

How Mikola Became a Cow

One upon a time there lived a poor man named Mikola. He lived in a tiny old house in which there was a brood of children. One day he went into the forest to get some wood while his wife hunted for mushrooms. Suddenly they saw the rich man for whom Mikola had worked for a whole year practically for nothing, and he was leading a cow to market. Mikola's wife whispered, "If only we had such a cow. The children would have some milk!"

"Silence, wife," answered Mikola. "The rich man owes me money, so the cow will be ours." He left his wife in the bushes and he himself continued along the road. Very quietly he approached the cow, removed the rope from the horns and slipped it around his own neck. The cow started to graze in the woods and Mikola followed after the rich man. His wife was pleased because she understood her husband's craftiness, and so she led the cow home.

As for the rich man, he didn't bother to look around. No one knows how long he would have kept on walking so unconcerned, when he met a familiar merchant. "Hey, neighbour," the merchant shouted from afar. "What did you pay for the bullock?"

Even then the rich man did not glance around him but growled angrily, "If you still don't know the difference between a bullock and a cow, you ought to keep quiet."

"Well, what kind of cow is that? It's a bullock!" laughed the approaching merchant. "If you don't believe me, look for yourself!"

The rich man turned around and held his head. "Devil take it! I bought a good cow and this is what has happened." The merchant laughed a bit and went off. The rich man stopped in the middle of the road and didn't know what to do.

"Where did you come from?" he asked Mikola.

“I don’t know myself,” answered Mikola. “I don’t remember that you bought me, thinking I was a cow.”

The rich man pulled himself together. “How did you become a cow?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Mikola. “But my guess is that a certain widow cursed me. Once I was rich and stingy. This widow worked for me for nothing for a whole year. I was too miserly to pay her wages and because of that she started scolding me, ‘Mikola, I hope you’ll turn into a cow and remain one until you pay back my wages in milk.’”

The rich man heard him out and scolded him, saying, “The devil must have sent you to bother me and take my money. Go away and don’t make fun of me.”

“What are you saying?” Mikola gazed at him in astonishment. “You’ll not be able to treat this matter so lightly. Whoever heard that someone tied a rope around the neck of an innocent man? You will have to answer in court.” The rich man saw that there was trouble brewing. He paid Mikola wages so that he would agree to keep quiet.

Mikola returned with his pockets quite full. Meanwhile his wife had already managed to milk the cow and was pouring some for her children. Within a certain time the cow calved and Mikola fattened up another cow. He decided to sell the old cow.

He went with his wife to the market and they were leading the cow. They had just arrived when they were surrounded on all sides by customers because a finer cow than theirs was not to be seen that day. His wife did the bargaining while Mikola looked around the market. Suddenly he saw his one-time master coming to look at the cow. Mikola told his wife about this and then quietly stepped aside. Meanwhile the rich man examined the cow and whispered in her ear,

“Hey, Mikola. Are they selling you again? It serves you right! Well, I’m not so crazy as to buy you!” And he went off.

Then Mikola and his wife sold the cow and returned home, overjoyed that they had a good laugh at the expense of the rich man.