

The Golden Root

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Advanced
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A person who is over-curious, and wants to know more than he ought, always carries the match in his hand to set fire to the powder-room of his own fortunes; and he who pries into others' affairs is frequently a loser in his own; for generally he who digs holes to search for treasures, comes to a ditch into which he himself falls—as happened to the daughter of a gardener in the following manner.

There was once a gardener who was so very very poor that, however hard he worked, he could not manage to get bread for his family. So he gave three little pigs to his three daughters, that they might rear them, and thus get something for a little dowry. Then Pascuzza and Cice, who were the eldest, drove their little pigs to feed in a beautiful meadow; but they would not let Parmetella, who was the youngest daughter, go with them, and sent her away, telling her to go and feed her pig somewhere else. So Parmetella drove her little animal into a wood, where the Shades were holding out against the assaults of the Sun; and coming to a pasture—in the middle of which flowed a fountain, that, like the hostess of an inn where cold water is sold, was inviting the passers-by with its silver tongue—she found a certain tree with golden leaves. Then plucking one of them, she took it to her father, who with great joy sold it for more than twenty ducats, which served to stop up a hole in his affairs. And when he asked Parmetella where she had found it, she said, “Take it, sir, and ask no questions, unless you would spoil your good fortune.” The next day she returned and did the same; and she went on plucking the leaves from the tree until it was entirely stript, as if it had been plundered by the winds of

Autumn. Then she perceived that the tree had a large golden root, which she could not pull up with her hands; so she went home, and fetching an axe set to work to lay bare the root around the foot of the tree; and raising the trunk as well as she could, she found under it a beautiful porphyry staircase.

Parmetella, who was curious beyond measure, went down the stairs, and walking through a large and deep cavern, she came to a beautiful plain, on which was a splendid palace, where only gold and silver were trodden underfoot, and pearls and precious stones everywhere met the eye. And as Parmetella stood wondering at all these splendid things, not seeing any person moving among so many beautiful fixtures, she went into a chamber, in which were a number of pictures; and on them were seen painted various beautiful things—especially the ignorance of man esteemed wise, the injustice of him who held the scales, the injuries avenged by Heaven—things truly to amaze one. And in the same chamber also was a splendid table, set out with things to eat and to drink.

Seeing no one, Parmetella, who was very hungry, sat down at a table to eat like a fine count; but whilst she was in the midst of the feast, behold a handsome Slave entered, who said, “Stay! do not go away, for I will have you for my wife, and will make you the happiest woman in the world.” In spite of her fear, Parmetella took heart at this good offer, and consenting to what the Slave proposed, a coach of diamonds was instantly given her, drawn by four golden steeds, with wings of emeralds and rubies, who carried her flying through the air to take an airing; and a number of apes, clad in cloth of gold, were given to attend on her person, who forthwith arrayed her from head to foot, and adorned her so that she looked just like a Queen.

When night was come, and the Sun—desiring to sleep on the banks of the river of India untroubled by gnats—had put out the light, the Slave said to Parmetella, “My dear, now go to rest in this bed; but remember first to put out the candle, and mind what I say, or ill will betide you.” Then Parmetella did as he told her; but no sooner had she closed her eyes than the blackamoor, changing to a handsome youth, lay down to sleep. But the next morning, ere the Dawn went forth to seek fresh eggs in the fields of the sky the youth arose and took his other form again, leaving Parmetella full of wonder and curiosity.

And again the following night, when Parmetella went to rest, she put out the candle as she had done the night before, and the youth came as usual and lay down to sleep. But no sooner had he shut his eyes than Parmetella arose, took a steel which she had provided, and lighting the tinder applied a match; then taking the candle, she

raised the coverlet, and beheld the ebony turned to ivory, and the coal to chalk. And whilst she stood gazing with open mouth, and contemplating the most beautiful pencilling that Nature had ever given upon the canvas of Wonder, the youth awoke, and began to reproach Parmetella, saying, "Ah, woe is me! for your prying curiosity I have to suffer another seven years this accursed punishment. But begone! Run, scamper off! Take yourself out of my sight! You know not what good fortune you lose." So saying, he vanished like quicksilver.

The poor girl left the palace, cold and stiff with affright, and with her head bowed to the ground. And when she had come out of the cavern she met a fairy, who said to her, "My child, how my heart grieves at your misfortune! Unhappy girl, you are going to the slaughter-house, where you will pass over the bridge no wider than a hair. Therefore, to provide against your peril, take these seven spindles with these seven figs, and a little jar of honey, and these seven pairs of iron shoes, and walk on and on without stopping, until they are worn out; then you will see seven women standing upon a balcony of a house, and spinning from above down to the ground, with the thread wound upon the bone of a dead person. Remain quite still and hidden, and when the thread comes down, take out the bone and put in its place a spindle besmeared with honey, with a fig in the place of the little button. Then as soon as the women draw up the spindles and taste the honey, they will say—

'He who has made my spindle sweet,
Shall in return with good fortune meet!'

And after repeating these words, they will say, one after another, 'O you who brought us these sweet things appear!' Then you must answer, Nay, for you will eat me.' And they will say, We swear by our spoon that we will not eat you!' But do not stir; and they will continue, We swear by our spit that we will not eat you!' But stand firm, as if rooted to the spot; and they will say, We swear by our broom that we will not eat you!' Still do not believe them; and when they say, We swear by our pail that we will not eat you!' shut your mouth, and say not a word, or it will cost you your life. At last they will say, We swear by Thunder-and-Lightning that we will not eat you!' Then take courage and mount up, for they will do you no harm."

When Parmetella heard this, she set off and walked over hill and dale, until at the end of seven years the iron shoes were worn out; and coming to a large house, with a projecting balcony, she saw the seven women spinning. So she did as the fairy had advised her; and after a thousand wiles and allurements, they swore by Thunder-and-Lightning, whereupon she showed herself and mounted up. Then they all seven said to her, "Traitor, you are the cause that our brother has lived twice seven long years in the cavern, far away from us,

in the form of a blackamoor! But never mind; although you have been clever enough to stop our throat with the oath, you shall on the first opportunity pay off both the old and the new reckoning. But now hear what you must do. Hide yourself behind this trough, and when our mother comes, who would swallow you down at once, rise up and seize her behind her back; hold her fast, and do not let her go until she swears by Thunder-and-Lightning not to harm you.”

Parmetella did as she was bid, and after the ogress had sworn by the fire-shovel, by the spinning-wheel, by the reel, by the sideboard, and by the peg, at last she swore by Thunder-and-Lightning; whereupon Parmetella let go her hold, and showed herself to the ogress, who said, “You have caught me this time; but take care, Traitress! for, at the first shower, I’ll send you to the Lava.”

One day the ogress, who was on the look-out for an opportunity to devour Parmetella, took twelve sacks of various seeds—peas, chick-peas, lentils, vetches, kidney-beans, beans, and lupins—and mixed them all together; then she said to her, “Traitress, take these seeds and sort them all, so that each kind may be separated from the rest; and if they are not all sorted by this evening, I’ll swallow you like a penny tart.”

Poor Parmetella sat down beside the sacks, weeping, and said, “O mother, mother, how will this golden root prove a root of woes to me! Now is my misery completed; by seeing a black face turned white, all has become black before my eyes. Alas! I am ruined and undone—there is no help for it. I already seem as if I were in the throat of that horrid ogress; there is no one to help me, there is no one to advise me, there is no one to comfort me!”

As she was lamenting thus, lo! Thunder-and-Lightning appeared like a flash, for the banishment laid upon him by the spell had just ended. Although he was angry with Parmetella, yet his blood could not turn to water, and seeing her grieving thus he said to her, “Traitress, what makes you weep so?” Then she told him of his mother’s ill-treatment of her, and her wish to make an end of her, and eat her up. But Thunder-and-Lightning replied, “Calm yourself and take heart, for it shall not be as she said.” And instantly scattering all the seeds on the ground he made a deluge of ants spring up, who forthwith set to work to heap up all the seeds separately, each kind by itself, and Parmetella filled the sacks with them.

When the ogress came home and found the task done, she was almost in despair, and cried, “That dog Thunder-and-Lightning has played me this trick; but you shall not escape thus! So take these pieces of bed-

tick, which are enough for twelve mattresses, and mind that by this evening they are filled with feathers, or else I will make mincemeat of you.”

The poor girl took the bed-ticks, and sitting down upon the ground began to weep and lament bitterly, making two fountains of her eyes. But presently Thunder-and-Lightning appeared, and said to her, “Do not weep, Traitress,—leave it to me, and I will bring you to port; so let down your hair, spread the bed-ticks upon the ground, and fall to weeping and wailing, and crying out that the king of the birds is dead, then you’ll see what will happen.”

Parmetella did as she was told, and behold a cloud of birds suddenly appeared that darkened the air; and flapping their wings they let fall their feathers by basketfuls, so that in less than an hour the mattresses were all filled. When the ogress came home and saw the task done, she swelled up with rage till she almost burst, saying, “Thunder-and-Lightning is determined to plague me, but may I be dragged at an ape’s tail if I let her escape!” Then she said to Parmetella, “Run quickly to my sister’s house, and tell her to send me the musical instruments; for I have resolved that Thunder-and-Lightning shall marry, and we will make a feast fit for a king.” At the same time she sent to bid her sister, when the poor girl came to ask for the instruments, instantly to kill and cook her, and she would come and partake of the feast.

Parmetella, hearing herself ordered to perform an easier task, was in great joy, thinking that the weather had begun to grow milder. Alas, how crooked is human judgment! On the way she met Thunder-and-Lightning, who, seeing her walking at a quick pace, said to her, “Whither are you going, wretched girl? See you not that you are on the way to the slaughter; that you are forging your own fetters, and sharpening the knife and mixing the poison for yourself; that you are sent to the ogress for her to swallow you? But listen to me and fear not. Take this little loaf, this bundle of hay, and this stone; and when you come to the house of my aunt, you will find a bulldog, which will fly barking at you to bite you; but give him this little loaf, and it will stop his throat. And when you have passed the dog, you will meet a horse running loose, which will run up to kick and trample on you; but give him the hay, and you will clog his feet. At last you will come to a door, banging to and fro continually; put this stone before it, and you will stop its fury. Then mount upstairs and you find the ogress, with a little child in her arms, and the oven ready heated to bake you. Whereupon she will say to you, Hold this little creature, and wait here till I go and fetch the instruments.’ But mind—she will only go to whet her tusks, in order to tear you in pieces. Then throw the little child into the oven without pity, take the instruments which

stand behind the door, and hie off before the ogress returns, or else you are lost. The instruments are in a box, but beware of opening it, or you will repent.”

Parmetella did all that Thunder-and-Lightning told her; but on her way back with the instruments she opened the box, and lo and behold! they all flew out and about—here a flute, there a flageolet, here a pipe, there a bagpipe, making a thousand different sounds in the air, whilst Parmetella stood looking on and tearing her hair in despair.

Meanwhile the ogress came downstairs, and not finding Parmetella, she went to the window, and called out to the door, “Crush that traitress!” But the door answered:

“I will not use the poor girl ill,
For she has made me at last stand still.”

Then the ogress cried out to the horse, “Trample on the thief!” But the horse replied:

“Let the poor girl go her way,
For she has given me the hay.”

And lastly, the ogress called to the dog, saying, “Bite the rogue!” But the dog answered:

“I’ll not hurt a hair of her head,
For she it was who gave me the bread.”

Now as Parmetella ran crying after the instruments, she met Thunder-and-Lightning, who scolded her well, saying, “Traitor, will you not learn at your cost that by your fatal curiosity you are brought to this plight?” Then he called back the instruments with a whistle, and shut them up again in the box, telling Parmetella to take them to his mother. But when the ogress saw her, she cried aloud, “O cruel fate! even my sister is against me, and refuses to give me this pleasure.”

Meanwhile the new bride arrived—a hideous pest, a compound of ugliness, a harpy, an evil shade, a horror, a monster, a large tub, who with a hundred flowers and boughs about her looked like a newly opened inn. Then the ogress made a great banquet for her; and being full of gall and malice, she had the table placed close to a well, where she seated her seven daughters, each with a torch in one hand; but she gave two torches to Parmetella, and made her sit at the edge of the well, on purpose that, when she fell asleep, she might tumble to

the bottom.

Now whilst the dishes were passing to and fro, and their blood began to get warm, Thunder-and-Lightning, who turned quite sick at the sight of the new bride, said to Parmetella, "Traitor, do you love me?" "Ay, to the top of the roof," she replied. And he answered, "If you love me, give me a kiss." "Nay," said Parmetella, "YOU indeed, who have such a pretty creature at your side! Heaven preserve her to you a hundred years in health and with plenty of sons!" Then the new bride answered, "It is very clear that you are a simpleton, and would remain so were you to live a hundred years, acting the prude as you do, and refusing to kiss so handsome a youth, whilst I let a herdsman kiss me for a couple of chestnuts."

At these words the bridegroom swelled with rage like a toad, so that his food remained sticking in his throat; however, he put a good face on the matter and swallowed the pill, intending to make the reckoning and settle the balance afterwards. But when the tables were removed, and the ogress and his sisters had gone away, Thunder-and-Lightning said to the new bride, "Wife, did you see this proud creature refuse me a kiss?" "She was a simpleton," replied the bride, "to refuse a kiss to such a handsome young man, whilst I let a herdsman kiss me for a couple of chestnuts."

Thunder-and-Lightning could contain himself no longer; the mustard got up into his nose, and with the flash of scorn and the thunder of action, he seized a knife and stabbed the bride, and digging a hole in the cellar he buried her. Then embracing Parmetella he said to her, "You are my jewel, the flower of women, the mirror of honour! Then turn those eyes upon me, give me that hand, put out those lips, draw near to me, my heart! for I will be yours as long as the world lasts."

The next morning, when the Sun aroused his fiery steeds from their watery stable, and drove them to pasture on the fields sown by the Dawn, the ogress came with fresh eggs for the newly married couple, that the young wife might be able to say, "Happy is she who marries and gets a mother-in-law!" But finding Parmetella in the arms of her son, and hearing what had passed, she ran to her sister, to concert some means of removing this thorn from her eyes without her son's being able to prevent it. But when she found that her sister, out of grief at the loss of her daughter, had crept into the oven herself and was burnt, her despair was so great, that from an ogress she became a ram, and butted her head against the wall under she broke her pate. Then Thunder-and-Lightning made peace between Parmetella and her sisters-in-law, and they all lived happy and content,

finding the saying come true, that—

“Patience conquers all.”

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