



How the Tales Came to Be Told

Stories From The Pentamerone
Italian

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It is an old saying, that he who seeks what he should not, finds what he would not. Every one has heard of the ape who, in trying to pull on his boots, was caught by the foot. And it happened in like manner to a wretched slave, who, although she never had shoes to her feet, wanted to wear a crown on her head. But the straight road is the best; and, sooner or later, a day comes which settles all accounts. At last, having by evil means usurped what belonged to another, she fell to the ground; and the higher she had mounted, the greater was her fall—as you shall see.

Once upon a time the King of Woody Valley had a daughter named Zoza, who was never seen to laugh. The unhappy father, who had no other comfort in life but this only daughter, left nothing untried to drive away her melancholy. So he sent for folks who walk on stilts, fellows who jump through hoops, for boxers, for conjurers, for jugglers who perform sleight-of-hand tricks, for strong men, for dancing dogs, for leaping clowns, for the donkey that drinks out of a tumbler—in short, he tried first one thing and then another to make her laugh. But all was time lost, for nothing could bring a smile to her lips.

So at length the poor father, at wit's end, and to make a last trial, ordered a large fountain of oil to be set in front of the palace gates, thinking to himself that when the oil ran down the street, along which the people

passed like a troop of ants, they would be obliged, in order not to soil their clothes, to skip like grasshoppers, leap like goats, and run like hares; while one would go picking and choosing his way, and another go creeping along the wall. In short, he hoped that something might come to pass to make his daughter laugh.

So the fountain was made; and as Zoza was one day standing at the window, grave and demure, and looking as sour as vinegar, there came by chance an old woman, who, soaking up the oil with a sponge, began to fill a little pitcher which she had brought with her. And as she was labouring hard at this ingenious device, a young page of the court passing by threw a stone so exactly to a hair that he hit the pitcher and broke it to pieces.

Whereupon the old woman, who had no hair on her tongue, turned to the page, full of wrath, and exclaimed, "Ah, you impertinent young dog, you mule, you gallows-rope, you spindle-legs! Ill luck to you! May you be pierced by a Catalan lance! May a thousand ills befall you and something more to boot, you thief, you knave!"

The lad, who had little beard and less discretion, hearing this string of abuse, repaid the old woman in her own coin, saying, "Have you done, you grandmother of witches, you old hag, you child-strangler!"

When the old woman heard these compliments she flew into such a rage that, losing hold of the bridle and escaping from the stable of patience, she acted as if she were mad, cutting capers in the air and grinning like an ape. At this strange spectacle Zoza burst into such a fit of laughter that she well-nigh fainted away. But when the old woman saw herself played this trick, she flew into a passion, and turning a fierce look on Zoza she exclaimed: "May you never have the least little bit of a husband, unless you take the Prince of Round-Field."

Upon hearing this, Zoza ordered the old woman to be called; and desired to know whether, in her words, she had laid on her a curse, or had only meant to insult her. And the old woman answered, "Know then, that the Prince of whom I spoke is a most handsome creature, and is named Taddeo, who, by the wicked spell of a fairy, having given the last touch to the picture of life, has been placed in a tomb outside the walls of the city; and there is an inscription upon a stone, saying that whatever woman shall in three days fill with tears a pitcher that hangs there upon a hook will bring the Prince to life and shall take him for a husband. But as it is impossible for two human eyes to weep so much as to fill a pitcher that would hold half a barrel, I have wished you this wish in return for your scoffing and jeering at me. And I pray that it may come to pass, to avenge the wrong you have done me." So saying, she scuttled down the stairs, for fear of a beating.

Zoza pondered over the words of the old woman, and after turning over a hundred thoughts in her mind, until her head was like a mill full of doubts, she was at last struck by a dart of the passion that blinds the judgment

and puts a spell on the reasoning of man. She took a handful of dollars from her father's coffers and left the palace, walking on and on, until she arrived at the castle of a fairy, to whom she unburdened her heart. The fairy, out of pity for such a fair young girl, who had two spurs to make her fall—little help and much love for an unknown object—gave her a letter of recommendation to a sister of hers, who was also a fairy. And this second fairy received her likewise with great kindness; and on the following morning, when Night commands the birds to proclaim that whoever has seen a flock of black shadows gone astray shall be well rewarded, she gave her a beautiful walnut, saying, "Take this, my dear daughter, and keep it carefully; but never open it, but in time of the greatest need." And then she gave her also a letter, commending her to another sister.

After journeying a long way, Zoza arrived at this fairy's castle, and was received with the same affection. And the next morning this fairy likewise gave her a letter to another sister, together with a chestnut, cautioning her in the same manner. Then Zoza travelled on to the next castle, where she was received with a thousand caresses and given a filbert, which she was never to open, unless the greatest necessity obliged her. So she set out upon her journey, and passed so many forests and rivers, that at the end of seven years, just at the time of day when the Sun, awakened by the coming of the cocks, has saddled his steed to run his accustomed stages, she arrived almost lame at Round-Field.

There, at the entrance to the city, she saw a marble tomb, at the foot of a fountain, which was weeping tears of crystal at seeing itself shut up in a porphyry prison. And, lifting up the pitcher, she placed it in her lap and began to weep into it, imitating the fountain to make two little fountains of her eyes. And thus she continued without ever raising her head from the mouth of the pitcher—until, at the end of two days, it was full within two inches of the top. But, being wearied with so much weeping, she was unawares overtaken by sleep, and was obliged to rest for an hour or so under the canopy of her eyes.

Meanwhile a certain Slave, with the legs of a grasshopper, came, as she was wont, to the fountain, to fill her water-cask. Now she knew the meaning of the fountain which was talked of everywhere; and when she saw Zoza weeping so incessantly, and making two little streams from her eyes, she was always watching and spying until the pitcher should be full enough for her to add the last drops to it; and thus to leave Zoza cheated of her hopes. Now, therefore, seeing Zoza asleep, she seized her opportunity; and dexterously removing the pitcher from under Zoza, and placing her own eyes over it, she filled it in four seconds. But hardly was it full, when the Prince arose from the white marble shrine, as if awakened from a deep sleep, and embraced that mass of dark flesh, and carried her straightways to his palace; feasts and marvellous illuminations were made, and he took

her for his wife.

When Zoza awoke and saw the pitcher gone, and her hopes with it, and the shrine open, her heart grew so heavy that she was on the point of unpacking the bales of her soul at the custom-house of Death. But, at last, seeing that there was no help for her misfortune, and that she could only blame her own eyes, which had served her so ill, she went her way, step by step, into the city. And when she heard of the feasts which the Prince had made, and the dainty creature he had married, she instantly knew how all this mischief had come to pass; and said to herself, sighing, "Alas, two dark things have brought me to the ground,—sleep and a black slave!" Then she took a fine house facing the palace of the Prince; from whence, though she could not see the idol of her heart, she could at least look upon the walls wherein what she sighed for was enclosed.

But Taddeo, who was constantly flying like a bat round that black night of a Slave, chanced to perceive Zoza and was entranced with her beauty. When the Slave saw this she was beside herself with rage, and vowed that if Taddeo did not leave the window, she would kill her baby when it was born.

Taddeo, who was anxiously desiring an heir, was afraid to offend his wife and tore himself away from the sight of Zoza; who seeing this little balm for the sickness of her hopes taken away from her, knew not, at first, what to do. But, recollecting the fairies' gifts, she opened the walnut, and out of it hopped a little dwarf like a doll, the most graceful toy that was ever seen in the world. Then, seating himself upon the window, the dwarf began to sing with such a trill and gurgling, that he seemed a veritable king of the birds.

The Slave, when she saw and heard this, was so enraptured that, calling Taddeo, she said, "Bring me the little fellow who is singing yonder, or I will kill the child when it is born." So the Prince, who allowed this ugly woman to put the saddle on his back, sent instantly to Zoza, to ask if she would not sell the dwarf. Zoza answered she was not a merchant, but that he was welcome to it as a gift. So Taddeo accepted the offer, for he was anxious to keep his wife in good humour.

Four days after this, Zoza opened the chestnut, when out came a hen with twelve little chickens, all of pure gold, and, being placed on the window, the Slave saw them and took a vast fancy to them; and calling Taddeo, she showed him the beautiful sight, and again ordered him to procure the hen and chickens for her. So Taddeo, who let himself be caught in the web, and become the sport of the ugly creature, sent again to Zoza, offering her any price she might ask for the beautiful hen. But Zoza gave the same answer as before, that he might have it as a gift. Taddeo, therefore, who could not do otherwise, made necessity kick at discretion, and

accepted the beautiful present.

But after four days more, Zoza opened the hazel-nut, and forth came a doll which spun gold—an amazing sight. As soon as it was placed at the same window, the Slave saw it and, calling to Taddeo, said, “I must have that doll, or I will kill the child.” Taddeo, who let his proud wife toss him about like a shuttle, had nevertheless not the heart to send to Zoza for the doll, but resolved to go himself, recollecting the sayings: “No messenger is better than yourself,” and “Let him who would eat a fish take it by the tail.” So he went and besought Zoza to pardon his impertinence, on account of the caprices of his wife; and Zoza, who was in ecstasies at beholding the cause of her sorrow, put a constraint on herself; and so let him entreat her the longer to keep in sight the object of her love, who was stolen from her by an ugly slave. At length she gave him the doll, as she had done the other things, but before placing it in his hands, she prayed the little doll to put a desire into the heart of the Slave to hear stories told by her. And when Taddeo saw the doll in his hand, without his paying a single coin, he was so filled with amazement at such courtesy that he offered his kingdom and his life in exchange for the gift. Then, returning to his palace, he placed it in his wife’s hands; and instantly such a longing seized her to hear stories told, that she called her husband and said, “Bid some story-tellers come and tell me stories, or I promise you, I will kill the child.”

Taddeo, to get rid of this madness, ordered a proclamation instantly to be made, that all the women of the land should come on the appointed day. And on that day, at the hour when the star of Venus appears, who awakes the Dawn, to strew the road along which the Sun has to pass, the ladies were all assembled at the palace. But Taddeo, not wishing to detain such a rabble for the mere amusement of his wife, chose ten only of the best of the city who appeared to him most capable and eloquent. These were Bushy-haired Zeza, Bandy-legged Cecca, Wen-necked Meneca, Long-nosed Tolla, Humph-backed Popa, Bearded Antonella, Dumpy Ciulla, Blear-eyed Paola, Bald-headed Ciconmetella, and Square-shouldered Jacova. Their names he wrote down on a sheet of paper; and then, dismissing the others, he arose with the Slave from under the canopy, and they went gently to the garden of the palace, where the leafy branches were so closely interlaced, that the Sun could not separate them with all the industry of his rays. And seating themselves under a pavilion, formed by a trellis of vines, in the middle of which ran a great fountain—the schoolmaster of the courtiers, whom he taught everyday to murmur—Taddeo thus began:

“There is nothing in the world more glorious, my gentle dames, than to listen to the deeds of others; nor was it without reason that the great philosopher placed the highest happiness of man in listening to pretty stories. In

hearing pleasing things told, griefs vanish, troublesome thoughts are put to flight and life is lengthened. And, for this reason, you see the artisans leave their workshops, the merchants their country-houses, the lawyers their cases, the shopkeepers their business, and all repair with open mouths to the barbers' shops and to the groups of chatterers, to listen to stories, fictions, and news in the open air. I cannot, therefore, but pardon my wife, who has taken this strange fancy into her head of hearing the telling of tales. So, if you will be pleased to satisfy the whim of the Princess and comply with my wishes, you will, during the next four or five days, each of you relate daily one of those tales which old women are wont to tell for the amusement of the little ones. And you will come regularly to this spot; where, after a good repast, you shall begin to tell stories, so as to pass life pleasantly—and sorrow to him that dies!”

At these words, all bowed assent to the commands of Taddeo; and the tables being meanwhile set out and feast spread, they sat down to eat. And when they had done eating, the Prince took the paper and calling on each in turn, by name, the stories that follow were told, in due order.

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