



The King of Love

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Italian

Intermediate

10 min read

Once upon a time there was a man with three daughters, who earned his living by gathering wild herbs. One day he took his youngest daughter with him. They came to a garden, and began to gather vegetables. The daughter saw a fine radish, and began to pull it up, when suddenly a Turk appeared, and said: "Why have you opened my master's door? You must come in now, and he will decide on your punishment."

They went down into the ground, more dead than alive; and when they were seated they saw a green bird come in and bathe in a pan of milk, then dry itself, and become a handsome youth. He said to the Turk: "What do these persons want?" "Your worship, they pulled up a radish, and opened the door of the cave." "How did we know," said the father, "that this was Your Excellency's house? My daughter saw a fine radish; it pleased her, and she pulled it up." "Well, if that's the case," said the master, "your daughters shall stay here as my wife; take this sack of gold and go; when you want to see your daughter, come and make yourself at home." The father took leave of his daughter and went away.

When the master was alone with her, he said: "You see, Rosella (Rusidda), you are now mistress here," and gave her all the keys. She was perfectly happy (literally, "was happy to the hairs of her head"). One day, while the green bird was away, her sisters took it into their heads to visit her, and asked her about her husband. Rosella said she did not know, for he had made her promise not to try to find out who he was. Her sisters, however, persuaded her, and when the bird returned and became a man, Rosella put on a downcast air. "What is the matter?" asked her husband. "Nothing." "You had better tell me."

She let him question her a while, and at last said: "Well, then, if you want to know why I am out of sorts, it is because I wish to know your name." Her husband told her that it would be the worse for her, but she insisted on knowing his name. So he made her put the gold basins on a chair, and began to bathe his feet. "Rosella, do you really want to know my name?" "Yes." And the water came up to his waist, for he had become a bird, and had got into the basin. Then he asked her the same question again, and again she answered yes, and the water was up to his mouth. "Rosella, do you really want to know my name?" "Yes, yes, yes!" "Then know that I am called The King of Love!" And saying this he disappeared, and the basins and the palace disappeared likewise, and Rosella found herself alone out in an open plain, without a soul to help her. She called her servants, but no one answered her. Then she said: "Since my husband has disappeared, I must wander about alone and forlorn to seek him!"

The poor woman, who expected before long to become a mother, began her wanderings, and at night arrived at another lonely plain; then she felt her heart sink, and, not knowing what to do, she cried out:—

"Ah! King of Love, You did it, and said it. You disappeared from me in a golden basin, And who will shelter to-night This poor unfortunate one?"

When she had uttered these words an ogress appeared and said: "Ah! wretch, how dare you go about seeking my nephew?" and was going to eat her up; but she took pity on her miserable state, and gave her shelter for the night. The next morning she gave her a piece of bread, and said: "We are seven sisters, all ogresses, and the worst of all is your mother-in-law; look out for her!"

To be brief, the poor girl wandered about six days, and met all six of the ogresses, who treated her in the same way. The seventh day, in great distress, she uttered her usual lament, and the sister of the King of Love appeared and said, "Rosella, while my mother is out, come up!" and she lowered the braids of her hair, and pulled her up. Then she gave her something to eat, and told her how to seize and pinch her mother until she cried out: "Let me alone for the sake of my son, the King of Love!"

Rosella did as she was told, but the ogress was so angry she was going to eat her. But her daughters threatened to abandon her if she did. "Well, then, I will write a letter, and Rosella must carry it to my friend." Poor Rosella was disheartened when she saw the letter, and, [Pg 4] descending, found herself in the midst of a plain. She uttered her usual complaint, when the King of Love appeared, and said: "You see your curiosity has

!" Poor thing! when she saw him she began to cry, and begged his pardon for what she had done. He took pity on her, and said: "Now listen to what you must do. On your way you will come to a river of blood; you must bend down and take some up in your hands, and say: 'How beautiful is this crystal water! such water as this I have never drunk!' Then you will come to another stream of turbid water, and do the same there. Then you will find yourself in a garden where there is a great quantity of fruit; pick some and eat it, saying: 'What fine pears! I have never eaten such pears as these.' Afterward, you will come to an oven that bakes bread day and night, and no one buys any. When you come there, say: 'Oh, what fine bread! bread like this I have never eaten,' and eat some. Then you will come to an entrance guarded by two hungry dogs; give them a piece of bread to eat. Then you will come to a doorway all dirty and full of cobwebs; take a broom and sweep it clean. Half-way up the stairs you will find two giants, each with a dirty piece of meat by his side; take a brush and clean it for them. When you have entered the house, you will find a razor, a pair of scissors, and a knife; take something and polish them. When you have done this, go in and deliver your letter to my mother's friend. When she wants to make you enter, snatch up a little box on the table, and run away. Take care to do all the things I have told you, or else you will never escape alive."

Rosella did as she was told, and while the ogress was reading the letter Rosella seized the box and ran for her life. When the ogress had finished reading her letter, she called: "Rosella! Rosella!" When she received no answer, she perceived that she had been betrayed, and cried out: "Razor, Scissors, Knife, cut her in pieces!" They answered: "As long as we have been razor, scissors, and knife, when did you ever deign to polish us? Rosella came [Pg 5] and brightened us up." The ogress, enraged, exclaimed: "Stairs, swallow her up!" "As long as I have been stairs, when did you ever deign to sweep me? Rosella came and swept me." The ogress cried in a passion: "Giants, crush her!" "As long as we have been giants, when did you ever deign to clean our food for us? Rosella came and did it."

Then the furious ogress called on the entrance to bury her alive, the dogs to devour her, the furnace to burn her, the fruit-tree to fall on her, and the rivers to drown her; but they all remembered Rosella's kindness, and refused to injure her.

Meanwhile Rosella continued her way, and at last became curious to know what was in the box she was carrying. So she opened it, and a great quantity of little puppets came out; some danced, some sang, and some played on musical instruments. She amused herself some time with them; but when she was ready to go on, the little figures would not return to the box. Night approached, and she exclaimed, as she had so often

before:—

“Ah! King of Love,” etc.

Then her husband appeared and said, “Oh, your curiosity will be the death of you!” and commanded the puppets to enter the box again. Then Rosella went her way, and arrived safely at her mother-in-law’s. When the ogress saw her she exclaimed: “You owe this luck to my son, the King of Love!” and was going to devour poor Rosella, but her daughters said: “Poor child! she has brought you the box; why do you want to eat her?” “Well and good. You want to marry my son, the King of Love; then take these six mattresses, and go and fill them with birds’ feathers!” Rosella descended, and began to wander about, uttering her usual lament. When her husband appeared Rosella told him what had happened. He whistled and the King of the Birds appeared, and commanded all the birds to come and drop their feathers, fill the six beds, and carry them back to the ogress, who again said that her son had helped Rosella. However, she went and made up her son’s bed with the six mattresses, and that very day she made him marry the daughter of the King of Portugal. Then she called Rosella, and, telling her that her son was married, bade her kneel before the nuptial bed, holding two lighted torches. Rosella obeyed, but soon the King of Love, under the plea that Rosella was not in a condition to hold the torches any longer, persuaded his bride to change places with her. Just as the queen took the torches in her hands, the earth opened and swallowed her up, and the king remained happy with Rosella.

When the ogress heard what had happened she clasped her hands over her head, and declared that Rosella’s child should not be born until she unclasped her hands. Then the King of Love had a catafalque erected, and stretched himself on it as though he were dead, and had all the bells tolled, and made the people cry, “How did the King of Love die?” The ogress heard it, and asked: “What is that noise?” Her daughters told her that their brother was dead from her fault. When the ogress heard this she unclasped her hands, saying, “How did my son die?” At that moment Rosella’s child was born. When the ogress heard it she burst a blood-vessel (in her heart) and died. Then the King of Love took his wife and sisters, and they remained happy and contented.

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