



The Serpent

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Italian

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It always happens that he who is over-curious in prying into the affairs of other people, strikes his own foot with the axe; and the King of Long-Furrow is a proof of this, who, by poking his nose into secrets, brought his daughter into trouble and ruined his unhappy son-in-law—who, in attempting to make a thrust with his head was left with it broken.

There was once on a time a gardener's wife, who longed to have a son more than a man in a fever for cold water, or the innkeeper for the arrival of the mail-coach.

It chanced one day that the poor man went to the mountain to get a faggot, and when he came home and opened it he found a pretty little serpent among the twigs. At the sight of this, Sapatella (for that was the name of the gardener's wife) heaved a deep sigh, and said, "Alas! even the serpents have their little serpents; but I brought ill-luck with me into this world." At these words, the little serpent spoke, and said, "Well, then, since you cannot have children, take me for a child, and you will make a good bargain, for I shall love you better than my mother." Sapatella, hearing a serpent speak thus, nearly fainted; but, plucking up courage, she said, "If it were for nothing else than the affection which you offer, I am content to take you, and treat you as if you were really my own child." So saying, she assigned him a hole in a corner of the house for a cradle, and gave him for food a share of what she had with the greatest goodwill in the world.

The serpent increased in size from day to day; and when he had grown pretty big, he said to Cola Matteo, the gardener, whom he looked on as his father, "Daddy, I want to get married." "With all my heart," said Cola Matteo. "We must look out for another serpent like yourself, and try to make up a match between you." "What serpent are you talking of?" said the little serpent. "I suppose, forsooth, we are all the same with vipers and adders! It is easy to see you are nothing but a country bumpkin, and make a nosegay of every plant. I want the King's daughter; so go this very instant and ask the King for her, and tell him it is a serpent who demands her." Cola Matteo, who was a plain, straightforward kind of man, and knew nothing about matters of this sort, went innocently to the King and delivered his message, saying—

"The messenger should not be beaten more
Than are the sands upon the shore!"

"Know then that a serpent wants your daughter for his wife, and I am come to try if we can make a match between a serpent and a dove!" The King, who saw at a glance that he was a blockhead, to get rid of him, said, "Go and tell the serpent that I will give him my daughter if he turns all the fruit of this orchard into gold." And so saying, he burst out a-laughing, and dismissed him.

When Cola Matteo went home and delivered the answer to the serpent, he said, "Go to-morrow morning and gather up all the fruit-stones you can find in the city, and sow them in the orchard, and you will see pearls strung on rushes!" Cola Mateo, who was no conjurer, neither knew how to comply nor refuse; so next morning, as soon as the Sun with his golden broom had swept away the dirt of the Night from the fields watered by the

dawn, he took a basket on his arm and went from street to street, picking up all the stones of peaches, plums, nectarines, apricots, and cherries that he could find. He then went to the orchard of the palace and sowed them, as the serpent had desired. In an instant the trees shot up, and stems and branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit were all of glittering gold—at the sight of which the King was in an ecstasy of amazement, and cried aloud with joy.

But when Cola Matteo was sent by the serpent to the King, to demand the performance of his promise, the King said, “Fair and easy, I must first have something else if he would have my daughter; and it is that he make all the walls and the ground of the orchard to be of precious stones.”

When the gardener told this to the serpent, he made answer, “Go to-morrow morning and gather up all the bits of broken crockery-ware you can find, and throw them on the walks and on the walls of the orchard; for we will not let this small difficulty stand in our way.” As soon, therefore, as the Night, having aided the robbers, is banished from the sky, and goes about collecting the faggots of twilight, Cola Matteo took a basket under his arm, and went about collecting bits of tiles, lids and bottoms of pipkins, pieces of plate and dishes, handles of jugs, spouts of pitchers. He picked up all the spoiled, broken, cracked lamps and all the fragments of pottery he could find in his way. And when he had done all that the serpent had told him, you could see the whole orchard mantled with emeralds and chalcedonies, and coated with rubies and carbuncles, so that the lustre dazzled your eyes. The King was struck all of a heap by the sight, and knew not what had befallen him. But when the serpent sent again to let him know that he was expecting the performance of his promise, the King answered, “Oh, all that has been done is nothing, if he does not turn this palace into gold.”

When Cola Matteo told the serpent this new fancy of the King's, the serpent said, "Go and get a bundle of herbs and rub the bottom of the palace walls with them. We shall see if we cannot satisfy this whim!" Away went Cola that very moment, and made a great broom of cabbages, radishes, leeks, parsley, turnips, and carrots; and when he had rubbed the lower part of the palace with it, instantly you might see it shining like a golden ball on a weather-vane. And when the gardener came again to demand the hand of the Princess, the King, seeing all his retreat cut off, called his daughter, and said to her, "My dear Grannonia, I have tried to get rid of a suitor who asked to marry you, by making such conditions as seemed to me impossible. But as I am beaten, and obliged to consent, I pray you, as you are a dutiful daughter, to enable me to keep my word, and to be content with what Fate wills and I am obliged to do."

"Do as you please, father," said Grannonia; "I shall not oppose a single jot of your will!" The King, hearing this, bade Cola Matteo tell the serpent to come.

The serpent then set out for the palace, mounted on a car all of gold and drawn by four golden elephants. But wherever he came the people fled away in terror, seeing such a large and frightful serpent making his progress through the city; and when he arrived at the palace, the courtiers all trembled like rushes and ran away; and even the very scullions did not dare to stay in the place. The King and Queen, also, shivering with fear, crept into a chamber. Only Grannonia stood her ground; for though her father and her mother cried continually, "Fly, fly, Grannonia, save yourself," she would not stir from the spot, saying, "Why should I fly from the husband you have given me?" And when the serpent came into the room, he took Grannonia by the waist, in his tail, and gave her such a shower of kisses that the King writhed like a worm, and went as pale as Death. Then the serpent carried her into another room and fastened the door; and shaking off his skin on the floor, he became a most beautiful youth, with a head all covered with ringlets of gold, and with eyes that would enchant you!

When the King saw the serpent go into the room with his daughter and shut the door after him, he said to his wife, "Heaven have mercy on that good soul, my daughter! for she is dead to a certainty, and that accursed serpent has doubtless swallowed her down like the yolk of an egg." Then he put his eye to the key-hole to see what had become of her; but when he saw the exceeding beauty of the youth, and the skin of the serpent that he had left lying on the ground, he gave the door a kick, then in they rushed, and, taking the skin, flung it into the

fire and burned it.

When the youth saw this, he cried, "Ah, fools, what have you done!" and instantly he was turned into a dove and flew at the window, where, as he struck his head through the panes, he cut himself sorely.

Grannonia, who thus saw herself at the same moment happy and unhappy, joyful and miserable, rich and poor, tore her hair and bewailed her fate, reproaching her father and mother; but they excused themselves, declaring that they had not meant to do harm. But she went on weeping and wailing until Night came forth to drape the canopy of the sky for the funeral of the Sun; and when they were all in bed, she took her jewels, which were in a writing-desk, and went out by the back-door, to search everywhere for the treasure she had lost.

She went out of the city, guided by the light of the moon; and on her way she met a fox, who asked her if she wished for company. "Of all things, my friend," replied Grannonia. "I should be delighted; for I am not over well acquainted with the country." So they travelled along together till they came to a wood, where the trees, at play like children, were making baby-houses for the shadows to lie in. And as they were now tired and wished to rest, they sheltered under the leaves where a fountain was playing tricks with the grass, throwing water on it by the dishful. There they stretched themselves on a mattress of tender soft grass, and paid the duty of repose which they owed to Nature for the merchandise of life.

They did not awake till the Sun, with his usual fire, gave the signal to sailors and travellers to set out on their road; and, after they awoke, they still stayed for some time listening to the songs of the birds, in which Grannonia took great delight. The fox, seeing this, said to her, "You would feel twice as much pleasure if, like me, you understood what they are saying." At these words Grannonia—for women are by nature as curious as they are talkative—begged the fox to tell her what he had heard the birds saying. So, after having let her entreat him for a long time, to raise her curiosity about what he was going to relate, he told her that the birds were talking to each other about what had lately befallen the King's son, who was as beautiful as a jay. Because he had offended a wicked ogress, she had laid him under a spell to pass seven years in the form of a serpent; and when he had nearly ended the seven years, he fell in love with the daughter of a King, and being one day in a room with the maiden, he had cast his skin on the ground, when her father and mother rushed in and burned it. Then, when the Prince was flying away in the shape of a dove, he broke a pane in the window to escape, and hurt his head so severely that he was given over by the doctors.

Grannonia, who thus heard her own onions spoken of, asked if there was any cure for this injury. The fox replied that there was none other than by anointing his wounds with the blood of those very birds that had been telling the story. When Grannonia heard this, she fell down on her knees to the fox, entreating him to catch those birds for her, that she might get their blood; adding that, like honest comrades, they would share the gain. "Fair and softly," said the fox; "let us wait till night, and when the birds are gone to bed, trust me to climb the tree and capture them, one after the other."

So they waited till Day was gone, and Earth had spread out her great black board to catch the wax that might drop from the tapers of Night. Then the fox, as soon as he saw all the birds fast asleep on the branches, stole up quite softly, and one after another, throttled all the linnets, larks, tomtits, blackbirds, woodpeckers, thrushes, jays, fly-catchers, little owls, goldfinches, bullfinches, chaffinches, and redbreasts that were on the trees. And when he had killed them all they put the blood in a little bottle, which the fox carried with him, to refresh himself on the road.

Grannonia was so overjoyed that she hardly touched the ground; but the fox said to her, "What fine joy in a dream is this, my daughter! You have done nothing, unless you mix my blood also with that of the birds"; and so saying he set off to run away. Grannonia, who saw all her hopes likely to be destroyed, had recourse to

woman's art—flattery; and she said to him, "Gossip fox, there would be some reason for your saving your hide if I were not under so many obligations to you, and if there were no other foxes in the world. But you know how much I owe you, and that there is no scarcity of the likes of you on these plains. Rely on my good faith. Don't act like the cow that kicks over the pail which she has just filled with milk. You have done the chief part, and now you fail at the last. Do stop! Believe me, and come with me to the city of this King, where you may sell me for a slave if you will!"

The fox never dreamed that he could be out-forced by a woman; so he agreed to travel on with her. But they had hardly gone fifty paces, when she lifted up the stick she carried and gave him such a neat rap that he forthwith stretched his legs. Then she put his blood into the little bottle; and setting off again she stayed not till she came to Big Valley, where she went straightway to the royal palace, and sent word that she was come to cure the Prince.

Then the King ordered her to be brought before him, and he was astonished at seeing a girl undertake a thing which the best doctors in his kingdom had failed to do. However, a trial could do no harm; and so he said he wished greatly to see the experiment made. But Grannonia answered, "If I succeed, you must promise to give him to me for a husband." The King, who looked on his son to be even as already dead, answered her, "If you give him to me safe and sound, I will give him to you sound and safe; for it is no great matter to give a husband to her that gives me a son."

So they went to the chamber of the Prince, and hardly had she anointed him with the blood, when he found himself just as if nothing had ever ailed him. Grannonia, when she saw the Prince stout and hearty, bade the King keep his word; whereupon he, turning to his son, said, "My son, a moment ago you were all but dead, and now I see you alive, and can hardly believe it. Therefore, as I have promised this maiden that if she cured you she should have you for a husband, now enable me to perform my promise, by all the love you bear me, since gratitude obliges me to pay this debt."

When the Prince heard these words, he said, "Sir, I would that I was free to prove to you the love I bear you. But as I have already pledged my faith to another woman, you would not consent that I should break my word, nor would this maiden wish that I should do such a wrong to her whom I love; nor can I, indeed, alter my mind!"

Grannonia, hearing this, felt a secret pleasure not to be described at finding herself still alive in the memory of the Prince. Her whole face became crimson as she said, "If I could induce this maiden to resign her claims, would you then consent to my wish?" "Never," replied the Prince, "will I banish from this breast the fair image of her whom I love. I shall ever remain of the same mind and will; and I would sooner see myself in danger of losing my place at the table of life than play so mean a trick!"

Grannonia could no longer disguise herself, and discovered to the Prince who she was; for, the chamber having been darkened on account of the wound in his head, he had not known her. But the Prince, now that he recognised her, embraced her with a joy that would amaze you, telling his father what he had done and suffered for her. Then they sent to invite her parents, the King and Queen of Long Field; and they celebrated the wedding with wonderful festivity, making great sport of the great ninny of a fox, and concluding at the last of the last that—

"Pain doth indeed a seasoning prove
Unto the joys of constant love."

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