



# *The Crumb in the Beard*

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Italian

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*Intermediate*

*11 min read*

There was once a king who had a daughter whose name was Stella. She was indescribably beautiful, but was so whimsical and hard to please that she drove her father to despair. There had been princes and kings who had sought her in marriage, but she had found defects in them all and would have none of them. She kept advancing in years, and her father began to despair of knowing to whom he should leave his crown. So he summoned his council, and discussed the matter, and was advised to give a great banquet, to which he should invite all the princes and kings of the surrounding countries, for, as they said, there cannot fail to be among so many, some one who should please the princess, who was to hide behind a door, so that she could examine them all as she pleased.

When the king heard this advice, he gave the orders necessary for the banquet, and then called his daughter, and said: "Listen, my little Stella, I have thought to do so and so, to see if I can find any one to please you; behold, my daughter, my hair is white, and I must have some one to leave my crown to." Stella bowed her head, saying that she would take care to please him. Princes and kings then began to arrive at the court, and when it was time for the banquet, they all seated themselves at the table.

You can imagine what sort of a banquet that was, and how the hall was adorned: gold and silver shone from all their necks; in the four corners of the room were four fountains, which continually sent forth wine and the

most exquisite perfumes. While the gentlemen were eating, Stella was behind a door, as has been said, and one of her maids, who was near by, pointed out to her now this one, now that one. "See, your Majesty, what a handsome youth that is there." "Yes, but he has too large a nose." "And the one near your father?" "He has eyes that look like saucers." "And that other at the head of the table?" "He has too large a mouth; he looks as if he liked to eat."

In short, she found fault with all but one, who, she said, pleased her, but that he must be a very dirty fellow, for he had a crumb on his beard after eating. The youth heard her say this, and swore vengeance. You must know that he was the son of the king of Green Hill, and the handsomest youth that could be seen. When the banquet was finished and the guests had departed, the king called Stella and asked: "What news have you, my child?" She replied, that the only one who pleased her was the one with the crumb in his beard, but that she believed him to be a dirty fellow and did not want him. "Take care, my daughter, you will repent it," answered her father, and turned away.

You must know that Stella's chamber looked into a court-yard into which opened the shop of a baker. One night, while she was preparing to retire, she heard, in the room where they sifted the meal, some one singing so well and with so much grace that it went to her heart. She ran to the window and listened until he finished. Then she began to ask her maid who the person with the beautiful voice could be, saying she would like to know. "Leave it to me, your Majesty," said the maid; "I will inform you to-morrow." Stella could not wait for the next day; and, indeed, early the next day she learned that the one who sang was the sifter. That evening she heard him sing again, and stood by the window until everything became quiet. But that voice had so touched her heart that she told her maid that the next day she would try and see who had that fine voice. In the morning she placed herself by the window, and soon saw the youth come forth. She was enchanted by his beauty as soon as she saw him, and fell desperately in love with him.

Now you must know that this was none other than the prince who was at the banquet, and whom Stella had called "dirty." So he had disguised himself in such a way that she could not recognize him, and was meanwhile preparing his revenge. After he had seen her once or twice he began to take off his hat and salute her. She smiled at him, and appeared at the window every moment. Then they began to exchange words, and in the evening he sang under her window. In short, they began to make love in good earnest, and when he learned that she was free, he began to talk about marrying her. She consented at once, but asked him what he had to

live on. "I haven't a penny," said he; "the little I earn is hardly enough to feed me."

Stella encouraged him, saying that she would give him all the money and things he wanted. To punish Stella for her pride, her father and the prince's father had an understanding, and pretended not to know about this love affair, and let her carry away from the palace all she owned. During the day Stella did nothing but make a great bundle of clothes, of silver, and of money, and at night the disguised prince came under the balcony, and she threw it down to him. Things went on in this manner some time, and finally one evening he said to her: "Listen. The time has come to elope." Stella could not wait for the hour, and the next night she quietly tied a cord about her and let herself down from the window. The prince aided her to the ground, and then took her arm and hastened away.

He led her a long ways to another city, where he turned down a street and opened the first door he met. They went down a long passage; finally they reached a little door, which he opened, and they found themselves in a hole of a place which had only one window, high up. The furniture consisted of a straw bed, a bench, and a dirty table. You can imagine that when Stella saw herself in this place she thought she should die. When the prince saw her so amazed, he said: "What is the matter? Does the house not please you? Do you not know that I am a poor man? Have you been deceived?" "What have you done with all the things I gave you?"

"Oh, I had many debts, and I have paid them, and then I have done with the rest what seemed good to me. You must make up your mind to work and gain your bread as I have done. You must know that I am a porter of the king of this city, and I often go and work at the palace. To-morrow, they have told me, the washing is to be done, so you must rise early and go with me there. I will set you to work with the other women, and when it is time for them to go home to dinner, you will say that you are not hungry, and while you are alone, steal two shirts, conceal them under your skirt, and carry them home to me." Poor Stella wept bitterly, saying it was impossible for her to do that; but her husband replied: "Do what I say, or I shall beat you." The next morning her husband rose with the dawn, and made her get up, too. He had bought her a striped skirt and a pair of coarse shoes, which he made her put on, and then took her to the palace with him, conducted her to the laundry and left her, after he had introduced her as his wife, saying that she should remember what awaited her at home.

Then the prince ran and dressed himself like a king, and waited at the gate of the palace until it was time for his

wife to come. Meanwhile poor Stella did as her husband had commanded, and stole the shirts. As she was leaving the palace, she met the king, who said: "Pretty girl, you are our porter's wife, are you not?" Then he asked her what she had under her skirt, and shook her until the shirts dropped out, and the king cried: "See there! the porter's wife is a thief; she has stolen some shirts."

Poor Stella ran home in tears, and her husband followed her when he had put on his disguise again. When he reached home Stella told him all that had happened and begged him not to send her to the palace again; but he told her that the next day they were to bake, and she must go into the kitchen and help, and steal a piece of dough. Everything happened as on the previous day. Stella's theft was discovered, and when her husband returned he found her crying like a condemned soul, and swearing that she had rather be killed than go to the palace again. He told her, however, that the king's son was to be married the next day, and that there was to be a great banquet, and she must go into the kitchen and wash the dishes. He added that when she had the chance she must steal a pot of broth and hide it about her so that no one should see it.

She had to do as she was told, and had scarcely concealed the pot when the king's son came into the kitchen and told his wife she must come to the ball that had followed the banquet. She did not wish to go, but he took her by the arm and led her into the midst of the festival. Imagine how the poor woman felt at that ball, dressed as she was, and with the pot of broth! The king began to poke his sword at her in jest, until he hit the pot, and all the broth ran on the floor. Then all began to jeer her and laugh, until poor Stella fainted away from shame, and they had to go and get some vinegar to revive her. At last the king's mother came forward and said: "Enough; you have revenged yourself sufficiently." Then turning to Stella: "Know that this is your mother, and that he has done this to correct your pride and to be avenged on you for calling him dirty." Then she took her by the arm and led her to another room, where her maids dressed her as a queen. Her father and mother then appeared and kissed and embraced her. Her husband begged her pardon for what he had done, and they made peace and always lived in harmony. From that day on she was never haughty, and had learned to her cost that pride is the greatest fault.

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