remark or ironic smile, here and there, which irritated him. He attempted to calm his temper with wine, but overdid it a little. Soon, his head began to flop, and before long he was snoring soundly.

She then loaded her husband — who was that which she loved the most — onto the cart and drove off. After a time, the shaking of the cart on the uneven road, broke the judge's drunken stupor, and he awoke. There was nothing that he could say. He understood what his wife had done, and that, once again the clever woman had got the better of him. He asked for her forgiveness, and the pair drove back home together, where they lived many happy years together.

And now, it only remains to be said that the narrator of this tale can only hope that not all women are as clever as the judge's wife.