

The Washtub

Anonymous

Translated by Laura Elizabeth Rice & Katharine Handel

Narrator

At home today we find Jaquinot, a simple peasant man.....

Jaquinot

The great devil inspired me well when I set about housekeeping! It is nothing but storm and tempest; and I have nothing but care and sorrow. My wife is always difficult; and then her mother always wants to have her say on the matter. I no longer have rest or leisure; I am struck and tortured with great stones hurled at my head. One man screams, another grumbles; one curses, another rages. Workday or holiday, I have no other pastime. I am among the malcontents, for I make no profit from anything. (Raising his voice.) But, by the blood that flows in me, I will be master in my house, if I set about it!

Narrator

And with that bold declaratio, Jaquinot sits down to rest, just in time for Jaquinette, his wife, and her mother, enter the scene.

Wife

Devil! What a lot of words! Be quiet! It would be wiser!

Mother

What is it?

Jaquinette

What? And what do I know? There's always so much to do! And he doesn't think about what needs to be done at home.

Narrator

Jaquinette puts on her apron and begins to tidy up the house.

Mother

Yes, there is no reason or matter to discuss. By my lady! You must obey your wife, as a good husband should. Even if one day she beats you, when will you do what is right?

Jaquinot

Oh! I know well that I will not tolerate it in my life.

Mother

And why? By holy Mary! Do you think that, if she chastises and corrects you in due time and place, it is out of malice? No, by Jove! It is only a proof of love.

Jaquinot

That's well said, Mother Jacquette. But there's no point speaking about it so insincerely. What do you mean by that? I'm asking you for an explanation.

Mother

I understand. I mean, in the first year of marriage, a quarrel is nothing. Do you hear, my big idiot?

Jaquinot

Idiot! By Saint Paul's virtue, but what does that mean? You dress me up like a fine lord, only to beat me down so quickly! My name is Jaquinot, my real name: don't you know it?

Mother

No, my friend, no! But you are, nevertheless, a *married* idiot.

Jacquinot

By Jove! I'm only too sorry for it!

Mother

Certainly, Jaquinot, my friend; but you are a tamed man.

Jacquinot

Tamed! By St George's virtue! I would rather have my throat cut!
Tamed! Blessed be Our Lady!

Jacquinette

You must do as your wife pleases; yes, truly, when she commands you.

Jacquinot

(*to himself*) Ah! By Saint John! She really gives me too many orders.

Mother

Well! To remember it better, you will have to take a scroll and write down on a piece of paper everything she orders you to do.

Narrator

She hands him a roll of parchment and a pencil to write it. Meanwhile, Jacquinette continues her cleaning, throwing rags and clothing into their extremely large washtub, but pausing to interject her thoughts as her husband makes his list.

Jaquinot

Fine! I'll start writing.

Jacquinette

So write so that it can be read. Say that you will obey me, that you will never refuse to do anything that I want.

Jacquinot

Ah! Good grief, I won't do any of it, unless it's reasonable.

Jacquinette

So, to keep things brief and avoid tiring me out, put here that you will always have to get up first to do the work.

Jacquinot

By Our Lady of Boulogne, I oppose this article. Rise first! And for what reason?

JacquINETTE

To heat my chemise by the fire.

Jacquinot

Do you tell me that this is the custom?

JacquINETTE

This is the custom, and the right way. Remember this lesson.

Mother

Write!

JacquINETTE

Put that on there, Jacquinot!

Jacquinot

I'm still on the first word! You're putting pressure on me like no other.

Mother

At night, if the child wakes up, you will, as is done almost everywhere, have to take the trouble to get up to rock him, walk him around the room, carry him, get him comfortable, even if it is midnight!

Jacquinot

I wouldn't know how to do that, I can't see that happening.

JacquINETTE

Write!

Jacquinot

In all conscience, there's no space left on the page. What do you want me to write?

JacquINETTE

Put that down, or you'll be smacked!

Jacquinot

That will have to go on the other side.

Narrator

He turns the paper over and continues.

Mother

Then, Jacquinot, you have to knead the bread, bake it, do the washing up...

Narrator

JacquINETTE gets distracted from her work and she and her mother hover over her husband, pelting him with chores to write down furiously.

JacquINETTE

Knead... bake... wash....

Mother

Come, go, trot, run, move like the devil!

JacquINETTE

Make the bread, heat the oven...

Mother

Bring the grain to the mill...

JacquINETTE

Make the bed early in the morning, or you'll be beaten.

Mother

And then put the pot on the fire and keep the kitchen clean.

Jacquinet

If I have to put all this down, I have to say it word for word.

Mother

Good! Write then, Jacquinet: knead

Jacquinete

Bake the bread...

Jacquinet

Wash...

Jacquinete

Provide

Mother

Pour drinks

Jacquinete

Cook

Mother

Wash

Jacquinet

Wash what, exactly?

Mother

The pots and the dishes!

Jacquinet

Wait, don't rush... The pots... the dishes...

Jacquinete

And the bowls.

Jacquinet

By Jove! I'm brainless, I cannot remember everything.

Jacquinette

So write it down to remember it. Do you hear? Because I want it done!

Jacquinet

Good. "Wash them...."

Jacquinette

Wash our child's shitty diapers in the river.

Jacquinet

God forbid! This matter and these words are not humane!

Jacquinette

Write! Go on, you silly beast! Are you ashamed of this?

Jacquinet

Oh, my God! I won't do anything about it. A lie, if you believe it: I won't write it, I swear.

Jacquinette

I must insult you. I will beat you worse than a plaster can fix.

Narrator

Jacquinette raises a hand menacingly towards her husband, and he ducks towards his paper.

Jacquinet

Well! I don't want to debate it anymore. I'll write it down, don't talk about it anymore.

Jacquinette

All that will remain is to tidy up the house; and now, to help me wring out the washing near the tub, you'll step lively and swift as a hawk. Write!

Jacquinet

That's it: finished!

Narrator

Jacquinet proceeds towards the washtub, an object sitting in the corner, so large that she has to stand on a stool to reach into it, and Jacquinet is just about to put his pencil down when-

Mother

And then also... you know what? Doing the right thing to my daughter sometimes.

Jacquinet

You'll only have to sleep with me once a fortnight, or maybe once a month.

Jacquinet

Rather five or six times a day! That's what I want, and at the very least. Kisses, sex, cuddling.

Jacquinet

It will not be so, by the saving God! Five or six times, by the virtue of Saint George! Five or six times! Neither two nor three; by golly, no, it will not be so.

Jacquinet

May we have nothing but misery from the boor! This impotent lecher has nothing left.

Jacquinet

Oh, my God! I am very foolish and simple to let myself be led so harshly. There is not a man in the world today who could take pleasure here. For what reason? It is that day and night I shall have to remember my lesson.

Mother

It will be written, since it pleases me. Hurry up, and then sign.

Jacquinet

There it is, signed. Here!

Narrator

He signs the paper and throws his pencil down onto the table.

Jacquinet

Take care that it is not lost. For even if I should be hanged, from this moment I intend never to do anything other than what is listed here.

Mother

(to the audience) Observe him well, as he is.

Narrator

Jacquinet's mother motions that she needs to leave and heads towards the door. Her daughter waves her off from where she stands by the tub. Jacquinet's wave goodbye is one of relief and invokes "good riddance".

Jacquinet

Go! I commend you to God. *(to Jacquinet)* Come on!

Narrator

Jacquinet goes over to where his wife is lifting the laundry out of the washtub, a piece at a time, and attempting to wring it out. She hands him the end of a large piece of cloth and tries to twist it dry, but Jacquinet keeps dropping it.

Jacquinet

Hold on, damn it! Make an effort, sweat a little to hang out our laundry properly: it's part of our business.

Jacquinet

I don't know what you want to do. (*to the audience*) What is she ordering me to do?

Jacquinette

What a good slap you're going to get! I'm talking about lifting the laundry, you little goblin!

Narrator

Jacquinet drops the laundry altogether and goes to pick up his piece of paper, looking it over curiously.

Jacquinet

This is not in my job description.

Jacquinette

Yes, it is there, truly.

Jacquinet

No, Saint John, it is not there!

Jacquinette

Isn't it there?

Narrator

Jacquinette also drops the laundry now, and, huffing in annoyance, steps down from the tub stool to go look at the list. She snatches it out of Jacquinet's hand, and after a moment she spots the item about "laundry" and taps it triumphantly.

Jacquinette

Yes, it is, if you please. There it is, you'll hate to deny it!

Jacquinet

Hey, hey! I'm happy to; you're right, you spoke the truth. Another time, I'll think about it.

Narrator

Jacquinetot takes her husband's arm and pulls him over to the washtub, and they take positions around the tub, facing each other, each standing on a stool so they can reach into the high tub. She takes a small child's sheet from the tub and hands him one end.

Jacquinette

Hold this end; pull hard!

Jacquinetot

Damn! This laundry is so dirty! It smells like a bed of shit.

Jacquinette

Rather a turd in your mouth! Come on! Do as I do, and be wise.

Jacquinetot

The shit is there, I swear. What a pitiful household!

Jacquinette

I'll throw everything in your face. Don't think I'm joking.

Jacquinetot

By the devil, you won't do anything with it.

Narrator

She throws the dirty, wet laundry down over her husband's head, and he has to wrestle his way out of it while she chides him.

Jacquinette

Well, feel it now, Master of Sots!

Jacquinetot

Good Virgin! This is the devil! You have soiled my clothes.

Jacquinette

Why should we look for so many alibis when it is necessary to work? Hold the laundry towards you!

Narrator

JacquINETTE again throws the end of a sheet towards JacquINOT, who takes the end, looks up at her, and contemplates for a moment. The he jerks it hard out of her hands and throws it back towards the tub. As JacquINETTE tries to catch it before it goes back in the water, she loses her balance and falls into the washtub. Although JacquINETTE's head can clearly be seen above the edge of the tub- and therefore is clear above the water!- she begins to shriek and splash about amid the laundry.

JacquINETTE

My God! Remember me! Have pity on your poor friend! Help me get out of here, or I will die in great shame. JacquINOT, help your wife; pull her out of this tub.

JacquINOT

That is not on my list.

JacquINETTE

How this barrel crushes me! I am in great distress! My heart is pounding! I'm afraid! For the love of God, take me out of it!

JacquINOT

Oh! you old fart, you're just a drunkard. Turn your buttocks over!

JacquINETTE

My good husband, save my life! I'm already completely unconscious. Give me a hand, just a little.

JacquINOT

This is not my job. Whoever claims otherwise can go to hell.

Narrator

Instead of helping, JacquINOT goes over to pick up his list and begins to read it over while JacquINETTE continues to panic.

JacquINETTE

Alas! if no one helps me, death will come and take me away.

Jacquinet

"Knead the bread, bake the bread, wash..., knead, wash, clean..."

JacquINETTE

My blood has already turned to ice. I'm about to die.

Jacquinet

...Kissing, sex, cuddling...

JacquINETTE

Quickly, help me!

Jacquinet

Come, go, trot, run...

JacquINETTE

I will never endure beyond this day!

Jacquinet

...Make the bread, heat the oven...

JacquINETTE

That's it! I'm nearing my end!

Jacquinet

...Bring the grain to the mill...

JacquINETTE

You are worse than a mastiff dog!

Jacquinet

...Make the bed first thing in the morning...

JacquINETTE

Alas! It seems to you that this is a game!

Jacquinet

...and then put the pot on the fire...

Jacquintte

Alas! Where is my mother?

Jacquinet

...And keep the kitchen clean

Jacquinette

Go get me the priest!

Jacquinet

I have finished reading my list; and, without further ado, I assure you that it is not on my scroll.

Narrator

Jacquinet sets the list back on the table and, adopting a smug attitude, sits down calmly in a chair, kicking his feet up on another one.

Jacquinette

And why isn't it written there?

Jacquinet

Because you didn't say so. Save yourself as you wish; if it's up to me, you'll stay there.

Jacquinette

Go and look for a servant passing in the street.

Jacquinet

This is not my job.

Jacquinette

A hand, my sweet friend! For I am not strong enough to get up alone!

Jacquinet

Me, your friend! Or rather, your great enemy. I wish I had fucked you dead already!

Narrator

From outside, we hear a familiar voice: the return of Jacquinette's mother.

Mother

Hello, hello!

Jacquinet

Who's knocking on the door?

Narrator

Without waiting for anyone to let her in, Jacquinette's mother barges into the room. Meanwhile, Jacquinette disappears into the tub- but her hands are still seen hanging onto the edge.

Mother

It's your dear mother-in-law! I came here to find out how everything is going.

Jacquinet

Very well, since my wife... died. All my wishes have come true; and I have become richer for it.

Mother

What! is my daughter killed?

Jacquinet

She drowned in the laundry.

Narrator

JacquINETTE's mother begins to panic, pacing about the room at increasing speed and twisting her hands, tearing at her hair, wringing her apron in her hands....

Mother

Treachery! Murderer, what are you saying?

JacquINOT

I pray to the God of heaven and to Saint Denis of France that the devil may break her belly, before her soul has passed away.

Mother

Alas! my daughter has passed away?

JacquINOT

While wringing the linen, she dropped it, and as she bent down, she slipped, and there she was, fallen into the tub.

Narrator

At this moment, JacquINETTE's head pops back up in the tub, spluttering and spitting out water, but clearly very much *not dead*.

JacquINETTE

Mother, I am dead, see, if you do not help your daughter.

Narrator

JacquINETTE returns to her invisible pose, as if she is sinking. Her mother rushes over to the tub and grabs at her daughter's hands, which are still gripping the side of the washtub- needlessly!- but every time she catches one, JacquINETTE wails again and waves her hands above her head before once again holding on to the side of the tub. We might see her head bob up occasionally, but mostly she's yelling from inside the tub.

Mother

I'm not strong enough on my own. JacquINOT, hand me a hand, please.

Jacquinet

This is not on my list.

Mother

You are wrong that it is not there.

Jacquinet

Alas! Help me!

Mother

Nasty stinker! Will you let her die there?

Jacquinet

If it's up to me, she'll stay there. I don't want to be her servant anymore.

Jacquinet

Help me.

Jacquinet

Not my job. Impossible to find it there!

Mother

Go, Jacquinet, without further delay, help me lift your wife.

Jacquinet

I will not do it, upon my soul, until it is promised to me that from now on, I shall be put in the position of master.

Jacquinet

If you do get me out of here, I promise you will be master, with all my heart.

Jacquinet

And you will do it?

JacquINETTE

I will take care of the housework, without ever asking you anything, without ever ordering you anything, even in great need.

NARRATOR

At these welcome words, knowing their contract is now rescinded, JacquINOT rushes over to the washtub and climbs up onto the stool. He reaches out to grab his wife but then suddenly pauses.

JacquINOT

Well! So, you shall be lifted out. But, by all the saints of the Mass, I want you to keep your promise, just as you said.

JacquINETTE

I will never contradict you; my friend, I promise you.

NARRATOR

And with this, JacquINOT pulls JacquINETTE from the tub. She leans against it, gasping for the air she never actually lost except to her own panic.

JacquINOT

So I will be the master from now on, since my wife finally grants it.

MOTHER

If there is discord in the household, no one can profit from it.

JacquINOT

I want it on the record, that it is shameful for a woman to make a servant of her master, however foolish and ill-bred he may be.

JacquINETTE

And that is why I had a terrible time of it, as we have just seen here. But from now on, I will diligently take care of all the housework. It is I who will be the servant, as is by right my duty.

Jacquinet

I will be happy if the deal holds, because I will live without any need.

JacquINETTE

I'll definitely keep my word. I promise you, that's right. You'll be the master of the house now, that's well thought out.

JacquINOT

For this reason, I will be careful not to be cruel to you anymore. (*to audience*) Remember, then, in veiled terms, that through unspeakable madness I had the meaning completely backward. But those who have spoken ill of me are now of my opinion, when they see that my wife is rallying to my cause, she who had wanted, with her mad imagination, to impose her domination on me. Farewell! Such is my conclusion.

Narrator

The two turn towards one another, and lean in to kiss, and we see that they both have one hand with fingers crossed behind their back.