Name: _____ Date: _____

Minding the House

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1021 words

Long ago in Norway there lived a farmer who was always in a terrible temper when he came home. All day he worked in the hayfield, and by evening he was exhausted, hungry and completely fed up. The porridge was too thin, the floor was too dusty, and the baby was far too noisy. Nothing his wife did was ever right, and he complained about it every single night, loudly enough to rattle the dishes on the shelf.

One evening he stomped into the kitchen and grumbled worse than usual. His wife did not grumble back. She only smiled and said, "My dear, tomorrow let us change places. I will go out with the mowers and cut the hay. You can stay at home and mind the house." The farmer thought this was a wonderful idea. Minding the house, he was certain, was very easy work. "Agreed," he said. "Tomorrow we shall see who is cross at suppertime."

At sunrise his wife put a scythe over her shoulder and marched off to the hayfield, singing cheerfully. The farmer stood in the doorway and waved goodbye. Then he rolled up his sleeves and looked around the kitchen confidently. "First I shall make the butter," he announced, "because we must have fresh butter for dinner." He poured thick cream into the tall wooden churn, took hold of the handle, and began pushing it up and down, up and down, with great importance.

After a little while the churning made him thirsty. "A cup of cold buttermilk would be delicious," he thought, and down the cellar steps he went. He pulled the plug from the barrel and was just fitting the wooden tap into the hole when he heard a noise overhead. Thump, thump, snuffle! An enormous pig had wandered into the kitchen. "My cream!" shouted the farmer, and he raced up the steps with the tap still clutched in his hand.

He was too late. The pig had knocked over the churn, and there it stood, with its snout in a river of cream, grunting with delight. The farmer shouted and swung his foot to chase it away. The pig squealed and shot out of the door and across the yard, with its curly tail sticking straight up. Then the farmer remembered the tap. In the cellar the buttermilk was pouring out of the barrel and spreading across the floor in an enormous white puddle.

He mopped the floor and muttered unhappily, and then he scraped up whatever cream was left and began to churn all over again. Suddenly he remembered the cow. She was still shut in the barn, and the sun was high, and she had not eaten a mouthful all morning. The meadow was much too far away to walk to. But the roof of the house was covered with turf, and thick green grass was growing on top of it. "That is the perfect place for her," said the farmer.

The house stood right up against a steep hill, so he laid a long plank from the hillside to the roof. But the baby was crawling around the floor, and the farmer was afraid to leave the cream

behind. "If I go, that child will certainly tip it over," he said. So he strapped the heavy churn onto his back and carried it outside. When he leaned over the well to fetch a bucket of water for the cow, the cream poured out of the churn, down his neck, and splashed into the well.

Now it was nearly dinnertime, and he still had no butter at all. "Porridge, then," said the farmer, and he filled the big iron pot with water and hung it over the fire. Then he glanced up at the cow on the roof, munching grass at the very edge. "What if she falls?" he thought anxiously. So he climbed up and tied a rope around her neck. He dropped the other end down the chimney, hurried back inside, and tied it around his own leg.

The farmer felt extremely clever and rather proud of himself. Now he could grind the oatmeal for the porridge, and the cow would be perfectly safe. He began to turn the heavy stone handle, round and round. But the cow had other ideas. She stepped a little too close to the edge, slipped, and slid right off the roof. The rope jerked tight and whisked the farmer up the chimney like a cork out of a bottle. There he stuck, kicking and sneezing, with soot in his nose.

Outside, the poor cow dangled halfway down the wall, swinging to and fro in the air. She could neither climb up nor get down, so she mooed as loudly as she possibly could. Out in the hayfield, the farmer's wife had waited and waited to hear him call her to dinner. At last she put down her scythe and walked home to find out why he had not called. When she saw the cow hanging from the roof, she stopped and stared in astonishment.

Then she hurried to the wall, lifted her sharp scythe, and cut the rope with a single stroke. The cow dropped gently onto the soft grass, and she shook herself as though nothing unusual had happened. But inside the house something went rattle, bump, thump, whoosh! The farmer shot down the chimney headfirst. The fire had burned low and the water was only lukewarm, so he landed in the porridge pot with a tremendous splash. When his wife came in, all she could see were two boots sticking out of the pot, waving about.

She pulled him out, and he sat on the floor with porridge dripping from his ears. The pig trotted back in and began licking up the spilled cream, while the baby clapped her hands in delight. The farmer looked at his wife for a long moment. Then he began to laugh, and she laughed too. That evening she brought him a bowl of porridge, and the farmer said it was the best he had ever tasted. And he never complained about her housework again.

Questions

1. Why did the farmer's wife suggest trading places?

A. She wanted to rest
B. He kept saying she did nothing right
C. The hay was ready

2. Why did the farmer put the cow on the roof?

A. He wanted her to eat the grass there
B. He was hiding her from the pig
C. She was too tired to walk

3. What happened to the cream?

A. The pig ate all of it
B. It poured down the farmer's neck into the well
C. The baby spilled it

4. What did the farmer learn that day?

A. Cows are hard to carry
B. A farmer should never cook
C. Housework is harder than it looks

5. In this story, to dangle means to

A. hang and swing
B. fall down hard
C. run away

Words to know

scythe: long mowing blade
churn: butter-making tub
turf: grassy earth
dangled: hung and swung
grumbled: complained crossly

Answer key: Minding the House

1. B. He kept saying she did nothing right
2. A. He wanted her to eat the grass there
3. B. It poured down the farmer's neck into the well
4. C. Housework is harder than it looks
5. A. hang and swing