



The Curse of the Seven Children

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Italian

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There was once a king and a queen who had six children, all sons. The queen was about to give birth to another child, and the king said that if it was not a daughter all seven children would be cursed. Now it happened that the king had to go away to war; and before departing he said to the queen, "Listen. If you have a son, hang a lance out of the window; if a daughter, a distaff; so that I can see as soon as I arrive which it is." After the king had been gone a month, the queen gave birth to the most beautiful girl that was ever seen. Imagine how pleased the queen was at having a girl. She could scarcely contain herself for joy, and immediately gave orders to hang the distaff out of the window; but in the midst of the joyful confusion, a mistake was made, and they put out a lance. Shortly after, the king returned and saw the sign at the window, and cursed all his seven sons; but when he entered the house and the servants crowded around him to congratulate him and tell him about his beautiful daughter, then the king was amazed and became very melancholy. He entered the queen's room and looked at the child, who seemed exactly like one of those wax dolls to be kept in a box; then he looked about him and saw nothing of his sons, and his eyes filled with tears, for those poor youths had wandered out into the world.

Meanwhile the girl grew, and when she was large she saw that her parents caressed her, but always with tears in their eyes. One day she said to her mother: "What is the matter with you, mother, that I always see you crying?" Then the queen told her the story, and said that she was afraid that some day she would see her

disappear too. When the girl heard how it was, what did she do? One night she rose softly and left the palace, with the intention of going to find her brothers. She walked and walked, and at last met a little old man, who said to her: "Where are you going at this time of the night?" She answered: "I am in search of my brothers." The old man said: "It will be difficult to find them, for you must not speak for seven years, seven months, seven weeks, seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes." She said: "I will try." Then she took a bit of paper which she found on the ground, wrote on it the day and the hour with a piece of charcoal, and left the old man and hastened on her way. After she had run a long time, she saw a light and went towards it, and when she was near it, she saw that it was over the door of a palace where a king lived. She entered and sat down on the stairway, and fell asleep. The servants came later to put out the light, and saw the pretty girl asleep on the stone steps; they awakened her, asking her what she was doing there. She began to make signs, asking them to give her a lodging. They understood her, and said they would ask the king. They returned shortly to tell her to enter, for the king wished to see her before she was shown to her room. When the king saw the beautiful girl, with hair like gold, flesh like milk and wine, teeth white as pearls, and little hands that an artist could not paint as beautiful as they were, he suddenly imagined that she must be the daughter of some lord, and gave orders that she should be treated with all possible respect. They showed her to a beautiful room; then a maid came and undressed her and put her to bed. Next morning, Diana, for so she was called, arose, saw a frame with a piece of embroidery in it, and began to work at it. The king visited her, and asked if she needed anything, and she made signs that she did not. The king was so pleased with the young girl that he ended by falling in love with her, and after a year had passed he thought of marrying her. The queen-mother, who was an envious person, was not content with the match, because, said she, no one knows where she came from, and, besides, she is dumb, something that would make people wonder if a king should marry her. But the king was so obstinate that he married her; and when his mother saw that there was no help, she pretended to be satisfied. Shortly after, the queen-mother put into the king's hands a letter which informed him of an imminent war, in which, if he did not take part, he would run the risk of losing his realm. The king went to the war, in fact, with great grief at leaving his wife; and before departing, he commended her earnestly to his mother, who said: "Do not be anxious, my son, I shall do all that I can to make her happy." The king embraced his wife and mother, and departed.

Scarcely had the king gone when the queen-mother sent for a mason, and made him build a wall near the kitchen-sink, so that it formed a sort of box. Now you must know that Diana expected soon to become a mother, and this afforded the queen-mother a pretext to write to her son that his wife had died in giving birth to a child

.She took her and put her in the wall she had had built, where there was neither light nor air, and where the wicked woman hoped that she would die. But it was not so. The scullion went every day to wash the dishes at the sink near where poor Dianawas buried alive. While attending to his business, he heard a lamentation, and listened to see where it could come from. He listened and listened, until at last he perceived that the voice came from the wall that had been newly built. What did he do then? He made a hole in the wall, and saw that the queen was there. The scullion asked how she came there; but she only made signs that she was about to give birth to a child. The poor scullion had his wife make a fine cushion, on which Diana reposed as well as she could, and gave birth to the most beautiful boy that could be seen. The scullion's wife went to see her every moment, and carried her broth, and cared for the child; in short, this poor woman, as well as her husband, did everything she could to alleviate the poor queen, who tried to make them understand by signs what she needed. One day it came into Diana's head to look into her memorandum book and see how long she still had to keep silent, and she saw that only two minutes yet remained. As soon as they had passed, she told the scullion all that had happened. At that moment the king arrived, and the scullion drew the queen from out the hole, and showed her to the king. You can imagine how delighted he was to see again his Diana, whom he believed to be dead. He embraced her, and kissed her and the child; in short, such was his joy that it seemed as if he would go mad. Diana related everything to him: why she had left her home, and why she had played dumb so long, and finally how she had been treated by the queen-mother, and what she had suffered, and how kind those poor people had been to her. When he had heard all this, he said: "Leave the matter to me; I will arrange it."

The next day the king invited all the nobles and princes of his realm to a great banquet. Now it happened that in setting the tables the servants laid six plates besides the others; and when the guests sat down, six handsome youths entered, who advanced and asked what should be given to a sister who had done so and so for her brothers. Then the king sprang up and said: "And I ask what shall be done to a mother who did so and so to her son's wife?" and he explained everything. One said: "Burn her alive." Another: "Put her in the pillory." Another: "Fry her in oil in the public square." This was agreed to. The youths had been informed by that same old man whom Diana had met, and who was a magician, where their sister was and what she had done for them. Then they made themselves known, and embraced Diana and their brother-in-law the king, and after the greatest joy, they all started off to see their parents. Imagine the satisfaction of the king and queen at seeing again all their seven children. They gave the warmest reception to the king, Diana's husband, and after they had spent some days together, Diana returned with her husband to their city. And all lived there afterward in peace and contentment.

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