



The Dragon

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Advanced
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He who seeks the injury of another finds his own hurt; and he who spreads the snares of treachery and deceit often falls into them himself; as you shall hear in the story of a queen, who with her own hands constructed the trap in which she was caught by the foot.

There was one time a King of High-Shore, who practised such tyranny and cruelty that, whilst he was once gone on a visit of pleasure to a castle at a distance from the city, his royal seat was usurped by a certain sorceress. Whereupon, having consulted a wooden statue which used to give oracular responses, it answered that he would recover his dominions when the sorceress should lose her sight. But seeing that the sorceress, besides being well guarded, knew at a glance the people whom he sent to annoy her, and did dog's justice upon them, he became quite desperate, and out of spite to her he killed all the women of that place whom he could get into his hands.

Now after hundreds and hundreds had been led thither by their ill-luck, only to lose their lives, there chanced, among others, to come a maiden named Porziella, the most beautiful creature that could be seen on the whole earth, and the King could not help falling in love with her and making her his wife. But he was so cruel and spiteful to women that, after a while, he was going to kill her like the rest; but just as he was raising the dagger a bird let fall a certain root upon his arm, and he was seized with such a trembling that the weapon fell from his

hand. This bird was a fairy, who, a few days before, having gone to sleep in a wood, where beneath the tent of the Shades Fear kept watch and defied the Sun's heat, a certain satyr was about to rob her when she was awakened by Porziella, and for this kindness she continually followed her steps in order to make her a return.

When the King saw this, he thought that the beauty of Porziella's face had arrested his arm and bewitched the dagger to prevent its piercing her as it had done so many others. He resolved, therefore, not to make the attempt a second time, but that she should die built up in a garret of his palace. No sooner said than done: the unhappy creature was enclosed within four walls, without having anything to eat or drink, and left to waste away and die little by little.

The bird, seeing her in this wretched state, consoled her with kind words, bidding her be of good cheer, and promising, in return for the great kindness she had done for her, to aid her if necessary with her very life. In spite, however, of all the entreaties of Porziella, the bird would never tell her who she was, but only said that she was under obligations to her, and would leave nothing undone to serve her. And seeing that the poor girl was famished with hunger, she flew out and speedily returned with a pointed knife which she had taken from the king's pantry, and told her to make a hole in the corner of the floor just over the kitchen, through which she would regularly bring her food to sustain her life. So Porziella bored away until she had made a passage for the bird, who, watching till the cook was gone out to fetch a pitcher of water from the well, went down through the hole, and taking a fine fowl that was cooking at the fire, brought it to Porziella; then to relieve her thirst, not knowing how to carry her any drink, she flew to the pantry, where there was a quantity of grapes hanging, and brought her a fine bunch; and this she did regularly for many days.

Meanwhile Porziella gave birth to a fine little boy, whom she suckled and reared with the constant aid of the bird. And when he was grown big, the fairy advised his mother to make the hole larger, and to raise so many boards of the floor as would allow Miuccio (for so the child was called) to pass through; and then, after letting him down with some cords which the bird brought, to put the boards back into their place, that it might not be seen where he came from. So Porziella did as the bird directed her; and as soon as the cook was gone out, she let down her son, desiring him never to tell whence he came nor whose son he was.

When the cook returned and saw such a fine little boy, he asked him who he was, whence he came, and what he wanted; whereupon, the child, remembering his mother's advice, said that he was a poor forlorn boy who was

looking about for a master. As they were talking, the butler came in, and seeing the spritely little fellow, he thought he would make a pretty page for the King. So he led him to the royal apartments; and when the King saw him look so handsome and lovely that he appeared a very jewel, he was vastly pleased with him, and took him into his service as a page and to his heart as a son, and had him taught all the exercises befitting a cavalier, so that Miuccio grew up the most accomplished one in the court, and the King loved him much better than his stepson. Now the King's stepmother, who was really the queen, on this account began to take a dislike to him, and to hold him in aversion; and her envy and malice gained ground just in proportion as the favours and kindness which the King bestowed on Miuccio cleared the way for them; so she resolved to soap the ladder of his fortune in order that he should tumble down from top to bottom.

Accordingly one evening, when the King and his stepmother had tuned their instruments together and were making music of their discourse, the Queen told the King that Miuccio had boasted he would build three castles in the air. So the next morning, at the time when the Moon, the school-mistress of the Shades, gives a holiday to her scholars for the festival of the Sun, the King, either from surprise or to gratify the old Queen, ordered Miuccio to be called, and commanded him forthwith to build the three castles in the air as he had promised, or else he would make him dance a jig in the air.

When Miuccio heard this he went to his chamber and began to lament bitterly, seeing what glass the favour of princes is, and how short a time it lasts. And while he was weeping thus, lo! the bird came, and said to him, "Take heart, Miuccio, and fear not while you have me by your side, for I am able to draw you out of the fire." Then she directed him to take pasteboard and glue and make three large castles; and calling up three large griffins, she tied a castle to each, and away they flew up into the air. Thereupon Miuccio called the King, who came running with all his court to see the sight; and when he saw the ingenuity of Miuccio he had a still greater affection for him, and lavished on him caresses of the other world, which added snow to the envy of the Queen and fire to her rage, seeing that all her plans failed; insomuch that, both sleeping and waking, she was for ever thinking of some way to remove this thorn from her eyes. So at last, after some days, she said to the King, "Son, the time is now come for us to return to our former greatness and the pleasures of past times, since Miuccio has offered to blind the sorceress, and by the disbursement of her eyes to make you recover your lost kingdom."

The King, who felt himself touched in the sore place, called for Miuccio that very instant, and said to him, "I

am greatly surprised that, notwithstanding all my love for you, and that you have the power to restore me to the seat from which I have fallen, you remain thus careless, instead of endeavouring to relieve me from the misery I am in—reduced thus from a kingdom to a wood, from a city to a paltry castle, and from commanding so great a people to be hardly waited on by a parcel of half-starved menials. If, therefore, you do not wish me ill, run now at once and blind the eyes of the fairy who has possession of my property, for by putting out her lanterns you will light the lamps of my honour that are now dark and dismal.”

When Miuccio heard this proposal he was about to reply that the King was ill-informed and had mistaken him, as he was neither a raven to pick out eyes nor an auger to bore holes; but the King said, “No more words—so I will have it, so let it be done! Remember now, that in the mint of this brain of mine I have the balance ready; in one scale the reward, if you do what I tell you; in the other the punishment, if you neglect doing what I command.”

Miuccio, who could not butt against a rock, and had to do with a man who was not to be moved, went into a corner to bemoan himself; and the bird came to him and said, “Is it possible, Miuccio, that you will always be drowning yourself in a tumbler of water? If I were dead indeed you could not make more fuss. Do you not know that I have more regard for your life than for my own? Therefore don’t lose courage; come with me, and you shall see what I can do.” So saying off she flew, and alighted in the wood, where as soon as she began to chirp, there came a large flock of birds about her, to whom she told the story, assuring them that whoever would venture to deprive the sorceress of sight should have from her a safeguard against the talons of the hawks and kites, and a letter of protection against the guns, crossbows, longbows, and bird-lime of the fowlers.

There was among them a swallow who had made her nest against a beam of the royal palace, and who hated the sorceress, because, when making her accursed conjurations, she had several times driven her out of the chamber with her fumigations; for which reason, partly out of a desire of revenge, and partly to gain the reward that the bird promised, she offered herself to perform the service. So away she flew like lightning to the city, and entering the palace, found the fairy lying on a couch, with two damsels fanning her. Then the swallow came, and alighting directly over the fairy, pecked out her eyes. Whereupon the fairy, thus seeing night at midday, knew that by this closing of the custom-house the merchandise of the kingdom was all lost; and uttering yells, as of a condemned soul, she abandoned the sceptre and went off to hide herself in a certain cave, where she knocked her head continually against the wall, until at length she ended her days.

When the sorceress was gone, the councillors sent ambassadors to the King, praying him to come back to his castle, since the blinding of the sorceress had caused him to see this happy day. And at the same time they arrived came also Miuccio, who, by the bird's direction, said to the King, "I have served you to the best of my power; the sorceress is blinded, the kingdom is yours. Wherefore, if I deserve recompense for this service, I wish for no other than to be left to my ill-fortune, without being again exposed to these dangers."

But the King, embracing him with great affection, bade him put on his cap and sit beside him; and how the Queen was enraged at this, Heaven knows, for by the bow of many colours that appeared in her face might be known the wind of the storm that was brewing in her heart against poor Miuccio.

Not far from this castle lived a most ferocious dragon, who was born the same hour with the Queen; and the astrologers being called by her father to astrologise on this event, said that his daughter would be safe as long as the dragon was safe, and that when one died, the other would of necessity die also. One thing alone could bring back the Queen to life, and that was to anoint her temples, chest, nostrils, and pulse with the blood of the same dragon.

Now the Queen, knowing the strength and fury of this animal, resolved to send Miuccio into his claws, well assured that the beast would make but a mouthful of him, and that he would be like a strawberry in the throat of a bear. So turning to the King, she said, "Upon my word, this Miuccio is the treasure of your house, and you would be ungrateful indeed if you did not love him, especially as he had expressed his desire to kill the dragon, who, though he is my brother, is nevertheless your enemy; and I care more for a hair of your head than for a

hundred brothers.”

The King, who hated the dragon mortally, and knew not how to remove him out of his sight, instantly called Miuccio, and said to him, “I know that you can put your hand to whatever you will; therefore, as you have done so much, grant me yet another pleasure, and then turn me whithersoever you will. Go this very instant and kill the dragon; for you will do me a singular service, and I will reward you well for it.”

Miuccio at these words was near losing his senses, and as soon as he was able to speak, he said to the King, “Alas, what a headache have you given me by your continual teasing! Is my life a black goat-skin rug that you are for ever wearing it away thus? This is not a pared pear ready to drop into one’s mouth, but a dragon, that tears with his claws, breaks to pieces with his head, crushes with his tail, crunches with his teeth, poisons with his eyes, and kills with his breath. Wherefore do you want to send me to death? Is this the sinecure you give me for having given you a kingdom? Who is the wicked soul that has set this die on the table? What son of perdition has taught you these capers and put these words into your mouth?” Then the King, who, although he let himself be tossed to and fro as light as a ball, was firmer than a rock in keeping to what he had once said, stamped with his feet, and exclaimed, “After all you have done, do you fail at the last? But no more words; go, rid my kingdom of this plague, unless you would have me rid you of life.”

Poor Miuccio, who thus received one minute a favour, at another a threat, now a pat on the face, and now a kick, now a kind word, now a cruel one, reflected how mutable court fortune is, and would fain have been without the acquaintance of the King. But knowing that to reply to great men is a folly, and like plucking a lion by the beard, he withdrew, cursing his fate, which had led him to the court only to curtail the days of his life. And as he was sitting on one of the door-steps, with his head between his knees, washing his shoes with his tears and warming the ground with his sighs, behold the bird came flying with a plant in her beak, and throwing it to him, said, “Get up, Miuccio, and take courage! for you are not going to play at unload the ass’ with your days, but at backgammon with the life of the dragon. Take this plant, and when you come to the cave of that horrid animal, throw it in, and instantly such a drowsiness will come over him that he will fall fast asleep; whereupon, nicking and sticking him with a good knife, you may soon make an end of him. Then come away, for things will turn out better than you think.”

“Enough!” cried Miuccio, “I know what I carry under my belt; we have more time than money, and he who has

time has life.” So saying, he got up, and sticking a pruning-knife in his belt and taking the plant, he went his way to the dragon’s cave, which was under a mountain of such goodly growth, that the three mountains that were steps to the Giants would not have reached up to its waist. When he came there, he threw the plant into the cave, and instantly a deep sleep laid hold on the dragon, and Miuccio began to cut him in pieces.

Now just at the time that he was busied thus, the Queen felt a cutting pain at her heart; and seeing herself brought to a bad pass, she perceived her error in having purchased death with ready money. So she called her stepson and told him what the astrologers had predicted—how her life depended on that of the dragon, and how she feared that Miuccio had killed him, for she felt herself gradually sliding away. Then the King replied, “If you knew that the life of the dragon was the prop of your life and the root of your days, why did you make me send Miuccio? Who is in fault? You must have done yourself the mischief, and you must suffer for it; you have broken the glass, and you may pay the cost.” And the Queen answered, “I never thought that such a stripling could have the skill and strength to overthrow an animal which made nothing of an army, and I expected that he would have left his rags there. But since I reckoned without my host, and the bark of my projects is gone out of its course, do me one kindness if you love me. When I am dead, take a sponge dipped in the blood of this dragon and anoint with it all the extremities of my body before you bury me.”

“That is but a small thing for the love I bear you,” replied the King; “and if the blood of the dragon is not enough, I will add my own to give you satisfaction.” The Queen was about to thank him, but the breath left her with the speech; for just then Miuccio had made an end of scoring the dragon.

No sooner had Miuccio come into the King’s presence with the news of what he had done than the King ordered him to go back for the dragon’s blood; but being curious to see the deed done by Miuccio’s hand, he followed him. And as Miuccio was going out of the palace gate, the bird met him, and said, “Whither are you going?” and Miuccio answered, “I am going whither the King sends me; he makes me fly backwards and forwards like a shuttle, and never lets me rest an hour.” “What to do?” said the bird. “To fetch the blood of the dragon,” said Miuccio. And the bird replied, “Ah, wretched youth! this dragon’s blood will be bull’s blood to you, and make you burst; for this blood will cause to spring up again the evil seed of all your misfortunes. The Queen is continually exposing you to new dangers that you may lose your life; and the King, who lets this odious creature put the pack-saddle on him, orders you, like a castaway, to endanger your person, which is his own flesh and blood and a shoot of his stem. But the wretched man does not know you, though the inborn

affection he bears you should have betrayed your kindred. Moreover, the services you have rendered the King, and the gain to himself of so handsome a son and heir, ought to obtain favour for unhappy Porziella, your mother, who has now for fourteen years been buried alive in a garret, where is seen a temple of beauty built up within a little chamber.”

While the fairy was thus speaking, the King, who had heard every word, stepped forward to learn the truth of the matter better; and finding that Miuccio was his own and Porziella’s son, and that Porziella was still alive in the garret, he instantly gave orders that she should be set free and brought before him. And when he saw her looking more beautiful than ever, owing to the care taken of her by the bird, he embraced her with the greatest affection, and was never satisfied with pressing to his heart first the mother and then the son, praying forgiveness of Porziella for his ill-treatment of her, and of his son for all the dangers to which he had exposed him. Then he ordered her to be clothed in the richest robes, and had her crowned Queen before all the people. And when the King heard that her preservation, and the escape of his son from so many dangers were entirely owing to the bird, which had given food to the one and counsel to the other, he offered her his kingdom and his life. But the bird said she desired no other reward for her services than to have Miuccio for a husband; and as she uttered the words she was changed into a beautiful maiden, and, to the great joy and satisfaction of the King and Porziella, she was given to Miuccio to wife. Then the newly-married couple, to give still greater festivals, went their way to their own kingdom, where they were anxiously expected, every one ascribing this good fortune to the fairy, for the kindness that Porziella had done her; for at the end of the end—

“A good deed is never lost.”

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