



The Clever Girl

Anne Macdonall

Italian

Easy
6 min read

A countryman and his wife at work in the fields left their little daughter in her cradle at home. An old, old woman crept softly, softly in, and kissed the child on her eyes and her forehead. "I bring you two gifts," she said, "Beauty and Wit."

When the parents returned they hardly knew the little one again, so beautiful had she become. And when she grew to be a big girl, none in all the countryside was so lovely or so clever. Now, one day, when he was working in his vineyard, the peasant found a mortar made of solid gold.

"It's of little use to me," he said, "but what a fine gift for the King! I'll set off this very minute." And he ran into the house to put on his Sunday coat. But Pina, his daughter, said, "You'd better do no such thing. If you show the mortar to the King, he'll only say, 'What is the use of a mortar without a pestle?'"

"Nonsense!" replied her father. And off he went. He made his way into the Palace, threw himself before the King, and said, "Please, your Majesty, will you accept this gift?"

"Very nice! Very nice!" replied the King, taking the mortar in his hand. "But where is the pestle?"

"I found no pestle," said the peasant.

“Found a mortar without a pestle? Impossible! You are keeping it back. If you do not bring me the pestle by tomorrow morning I’ll have you thrown into prison for a thief!”

The poor countryman stared, and then as he was turning away, said, “Ah, what a wise girl is my daughter!”

“What’s that you’re saying?” asked the King.

“Only that my daughter Pina told me your Majesty would be sure to ask for the pestle instead of being pleased with the mortar alone. She said I was a fool to give it you.”

“Then your daughter is a great deal cleverer than yourself.” Now, the King was not a bad man at heart, but rather greedy, and very capricious, rather like a spoilt child. “

Hark ye,” he went on, “I’ll give that clever daughter of yours something to do. See! Take her this flax and tell her to spin from it linen enough to make shirts for my whole army.”

And he handed the poor dazed man the flax, and distaffs and spindles made of fish-bones.

“If she refuses, or if she is not able to do it, I’ll have you both put in prison. Ha! ha! Good-bye!”

There was a fine task to take home to his poor daughter! But Pina only laughed. “Leave me the flax,” she said; “and take the distaffs and spindles back; and tell the King that I am spinning busily; and that I shall make the shirts for his whole army when he has made me a loom out of these fish- bones.”

You may think that the peasant did not like to take such a message to the King. But he took it, nevertheless. Perhaps the King would be in a more reasonable humour this morning. When he repeated what Pina had said, the King stared in amazement. “Well, it’s a bold daughter you’ve got, my man! She is no common girl. I should like to see her; and perhaps I can find her a husband. Tell her she may stop spinning the yarn; and she must come and see me here. But there is one condition “—the King loved to tease—” she must come neither with clothes on, nor naked, neither walking on her feet, nor riding on horse, ass, or mule. Ha! ha! Good-day to you, my man!”

“What next ?” said the poor distracted father. “For all her cleverness this task is beyond her.”

He gave her the King’s message; and she only laughed. “Oh, that’s easy enough!” she said. Then she went to her room, took off her clothes, let down her long thick hair, which fell to her feet, and drew it close round her by a

great net.



“When the king saw her he laughed.” Illustration by Morris Meredith Williams, published in *The Italian Fairy Book* by Anne Macdonall (1914), Frederick A. Stokes Company.

Then she went out to the field, caught her father’s old ram, put one foot over its back, and hopped along the

road to the town on the other. Thus she reached the Palace. When the King saw her he laughed aloud in great good humour; and he said, "One could never be dull with such a wife! Pina, will you marry me?"

So the King married Pina, the peasant's clever daughter, and they lived happily and merrily together. But one day, when he was riding out in the country, the King spied a fine horse grazing in a meadow. "That's a splendid animal!" he said. "I have not its like in my stud." And he ordered his servant to seize it and bring it back to the royal stables. Of course, the farmer who owned the horse was very angry, and came to claim it; but the King sent him away scornfully. Queen Pina, who had been present, begged him to act justly, to restore the horse and beg the farmer's pardon, or else offer to buy it for a fair price. But her husband was very obstinate, and refused. So the Queen sent secretly for the farmer, and suggested to him a means whereby he might get back his horse.

The farmer listened and acted on her advice. With a net thrown about him, he went up and down the town, and round and round the outside of the Palace crying, "Ho! ho! the fisherman! Who wants to catch fish with me?"

Up and down the town he went with this cry, and round and round the Palace, stopping always before the King's own windows. At last the King could stand it no longer, and he bawled out, "Be off with you! Would you have us catching fish in the streets? You're a fine fisher, you country bumpkin! And it's a fine catch you'll get in my gutters."

"And you're a fine fisher of horses!" retorted the farmer. "And a fine haul you made in my meadow!" And the King, who liked a good answer, laughed heartily, and ordered his servants to give back the horse to its master. Nevertheless, he was very angry; and when the man had gone, he called for his wife and said, "I know who put the fellow up to that trick. It was you. You have no care for my interests. You like country bumpkins best. Be off with you! Out of my house!"

Then Queen Pina answered, "Very well, your Majesty, I'll go back again to my home. They will be glad to see me, all the country bumpkins. But it is hardly fair I should go away empty-handed. When you married me you said, 'Whatever is most precious in this palace belongs to you!'"

"Oh, take whatever you like! Only, be off with you!" Now, Pina had some fairy gifts; and by means of one of these she threw her husband into a deep sleep. And when he was fast asleep she ordered a great coach to draw up before the palace door, and had him carried into it. Then she got in herself, and they drove away to her

father's cottage. When at last he woke he found Pina sitting by him. But where were they? It seemed a very small place, and the light was dim; and his couch uncommonly hard.

"Where am I? Where am I?" he cried out in some alarm. "What has happened?" "Only what you ordered," replied Pina. "You sent me away, you remember. But you told me I might take with me the most precious thing in the palace. So I did. I brought you!" t

Then the King laughed, and laughed again, till the cottage rafters rang. And he laughed all the way back in the coach. Of course, Queen Pina sat by him, laughing too. They never parted any more. And their reign was a long and a merry one.

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