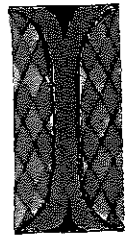


THE BARBER'S WIFE



n a small village in a land not too near and not too far away, there lived a barber who was exceedingly handsome. But as lazy and silly a man as this barber would be hard to find. Every day he went off to work in the village square, but instead of cutting hair and shaving beards, as a barber should, he spent his time gambling and telling stories with his friends. Every day he returned home to his wife with empty hands and empty pockets, until finally he found himself with nothing left in his house but his wife and his razor, both of whom were as sharp as sharp could be.

The barber's wife was a sensible woman named Amarjit. She loved her husband very much, for he was handsome and charming and knew how to make her laugh. But she was tired of pinching pennies and worrying about where their next meal would come from.

"So here you are again," she said to her husband, "without so much as a cup of rice to show for all the time you've spent in the village square. What are we to eat tonight? You know very well there's nothing in the house."

"Sweetheart, what can I say? Business is slow," her husband replied with a smile.

"It's plain as the pretty nose on your face that business will always be slow with you," snapped Amarjit. "Very well. If you can't earn a living at an honest trade, you'll have to beg. The maharajah is having a wedding feast this week. Go to the palace and ask him for something. It would be bad luck for him to refuse you."

The barber was not at all pleased with this idea, but Amarjit made it clear that she had no intention of starving to death. If he didn't at least try to bring something home for

them, he knew she would leave him, and that was that. So he grumbled and complained but in the end went off to the palace to beg from the maharajah.

After waiting in line with the other beggars for many hours, the barber at last came before the maharajah and humbly asked him to give him something.

"Something?" inquired the ruler, raising an eyebrow. "What sort of thing are you looking for, my good man? Speak up!"

The silly barber had no idea what he should ask for. Stuttering and stammering, he could only repeat that he wanted something.

"Give him a plot of wasteland near his village," the maharajah ordered at last. The barber realized there was probably nothing he could do with a piece of wasteland, but his wife had told him to ask for something, and something he had received. Now at least, he said to himself, maybe she will let me have some peace.

"You idiot!" cried Amarjit when she heard the news. "Whatever are we going to do with a piece of wasteland? How can we plow it without any oxen? Why didn't you ask the prince for some money to buy bread? Are you crazy?"

Amarjit carried on like this, throwing dishes and screaming and shouting, until finally, realizing there was nothing to be done and she had better make the best of a bad bargain, she calmed herself and sat down to think of a plan.

Bright and early the next day, she set off to look at their piece of land. "Follow me," she told her husband. "Whatever I do, you do it, too. And whatever happens, don't speak to anyone who passes by. I'll do the talking today." She began walking all over the field, peering anxiously at the ground. Whenever anyone walked by, she would stare even more intently. Then she would suddenly pretend to be startled by the newcomer, and she would sit down and act as if she were doing nothing at all. Her husband did exactly the same.

Now, a band of thieves happened to pass by on that day. Thinking that this couple was behaving very strangely, they hid behind some trees to watch them. They soon decided there must be something special about the field, and one of the thieves went over to ask about it.

"Whatever are you doing?" the thief asked Amarjit.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," the clever woman answered, but the thief persisted until she reluctantly agreed to tell him her "secret."

"Promise you won't tell anybody," she pleaded, and the thief swore he was the most trustworthy man that ever walked this earth.

"Well," she began, "my grandfather left us this piece of land, and before he died, he buried a pot of gold here. But we don't know where he buried it, so we've been trying to find the exact place before we start digging. But please don't tell anyone. Someone might try to steal the gold."

"My lips are sealed," the thief assured her, and hurried away to tell his companions everything he'd heard. As soon as Amarjit and her husband had gone home, the band of thieves began digging in the field, looking for the pot of gold. All night long they dug and dug, until every inch of earth had been turned over three times. But when the sun came up, they still hadn't found the tiniest nugget of gold, and they went away tired and angry.

When the barber and his wife came back to their field that morning, it looked as though it had been plowed three times. Amarjit was delighted and went straight to the village to borrow some wheat to plant, promising the grain seller she would pay it back with interest. She planted the wheat in the beautifully tilled soil and tended it carefully. When harvesttime came, her crop was so successful that she paid back her debt, kept enough to feed herself and her husband, and sold the rest for a big bag of gold coins, which she hid in her mattress.

The thieves saw what had happened, and they were furious. They went to the barber's house and banged on the door. "We dug up that whole field for you," the leader of the thieves called to Amarjit. "Now pay us for our work."

"I told you there was a pot of gold in the ground, but you couldn't find it. Well, *I* did, and I'm not giving it away to you," said Amarjit, slamming the door in their faces.

"Look out for yourself, woman!" the thieves warned. "If you won't give us our share, we'll come and take it!"

That night one of the thieves crept into the house and hid himself in the closet, intending to wait until the barber and his wife went to sleep and then sneak off with all the gold pieces. But Amarjit noticed him lurking there and decided to trick him at his own game.

While she and her husband were eating dinner, she sighed loudly and said, "Those thieves came by today. I hope they don't find the bag of gold I hid under the curry in the pot standing by our door."

"What are you talking about?" her husband cried. "I thought you hid the gold in your —" But Amarjit kicked him under the table and put her finger to her lips. Then husband and wife went off to bed.

As soon as the house was quiet, the thief tiptoed out of the closet, grabbed the pot of curry standing by the doorway, and lugged it back to his friends waiting in the bushes nearby.

"Here it is, here it is," the thief whispered to his companions. "She said she hid the gold under the curry."

"Curry!" the other thieves murmured happily. "Let's eat before we divide up the gold. It was hungry work, waiting for you all this time."

The thieves couldn't see anything because it was very dark. Without looking, they all reached into the pot and greedily stuffed the curry into their mouths. But instead of putting chicken in the curry, Amarjit had made it with worms and slugs and spider's eggs

and all the most disgusting things you can imagine. The robbers became horribly sick, with terrible stomachaches and fevers.

After this, the barber and his wife had some peace, for the thieves were all sick in bed for many weeks. Amarjit tended her field, and the barber went back to gambling in the village square. He even cut some hair and shaved a few beards every now and then, just to keep his clever wife happy.

The dry season came to the village, and it was too hot to sleep indoors. One night Amarjit and her husband dragged their mattresses outside and slept in the yard, where it was cool. They didn't worry about the thieves, for they thought they were still sick from Amarjit's curry.

But the thieves had all recovered. In fact, they were planning revenge on Amarjit for having tricked them twice and making them so ill on top of it. Seeing the barber's wife sleeping peacefully, they decided to seize their opportunity, so they picked up her bed and carried it away.

Amarjit woke to find herself carried along on the heads of four of the robbers. She trembled with fear, imagining what they might do to her, but she couldn't think of any way to escape. She was frantically wondering what to do next when the thieves paused for a moment under a banyan tree. Without thinking twice, Amarjit grabbed the branch hanging over her head and pulled herself into the tree, leaving the covers on the bed as if she were still lying on it.

"This bed is too heavy," one of the thieves who was carrying the mattress complained to his companions. "Why don't you others take a turn?"

The robbers began arguing among themselves about who would carry the bed. Finally they decided they'd carried it far enough for one night, and they lay down to take a rest under the banyan tree. The captain of the robbers stayed awake to keep watch on the barber's wife, whom he still believed was sleeping in the bed.

Suddenly Amarjit had an idea. Drawing her veil across her face, she began to sing very softly. The captain of the thieves looked up and was quite startled to see a woman sitting in the tree. In the light of the full moon, Amarjit looked just like a fairy. The captain was a vain man, who believed himself to be irresistibly handsome. He decided this fairy must have fallen in love with him. He puffed out his chest and strutted back and forth under the tree, waiting for the fairy to come down and declare her love. When she went on singing and took no notice of him, he stopped and called up to her, "Come down, my beauty. I won't hurt you."

"Ahh!" sighed Amarjit. She turned her head and sighed again, mournfully.

"What's the matter, my lovely?" the captain called softly, so as not to wake the other thieves. "You are a fairy. You have fallen in love with me — there's nothing wrong with that. I love you, too, you know."

"Oh, no," the fairy said with another sigh. "You don't really love me. You're just saying that."

"But I do!" the captain insisted. "How can I prove it to you?"

"Well," said Amarjit coyly, "if you really loved me, you would climb up into this tree and give me a kiss."

So the captain began to climb the slippery banyan tree. But as soon as he had reached the lowest branches, Amarjit began to shriek and rock back and forth, so that the tree shook wildly. The branch the captain was holding broke off, and he fell to the ground with a crash. Amarjit couldn't help it — she burst out laughing.

The band of thieves woke up with a start, to find their leader lying half-unconscious on the ground and a strange figure in white leaning over them from the tree, making strange, eerie noises.

"What happened? What happened?" they asked their leader, shaking him back and forth — which only made him feel worse. All he could do was groan and point to the tree.

"*Whooo, whoooo,*" howled Amarjit, flapping her veil.

Convinced that an evil spirit had come to punish them for all their misdeeds, the terrified thieves picked up their captain and began running as fast as their legs would carry them. They ran and ran until they reached the next village, and they never came back again.

Amarjit climbed down from the tree, put her mattress on her head, and walked quietly home with it. She used the gold to buy some oxen to plow her fields. Her crops always thrived, and she and her husband never went hungry again.