



Goat-Face

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Intermediate

12 min read

All the ill-deeds that a man commits have some colour of excuse—either contempt which provokes, need which compels, love which blinds, or anger which breaks the neck. But ingratitude is a thing that has no excuse, true or false, upon which it can fix; and it is therefore the worst of vices, since it dries up the fountain of compassion, extinguishes the fire of love, closes the road to benefits, and causes vexation and repentance to spring up in the hearts of the ungrateful. As you will see in the story which I am about to relate.

A peasant had twelve daughters, not one of whom was a head taller than the next; for every year their mother presented him with a little girl; so that the poor man, to support his family decently, went early every morning as a day labourer and dug hard the whole day long. With what his labour produced he just kept his little ones from dying of hunger.

He happened, one day, to be digging at the foot of a mountain, the spy of other mountains, that thrust its head above the clouds to see what they were doing up in the sky, and close to a cavern so deep and dark that the sun was afraid to enter it. Out of this cavern there came a green lizard as big as a crocodile; and the poor man was so terrified that he had not the power to run away, expecting every moment the end of his days from a gulp of that ugly animal. But the lizard, approaching him, said, “Be not afraid, my good man, for I am not come here to do you any harm, but to do you good.”

When Masaniello (for that was the name of the labourer) heard this, he fell on his knees and said, “Mistress

What's-your-name, I am wholly in your power. Act then worthily and have compassion on this poor trunk that has twelve branches to support."

"It is on this very account," said the lizard, "that I am disposed to serve you; so bring me, to-morrow morning the youngest of your daughters; for I will rear her up like my own child, and love her as my life."

At this the poor father was more confounded than a thief when the stolen goods are found on his back. For, hearing the lizard ask him for one of his daughters, and that too, the tenderest of them, he concluded that the cloak was not without wool on it, and that she wanted the child as a titbit to stay her appetite. Then he said to himself, "If I give her my daughter, I give her my soul. If I refuse her, she will take this body of mine. If I yield her, I am robbed of my heart; if I deny her she will suck out my blood. If I consent, she takes away part of myself; if I refuse, she takes the whole. What shall I resolve on? What course shall I take? What expedient shall I adopt? Oh, what an ill day's work have I made of it! What a misfortune has rained down from heaven upon me!"

While he was speaking thus, the lizard said, "Resolve quickly and do what I tell you; or you will leave only your rags here. For so I will have it, and so it will be." Masaniello, hearing this decree and having no one to whom he could appeal, returned home quite melancholy, as yellow in the face as if he had jaundice; and his wife, seeing him hanging his head like a sick bird and his shoulders like one that is wounded, said to him, "What has happened to you, husband? Have you had a quarrel with any one? Is there a warrant out against you? Or is the ass dead?"

"Nothing of that sort," said Masaniello, "but a horned lizard has put me into a fright, for she has threatened that if I do not bring her our youngest daughter, she will make me suffer for it. My head is turning like a reel. I know not what fish to take. On one side love constrains me; on the other the burden of my family. I love Renzolla dearly, I love my own life dearly. If I do not give the lizard this portion of my heart, she will take the whole compass of my unfortunate body. So now, dear wife, advise me, or I am ruined!"

When his wife heard this, she said, "Who knows, husband, but this may be a lizard with two tails, that will make our fortune? Who knows but this lizard may put an end to all our miseries? How often, when we should have an eagle's sight to discern the good luck that is running to meet us, we have a cloth before our eyes and the cramp in our hands, when we should lay hold on it. So go, take her away, for my heart tells me that some good fortune awaits the poor little thing!"

These words comforted Masaniello; and the next morning, as soon as the Sun with the brush of his rays whitewashed the Sky, which the shades of night had blackened, he took the little girl by the hand, and led her to the cave. Then the lizard came out, and taking the child gave the father a bag full of crowns, saying, "Go now, be happy, for Renzolla has found both father and mother."

Masaniello, overjoyed, thanked the lizard and went home to his wife. There was money enough for portions to all the other daughters when they married, and even then the old folks had sauce remaining for themselves to enable them to swallow with relish the toils of life.

Then the lizard made a most beautiful palace for Renzolla, and brought her up in such state and magnificence as would have dazzled the eyes of any queen. She wanted for nothing. Her food was fit for a count, her clothing for a princess. She had a hundred maidens to wait upon her, and with such good treatment she grew as sturdy as an oak-tree.

It happened, as the King was out hunting in those parts, that night overtook him, and as he stood looking round, not knowing where to lay his head, he saw a candle shining in the palace. So he sent one of his servants, to ask the owner to give him shelter. When the servant came to the palace, the lizard appeared before him in the shape of a beautiful lady; who, after hearing his message, said that his master should be a thousand times welcome, and that neither bread nor knife should there be wanting. The King, on hearing this reply, went to the palace and was received like a cavalier. A hundred pages went out to meet him, so that it looked like the funeral of a rich man. A hundred other pages brought the dishes to the table. A hundred others made a brave noise with musical instruments. But, above all, Renzolla served the King and handed him drink with such grace that he drank more love than wine.

When he had thus been so royally entertained, he felt he could not live without Renzolla; so, calling the fairy, he asked her for his wife. Whereupon the fairy, who wished for nothing but Renzolla's good, not only freely consented, but gave her a dowry of seven millions of gold.

The King, overjoyed at this piece of good fortune, departed with Renzolla, who, ill-mannered and ungrateful for all the fairy had done for her, went off with her husband without uttering one single word of thanks. Then the fairy, beholding such ingratitude, cursed her, and wished that her face should become like that of a she-goat; and hardly had she uttered the words, when Renzolla's mouth stretched out, with a beard a span long on it, her jaws shrunk, her skin hardened, her cheeks grew hairy, and her plaited tresses turned to pointed horns.

When the poor King saw this he was thunderstruck, not knowing what had happened that so great a beauty should be thus transformed; and, with sighs and tears he exclaimed, "Where are the locks that bound me? Where are the eyes that transfixed me? Must I then be the husband of a she-goat? No, no, my heart shall not break for such a goat-face!" So saying, as soon as they reached his palace, he put Renzolla into a kitchen, along with a chambermaid; and gave to each of them ten bundles of flax to spin, commanding them to have the thread ready at the end of a week.

The maid, in obedience to the King, set about carding the flax, preparing and putting it on the distaff, twirling her spindle, reeling it and working away without ceasing; so that on Saturday evening her thread was all done. But Renzolla, thinking she was still the same as in the fairy's house, not having looked at herself in the glass, threw the flax out of the window, saying, "A pretty thing indeed of the King to set me such work to do! If he wants shirts let him buy them, and not fancy that he picked me up out of the gutter. But let him remember that I brought him home seven millions of gold, and that I am his wife and not his servant. Methinks, too, that he is somewhat of a donkey to treat me this way!"

Nevertheless, when Saturday morning came, seeing that the maid had spun all her share of the flax, Renzolla was greatly afraid; so away she went to the palace of the fairy and told her misfortune. Then the fairy embraced her with great affection, and gave her a bag full of spun thread, to present to the King and show him what a notable and industrious housewife she was. Renzolla took the bag, and without saying one word of thanks, went to the royal palace; so again the fairy was quite angered at the conduct of the graceless girl.

When the King had taken the thread, he gave two little dogs, one to Renzolla and one to the maid, telling them to feed and rear them. The maid reared hers on bread crumbs and treated it like a child; but Renzolla

grumbled, saying, "A pretty thing truly! As my grandfather used to say, Are we living under the Turks? Am I indeed to comb and wait upon dogs?" and she flung the dog out of the window!

Some months afterwards, the King asked for the dogs; whereat Renzolla, losing heart, ran off again to the fairy, and at the gate stood the old man who was the porter. "Who are you," said he, "and whom do you want?" Renzolla, hearing herself addressed in this off-hand way, replied, "Don't you know me, you old goat-beard?"

"Why do you miscall me?" said the porter. "This is the thief accusing the constable. I a goat-beard indeed! You are a goat-beard and a half, and you merit it and worse for your presumption. Wait awhile, you impudent woman; I'll enlighten you and you will see to what your airs and impertinence have brought you!"

So saying, he ran into his room, and taking a looking-glass, set it before Renzolla; who, when she saw her ugly, hairy visage, was like to have died with terror. Her dismay at seeing her face so altered that she did not know herself cannot be told. Whereupon the old man said to her, "You ought to recollect, Renzolla, that you are a daughter of a peasant and that it was the fairy that raised you to be a queen. But you, rude, unmannerly, and thankless as you are, having little gratitude for such high favours, have kept her waiting outside your heart, without showing the slightest mark of affection. You have brought the quarrel on yourself; see what a face you have got by it! See to what you are brought by your ingratitude; for through the fairy's spell you have not only changed face, but condition. But if you will do as this white-beard advises, go and look for the fairy; throw yourself at her feet, tear your beard, beat your breast, and ask pardon for the ill-treatment you have shown her. She is tender-hearted and she will be moved to pity by your misfortune."

Renzolla, who was touched to the quick, and felt that he had hit the nail on the head, followed the old man's advice. Then the fairy embraced and kissed her; and restoring her to her former appearance, she clad her in a robe that was quite heavy with gold; and placing her in a magnificent coach, accompanied with a crowd of servants, she brought her to the King. When the King beheld her, so beautiful and splendidly attired, he loved her as his own life; blaming himself for all the misery he had made her endure, but excusing himself on account of that odious goat-face which had been the cause of it. Thus Renzolla lived happy, loving her husband, honouring the fairy, and showing herself grateful to the old man, having learned to her cost that—

"It is always good to be mannerly."

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