

The Believing Husbands

by Andrew Lang
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

Once upon a time there dwelt in the land of Erin a young man who was seeking a wife, and of all the maidens round about none pleased him as well as the only daughter of a farmer. The girl was willing and the father was willing, and very soon they were married and went to live at the farm. By and bye the season came when they must cut the peats and pile them up to dry, so that they might have fires in the winter. So on a fine day the girl and her husband, and the father and his wife all went out upon the moor.

They worked hard for many hours, and at length grew hungry, so the young woman was sent home to bring them food, and also to give the horses their dinner. When she went into the stables, she suddenly saw the heavy pack-saddle of the speckled mare just over her head, and she jumped and said to herself:

‘Suppose that pack-saddle were to fall and kill me, how dreadful it would be!’ and she sat down just under the pack-saddle she was so much afraid of, and began to cry.

Now the others out on the moor grew hungrier and hungrier.

‘What can have become of her?’ asked they, and at length the mother declared that she would wait no longer, and must go and see what had happened.

As the bride was nowhere in the kitchen or the dairy, the old woman went into the stable, where she found her daughter weeping bitterly.

‘What is the matter, my dove?’ and the girl answered, between her sobs:

‘When I came in and saw the pack-saddle over my head, I thought how dreadful it would be if it fell and killed me,’ and she cried louder than before.

The old woman struck her hands together: 'Ah, to think of it! if that were to be, what should I do?' and she sat down by her daughter, and they both wrung their hands and let their tears flow.

'Something strange must have occurred,' exclaimed the old farmer on the moor, who by this time was not only hungry, but cross. 'I must go after them.' And he went and found them in the stable.

'What is the matter?' asked he.

'Oh!' replied his wife, 'when our daughter came home, did she not see the pack-saddle over her head, and she thought how dreadful it would be if it were to fall and kill her.'

'Ah, to think of it!' exclaimed he, striking his hands together, and he sat down beside them and wept too.

As soon as night fell the young man returned full of hunger, and there they were, all crying together in the stable.

'What is the matter?' asked he.

'When thy wife came home,' answered the farmer, 'she saw the pack-saddle over her head, and she thought how dreadful it would be if it were to fall and kill her.'

'Well, but it didn't fall,' replied the young man, and he went off to the kitchen to get some supper, leaving them to cry as long as they liked.

The next morning he got up with the sun, and said to the old man and to the old woman and to his wife:

'Farewell: my foot shall not return to the house till I have found other three people as silly as you,' and he walked away till he came to the town, and seeing the door of a cottage standing open wide, he entered. No man was present, but only some women spinning at their wheels.

'You do not belong to this town,' said he.

'You speak truth,' they answered, 'nor you either?'

'I do not,' replied he, 'but is it a good place to live in?'

The women looked at each other.

‘The men of the town are so silly that we can make them believe anything we please,’ said they.

‘Well, here is a gold ring,’ replied he, ‘and I will give it to the one amongst you who can make her husband believe the most impossible thing,’ and he left them.

As soon as the first husband came home his wife said to him:

‘Thou art sick!’

‘Am I?’ asked he.

‘Yes, thou art,’ she answered; ‘take off thy clothes and lie down.’

So he did, and when he was in his bed his wife went to him and said:

‘Thou art dead.’

‘Oh, am I?’ asked he.

‘Thou art,’ said she; ‘shut thine eyes and stir neither hand nor foot.’

And dead he felt sure he was.

Soon the second man came home, and his wife said to him:

‘You are not my husband!’

‘Oh, am I not?’ asked he.

‘No, it is not you,’ answered she, so he went away and slept in the wood.

When the third man arrived his wife gave him his supper, and after that he went to bed, just as usual. The next morning a boy knocked at the door, bidding him attend the burial of the man who was dead, and he was just going to get up when his wife stopped him.

‘Time enough,’ said she, and he lay still till he heard the funeral passing the window.

‘Now rise, and be quick,’ called the wife, and the man jumped out of bed in a great hurry, and began to look about him.

‘Why, where are my clothes?’ asked he.

‘Silly that you are, they are on your back, of course,’ answered the woman.

‘Are they?’ said he.

‘They are,’ said she, ‘and make haste lest the burying be ended before you get there.’

Then off he went, running hard, and when the mourners saw a man coming towards them with nothing on but his nightshirt, they forgot in their fright what they were there for, and fled to hide themselves. And the naked man stood alone at the head of the coffin.

Very soon a man came out of the wood and spoke to him.

‘Do you know me?’

‘Not I,’ answered the naked man. ‘I do not know you.’

‘But why are you naked?’ asked the first man.

‘Am I naked? My wife told me that I had all my clothes on,’ answered he.

‘And my wife told me that I myself was dead,’ said the man in the coffin.

But at the sound of his voice the two men were so terrified that they ran straight home, and the man in the coffin got up and followed them, and it was his wife that gained the gold ring, as he had been sillier than the other two.

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