



The King Who Wanted a Beautiful Wife

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Italian

Easy
5 min read

There was once a king who wanted to marry. But his wife must be more beautiful than the sun, and no matter how many maidens he saw, none was beautiful enough to suit him. Then he called his trusty servant, and commanded him to seek everywhere and see whether he could find a beautiful girl. The servant set out, and wandered through the whole land, but found none who seemed handsome enough to him. One day, however, after he had run about a great deal and was very thirsty, he came to a little house. He knocked and asked for a drink of water. Now there dwelt in the house two very old women,—one eighty and the other ninety years old,—who supported themselves by spinning. When the servant asked for water, the one eighty years old rose, opened a little wicket in the shutter, and handed him out the water. From spinning so much, her hands were very white and delicate; and when the servant saw them he thought, “It must be a handsome maiden, for she has such a delicate white hand.” So he hastened to the king, and said: “Your royal Majesty, I have found what you seek; so and so has happened to me.” “Very well,” answered the king, “go once more and try to see her.”

The servant returned to the little house, knocked, and asked again for some water. The old woman did not open the window, but handed him the pitcher through the little opening in the shutter. “Do you live here all alone?” asked the servant. “No,” she answered. “I live here with my sister; we are poor girls and support ourselves by the work of our hands.” “How old are you, then?” “I am fifteen and my sister twenty.” The servant

went back to the king and told him all, and the king said: "I will take the one who is fifteen. Go and bring her to me." When the servant returned to the two old women, and told them that the king wished to elevate the younger to the position of his wife, she answered: "Tell the king I am ready to do his will. Since my birth no ray of the sun has ever struck me, and if a ray of the sun or a beam of light should strike me now, I would become perfectly black. Ask the king, therefore, to send a closed carriage for me at night, and I will come to his palace."

When the king heard this he sent royal apparel and a closed carriage, and at night the old woman covered her face with a thick veil and rode to the palace. The king received her joyfully, and begged her to lay aside the veil. She replied: "There are too many lighted candles here; their light would make me black." So the king married her without having seen her face. When they came into the king's chamber, however, and she removed her veil, the king saw for the first time what an ugly old woman he had married, and in his rage he opened the window and threw her out. Fortunately there was a nail in the wall, on which she caught by her clothes, and remained hanging between heaven and earth. Four fairies chanced to pass by, and when they saw the old woman hanging there, one of them cried: "See, sisters, there is the old woman who cheated the king; shall we wish her dress to tear and let her fall?" "Oh, no! let us not do that," cried the youngest and most beautiful of the fairies. "Let us rather wish her something good. I wish her youth." "And I, beauty." "And I, prudence." "And I, a good heart." Thus the fairies cried, and while they were yet speaking the old woman became a wondrous fair maiden.

The next morning, when the king looked out of the window and saw the beautiful girl hanging there, he was terrified, and thought: "Unhappy man! What have I done! Had I no eyes last night?" Then he had her carefully taken down with long ladders, and begged her pardon, saying: "Now we will have a great festival and be right happy." So they celebrated a splendid feast, and the young queen was the fairest in the whole city.

But one day the sister ninety years old came to the palace to visit the queen, her sister. "Who is this ugly creature?" asked the king. "An old neighbor of mine who is half-witted," replied the queen, quickly. The old woman kept looking at her rejuvenated sister, and asked: "What did you do to become so young and lovely? I, too, would like to be young and pretty again." She kept asking this the whole day, until the queen finally lost her patience, and said: "I had my old skin taken off, and this new, smooth skin came to light." The old woman went to a barber and said: "I will give you what you will to remove my old skin, so that I may become young and handsome again." "But good old woman, you will surely die if I skin you."

The old woman would not listen to him, and at last he had to do her will. He took his knife and made a cut in her forehead. "Oh!" cried the old woman.

"Who will look fair
Must grief and pain bear,"

answered the barber. "Then skin away, master," said the old woman. The barber kept cutting on, until all at once the old woman fell down dead.

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