

The Washtub
A Late 15th Century French Farce
Anonymous

Translated by Oscar Mandel, from Five Comedies of Medieval France
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Jack
His Wife
Her Mother

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- Jack: It was the devil himself who made me get married. I've had nothing but tempests, storms, worry, and grief. My wife carries on like a beast, and her mother never fails to back her up. There's not a moment's peace, happiness, or relief for me. My brain feels as if pebbles were rolling around in it. The one yells, the other grumbles; one swears, the other rages at me. And that's the way I live weekdays and Sundays, with nothing else for entertainment. However, I swear by the blood of Christ who made me that I'll become master in my house the moment I make up my mind.
- Wife: Always complaining about something or other! If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut.
- Mother: What's the matter with him?
- Wife: How do I know? I have to mend whatever he touches, and besides, he pays no attention to our household needs.
- Mother: Why are you so unreasonable, Jack? My lord in heaven! A good husband ought to obey his wife. And if she decides to give you a beating because you failed in your duties ...
- Jack: Ha! That will be the day!
- Mother: Why not? Goodness gracious! If she chastises you and tries to improve you now and then with a little slap or two, do you think it's out of malice? Not in the least. A sign of love, that's what it is.
- Jack: Very eloquent, mother dear. But why don't you tell me in plain words what's on your mind instead of beating around the bush?
- Mother: All I meant is – this is only your first year of marriage, dear mousy.
- Jack: What's that? My name isn't mousy; it's Jack, and don't you forget it.
- Mother: Of course not, sweetheart. Jack the married man.
- Jack: That I am; mauled and married.
- Mother: Nonsense, you were never so well off.

Jack: Well off? I'll be damned! I'd be better off with my throat cut! Oh, God! Well off!

Mother: Just listen to your wife whenever she gives you an order.

Jack: I get too many orders from her as it is; that's the very trouble.

Mother: Well, to keep them all in your head, you should make a list. Write all your duties down on a sheet of paper.

Jack: Why not? Go ahead, I'm writing.

Wife: Write clearly, do you hear? Put down that you'll always obey me, never disobey me, and do everything I ask.

Jack: Nothing doing. Itemize, and I'll agree to what's reasonable.

Wife: Let's get to the point. If you want to keep me happy, write down that you'll always get up first in the morning.

Jack: I object to that article! Get up first? What for?

Wife: To warm my clothes by the fire.

Jack: Is that the custom?

Wife: It is. Apparently you need a lesson in customs.

Mother: Write!

Wife: Write, Jackie!

Jack: Don't rush me. I'm still on the first word.

Wife: At night, if the baby wakes up – and he does all the time – it's your duty to get out of bed to rock him and carry him and walk him up and down the room no matter how late it is.

Jack: But that's not fair!

Wife: Write!

Jack: The sheet is full already! Where I am supposed to write?

Wife: My palm is itching.

Jack: I guess there's room on the other side.

Mother: After that, Jackie boy, you'll have to carry the grain to the mill and grind it into flour.

Wife: Also feed the chickens, wash the clothes, and then hang them up to dry.

Mother: Come and go, hop, skip, and run, and sweat like Lucifer.

Wife: Make the soap.

Mother: Fetch water from the well.

Wife: Then, to avoid a drubbing, make the bed.

Mother: Sweep the floors and clean out the kitchen.

Jack: Wait, wait! If you want all this written down, you'll have to dictate word by word.

Mother: We don't mind. Let's start off: Carry the grain to the mill.

Wife: And grind it to flour.

Mother: Do the laundry.

Wife: Make the soap.

Mother: Sweep the floors.

Wife: Wash up.

Jack: Wash up what?

Mother: The pots and pans.

Jack: Slowly, slowly. The pots and pans.

Wife: And all the dishes.

Jack: Damnation. I'm not smart enough to remember all this.

Wife: Keep writing so you won't forget. Do you hear me? That's an order.

Jack: All right. Wash the –

Wife: Baby's dirty diapers.

Jack: That does it! I won't put that down. Dirty diapers isn't decent.

Wife: Put it down, you ninny. What's to be afraid of?

Jack: I won't, I swear I won't.

Wife: I can see I'll have to knock the lesson into your head.

Jack: I'll put it down. Who am I to object? Forget I opened my mouth.

Wife: The only item left is that you'll clean the house. And right now, quick as a rabbit, you'll help me wring the linen dry over the washtub.

Jack: It's all written down.

Mother: Oh, one more article. Now and then you'll steal a moment to give her a bit of you know what.

Jack: I'll let her have a sample in two weeks or a month.

Wife: Oh, really? Every day, five or six times. At least! That's an order, too.

Jack: I refuse, by the living God! Five or six times! All the saints help me! Neither five or six nor two or three. I can't do that!

Wife: Milksop, weakling, killjoy!

Jack: Jesus Christ, I'm an idiot to allow myself to be led by the nose. How can a man find a moment's rest in this house if he's kept busy with your list?

Mother: Don't forget that last article. Now, hurry up and sign!

Jack: Here, I've signed it. Keep it and don't lose it. From this moment on, I've sworn to do nothing except what's written down on that sheet, not even if it's to save myself from the hangman's noose.

Mother: Here, you keep it.

Wife: Good by for now, mother dear.

(The Mother leaves)

Wife: On with the job. I want to see you sweat a little. Help me stretch these sheets out. It's one of the articles in our contract.

Jack: What's she saying? I don't understand.

Wife: I'll give you the back of my hand in a minute. I'm talking about the wash, you clown!

Jack: It's not on the list.

Wife: It is, too.

Jack: No, it's not.

Wife: Oh, no? Here it is, if you please. I hope it burns your hand.

Jack: All right, all right. I was wrong, it's in the list. I'll know better next time.

Wife: There. Hold this end. Pull, pull hard.

Jack: God, is this sheet foul and smelly!

Wife: The only foul thing around here is your mouth! Come on, do it nicely like me.

Jack: But it's disgusting, I tell you! God, what a household!

Wife: I'll throw it all in your face, and don't think I'm joking.

Jack: No you won't, you demon.

Wife: I won't? Here, fool.

Jack: Damnation, you've ruined my clothes.

Wife: Nothing but alibis for not doing your work. Now hold this end, and I hope you choke to death. (*She falls into the tub.*) Oh, God, have mercy on me, look down on me, help me out of here or I'll die a shameful death! Jackie, save your wife! Pull her out of this tub!

Jack: It's not on the list.

Wife: This tub is my death! Oh, I'm so miserable! Help me out of here, for God's sake!

Jack: Just turn up your backside, you drunken sack.

Wife: Dearest, sweetest love, save my life! I'm dying. Give me your hand for one little second.

Jack: It's not in my list. Down to hell you go!

Wife: Somebody help me before I drown!

Jack: Grind the flour, make the soap, sweep the floor, wash the pots and pans.

Wife: I'm turning blue! I'm breathing my last!

Jack: Knock you up five times a day.

Wife: Help! Help!

Jack: Come and go, hop, skip, and run.

Wife: Heat your clothes over the fire.

Wife: Your hand, quick! This is the end!

Jack: Walk the baby.

Wife: You're a dog.

Jack: Make up the bed in the morning.

Wife: Do you think this is a laughing matter?

Jack: Hang up the laundry.

Wife: Mother! Where's my mother?

Jack: And keep the kitchen clean.

Wife: Call a priest!

Jack: I'm scrutinizing this paper, but I have to inform you that's not on the list, either.

Wife: Why didn't you write it?

Jack: Because you didn't make me. Save yourself any way you can. As far as I'm concerned, you can stay where you are.

Wife: At least go find a servant in the street to help me.

Jack: That's not on the list.

Wife: Won't you give me your hand, dearest? I'm ever so weak.

Jack: Dearest, is it? I'm your enemy, drop dead!

Mother: Open up!

Jack: Who is it?

Mother: It's me. I've come to see how you are.

Jack: I'm fine, now my wife is dead. Now I'm happy and rich.

Mother: What? Is my daughter dead?

Jack: Drowned in the wash.

Mother: What's that? Murderer!

Jack: I pray to God in Paradise and their worships the saints in heaven to let the devil puncture her guts before the soul comes out.

Mother: Is my daughter dead?

Jack: While she was wringing a sheet it fell out of her hands. She bent over the tub and fell in.

Wife: Mother! I'm dead if you don't rescue your daughter!

Mother: Of course I will! Jack, give me a hand.

Jack: It's not on the list.

Mother: Is that a nice thing to say?

Wife: Help!

Mother: Miserable cur, are you going to let her die?

Jack: As far as I'm concerned, yes. I don't want to be her servant anymore.

Wife: Help me!

Jack: It's not on the list. Can't find it anywhere.

Mother: Stop this nonsense at once, Jack, and help me get your wife out of the tub.

Jack: I swear I won't, unless I first receive a pledge that I'm to be master of the house.

Wife: With all my heart, I promise, if only you'll pull me out of here.

Jack: And what do you promise to do?

Wife: I'll do all the chores, I'll never bother you, and never give you an order unless it's absolutely necessary.

Jack: That's good. Now I'll pull you out. But you'd better keep your promise, by God.

Wife: I will, and I'll never break it, dear.

Jack: Well, then, it looks as if I'll be in charge from now on – since my wife says so.

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