

The Fisherman and His Wife

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm - Tale No. 19

Once upon a time there was a fisherman who lived with his wife in a piss pot near the sea. Every day the fisherman went out to fish, and all he did was fish and fish. One day he was sitting with his line and gazing into the clear water. And all he did was sit and sit. Suddenly his line sank deep down to the bottom, and when he pulled it up, he had a large flounder on the line, and the flounder said to him, "Listen here, fisherman, I beg of you, let me live. I'm not a real flounder but an enchanted prince. So what good would it do you to kill me? I certainly wouldn't taste very good. Put me back into the water, and let me go."

"Hold on," said the man. "You don't have to waste your words on me. I would have thrown a talking fish back into the water anyway."

He then put the fish back into the clear water, and the flounder swam to the bottom, leaving behind a long streak of blood. Then the fisherman stood up and returned to the piss pot to be with his wife and told her that he had caught a flounder but since it had been an enchanted prince, he had let him go.

"Didn't you wish for anything?" asked the wife.

"No," said the husband. "What should I have wished for?"

"Ah," said the wife. "Don't you think it's awful that we've got to live in this piss pot? It stinks, and it's disgusting. You should have wished for a little hut. Go back and call him. Tell him we want a little hut. I'm sure he'll give us one."

The husband didn't think that this was the right thing to do, but he went back to the sea anyway, and when he arrived, the sea was green and yellow, and he stood on the shore and said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,
if you’re a man, then speak to me.
Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,
I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

The flounder came swimming up to him and said, “Well, what does she want?”
“Oh,” said the man, “my wife, Isabel, thinks I should have wished for something because I caught you. Since she doesn’t want to live in a piss pot, she’d like to have a hut.”

“Just go home,” said the flounder. “She’s already got it.”

The fisherman went home, and his wife was standing in the doorway of a hut and said to him: “Come inside, husband. Look! Now, isn’t this much better?”

There was a stove and a parlor, also a kitchen. Behind the hut was a little yard and garden with all kinds of vegetables and chickens and ducks. “Oh,” said the fisherman, “now we can enjoy ourselves.”

“Yes,” said the wife, “we’re going to enjoy it.”

Everything went well for about a week or two, and then the wife said, “Listen, husband, the hut is much too cramped, and the yard and garden are too little. I want a large stone castle. Go back to the flounder and tell him to give us a castle.”

“Ah, wife,” said the husband. “The flounder has just given us a hut, and I don’t want to go back again so soon. The flounder might be unwilling to do anything.”

“What do you mean?” said the wife. “He can easily do it, and he’ll be glad to do it. Just go back to him!”

So the fisherman left, and his heart grew heavy. When he got to the sea, the water was purple, dark blue, gray, and dense but still calm. Then he stood there and said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,
if you’re a man, then speak to me.
Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,
I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

What now! What does she want?” the flounder asked.

“Oh,” said the fisherman, somewhat distressed. “My wife wants to live in a large stone castle.”

“Go home. She’s standing in front of the door,” the flounder said.

The fisherman went home, and his wife was standing in front of a large palace.

“So, husband,” she said, “isn’t this beautiful?”

He went inside with her, and there were many servants, and the walls were all bright. The chairs and tables were made of gold. Behind the palace was a huge yard and a park half a mile long with deer and does and rabbits. There was also a stable for cows and horses.

“Oh,” said the husband, “now let’s live in the beautiful castle and be content.”

“We’ll have to think about that,” said the wife, “and sleep on it.”

Then they went to bed.

The next morning the wife woke up. It was just daybreak, and she poked her husband in his side with her elbow and said, “Husband, get up. We must be king and rule this entire country.”

“Ah, wife!” said the husband. “Why should we be king? I don’t want to be king.”

“Well,” said the wife, “then I’ll be king.”

“Oh, wife,” said the husband, “where can you be king? The flounder won’t want to make you king.”

“Husband,” said the wife, “go straight to him and tell him I must be king!”

The fisherman went but was very distressed that his wife wanted to be king.

When he got to the sea, it was completely gray and black, and the water was fermenting from below. The fisherman stood there and said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,

if you’re a man, then speak to me.

Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,

I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

“Well, what does she want?” asked the flounder.

“Oh,” said the man, “she wants to be king.”

“Go back home,” said the flounder. “She’s already king.”

Then the man went home, and as he approached the palace, he saw that there were many soldiers, drums, and trumpets. His wife was sitting on a high throne of gold and diamonds, and she wore a large golden crown. Two rows of ladies-in-waiting were standing on either side of her, each lady a head shorter than the next.

“Oh,” said the fisherman, “now you’re king, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said his wife, “I am king.”

After he gazed at her for some time, he said, “Oh, wife, it’s wonderful that you’re king! Now let’s not wish for anything more.”

“No, husband,” the wife said as she became very restless. “I have too much time on my hands, and I can’t stand it anymore. I’m king, but now I also want to be emperor.”

“Oh, wife,” said the fisherman, “why do you want to be emperor?”

“Husband,” she said, “go to the flounder. I want to be emperor!”

“Oh, wife,” the husband said. “He can’t make you emperor. I don’t want to tell that to the flounder.”

“I’m king,” she said, “and you’re just my husband. Go there at once!”

The fisherman went away, but as he was walking, he thought, “This won’t turn out well at all. It’s outrageous for her to be emperor. The flounder’s going to become sick and tired of this in the end.” When he got to the sea, it was all black and dense, and a strong wind whipped across the surface and made the water curdle. Then the fisherman stepped forward and said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,
if you’re a man, then speak to me.
Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,
I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

“Well, what does she want?” asked the flounder.

“Oh, flounder,” he said. “My wife wants to be emperor.”

“Go back home,” said the flounder. “She’s already emperor.”

Then the man went home, and when he arrived, he saw his wife sitting on a very high throne made from a single piece of gold. She was wearing a large crown three yards tall and covered with diamonds and garnets. She was flanked on either side by two rows of bodyguards, each man shorter than the next, beginning with a tremendous giant two miles tall and ending with the tiniest dwarf, who was no bigger than my pinky. There were also many princes and dukes standing before her, and her husband stepped up and said, “Wife, now you’re emperor, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said, “I’m emperor.”

“Oh,” said the fisherman, and he gazed at her for some time, “it’s wonderful that you’re emperor.”

“Husband,” she replied. “why are you standing there like that? I’m emperor, but now I also want to be pope.”

“Oh, wife,” said the husband. “Why do you want to be pope?”

“Husband,” she said. “I want to be pope!”

“No, wife,” said the fisherman. “The flounder can’t make you pope. It won’t turn out well.”

“Stop talking nonsense, husband!” said the wife. “If he can make me emperor, he can also make me pope. Go there at once!”

So the fisherman went off, but he felt rather queasy. He was trembling, and his knees began to wobble. A strong wind swept across the land. The water rose up in waves, and the waves splashed against the shore. Ships were in distress as they were tossed up and down by the waves. Though there was still a little blue in the middle of the sky, the horizon was completely red, as if a heavy thunderstorm were coming. Then he stepped forward and said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,

if you’re a man, then speak to me.

Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,

I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

“Well, what does she want?” asked the flounder.

“Oh,” the man said, “she wants to be pope.”

“Go back home,” said the flounder. “She’s already pope.”

Then the man went home, and when he arrived, his wife was sitting on a throne two miles high and was wearing three large golden crowns on her head. Numerous bishops and priests were standing around her, and there were two rows

of candles on either side of her. The biggest candle was as thick and as large as the highest tower, and the tiniest was a church candle.

“Wife,” the man said as he took a good look at her, “are you the pope?”

“Yes,” she said, “I’m pope.”

“Oh, wife,” he said, “Isn’t it wonderful that you’re pope. You must be satisfied. Now that you’re pope, you can’t become anything greater.”

“I’ll think about it,” said the wife.

Then they both went to bed, but she wasn’t satisfied, and her ambition prevented her from sleeping. She kept thinking of ways she might become greater than she was. When the sun began to rise, she sat at the window and thought, “Aha, I could also make the sun rise!” Then she became quite grim and poked her husband and said, “Husband, go to the flounder. I want to be like God.”

The husband was still half asleep, but he was so shocked by what she had said that he fell out of the bed.

“Ah, wife,” he said. “Be content and remain pope.”

“No,” his wife said. “I won’t have any peace of mind and won’t be able bear it until I can make the sun and moon rise. I want to be like God!”

“Ahh, wife!” the husband said. “The flounder can’t do that. He can make you emperor and pope, but he can’t make you God.”

“Husband,” she said and looked ghastly, “I want to be like God. I want you to go to the flounder at once!”

Now his limbs began to tremble, and he was filled with fear. Outside a great storm was raging so much that all the trees and mountains were shaking. The sky was pitch black, and there was thunder and lightning. Black waves rose up in the sea as high as mountains, and they all had crests of white foam on top. Then the fisherman said:

“Flounder, flounder, in the sea,
if you’re a man, then speak to me.
Though I don’t agree with my wife’s request,
I’ve come to ask it nonetheless.”

“Well, what does she want?” the flounder asked.

“Oh,” he said, “she wants to be like God.”

“Go back home. She’s sitting in your piss pot again.”

And that’s where they are still sitting this very day.