

The Seven Doves

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Advanced
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He who gives pleasure meets with it: kindness is the bond of friendship and the hook of love: he who sows not reaps not; of which truth Ciulla has given you the foretaste of example, and I will give you the dessert, if you will bear in mind what Cato says, "Speak little at table." Therefore have the kindness to lend me your ears awhile; and may Heaven cause them to stretch continually, to listen to pleasant and amusing things.

There was once in the county of Arzano a good woman who every year gave birth to a son, until at length there were seven of them, who looked like the pipes of the god Pan, with seven reeds, one larger than another. And when they had changed their first teeth, they said to Jannetella their mother, "Hark ye, mother, if, after so many sons, you do not this time have a daughter, we are resolved to leave home, and go wandering through the world like the sons of the blackbirds."

When their mother heard this sad announcement, she prayed Heaven to remove such an intention from her sons, and prevent her losing seven such jewels as they were. And when the hour of the birth was at hand, the sons said to Jannetella, "We will retire to the top of yonder hill or rock opposite; if you give birth to a son, put an inkstand and a pen up at the window; but if you have a little girl, put up a spoon and a distaff. For if we see the signal of a daughter, we shall return home and spend the rest of our lives under your wings; but if we see the signal of a son, then forget us, for you may know that we have taken ourselves off."

Soon after the sons had departed it pleased Heaven that Jannetella should bring forth a pretty little daughter; then she told the nurse to make the signal to the brothers, but the woman was so stupid and confused that she

put up the inkstand and the pen. As soon as the seven brothers saw this signal, they set off, and walked on and on, until at the end of three years they came to a wood, where the trees were performing the sword-dance to the sound of a river which made music upon the stones. In this wood was the house of an ogre whose eyes having been blinded whilst asleep by a woman, he was such an enemy to the sex that he devoured all whom he could catch.

When the youths arrived at the ogre's house, tired out with walking and exhausted with hunger, they begged him for pity's sake to give them a morsel of bread. And the ogre replied that if they would serve him he would give them food, and they would have nothing else to do but to watch over him like a dog, each in turn for a day. The youths, upon hearing this, thought they had found father and mother; so they consented, and remained in the service of the ogre, who, having gotten their names by heart, called once for Giangrazio, at another time for Cecchitiello, now for Pascale, now Nuccio, now Pone, now Pezzillo, and now Carcavecchia, for so the brothers were named; and giving them a room in the lower part of the house, he allowed them enough to live upon.

Meanwhile their sister had grown up; and hearing that her seven brothers, owing to the stupidity of the nurse, had set out to walk through the world, and that no tidings of them had ever been received, she took it into her head to go in search of them. And she begged and prayed her mother so long, that at last, overcome by her entreaties, she gave her leave to go, and dressed her like a pilgrim. Then the maiden walked and walked, asking at every place she came to whether any one had seen seven brothers. And thus she journeyed on, until at length she got news of them at an inn, where having enquired the way to the wood, one morning, at the hour when the Sun with the penknife of his rays scratches out the inkspots made by Night upon the sheet of Heaven, she arrived at the ogre's house, where she was recognised by her brothers with great joy, who cursed the inkstand and the pen for writing falsely such misfortune for them. Then giving her a thousand caresses, they told her to remain quiet in their chamber, that the ogre might not see her; bidding her at the same time give a portion of whatever she had to eat to a cat which was in the room, or otherwise she would do her some harm. Cianna (for so the sister was named) wrote down this advice in the pocket-book of her heart, and shared everything with the cat, like a good companion, always cutting justly, and saying, "This for me—this for thee,—this for the daughter of the king," giving the cat a share to the last morsel.

Now it happened one day that the brothers, going to hunt for the ogre, left Cianna a little basket of chick-peas

to cook; and as she was picking them, by ill-luck she found among them a hazel-nut, which was the stone of disturbance to her quiet; for having swallowed it without giving half to the cat, the latter out of spite jumped on the table and blew out the candle. Cianna seeing this, and not knowing what to do, left the room, contrary to the command of her brothers, and going into the ogre's chamber begged him for a little light. Then the ogre, hearing a woman's voice, said, "Welcome, madam! wait awhile,—you have found what you are seeking." And so saying he took a Genoa stone, and daubing it with oil he fell to whetting his tusks. But Cianna, who saw the cart on a wrong track, seizing a lighted stick ran to her chamber; and bolting the door inside, she placed against it bars, stools, bedsteads, tables, stones, and everything there was in the room.

As soon as the ogre had put an edge on his teeth he ran to the chamber of the brothers, and finding the door fastened, he fell to kicking it to break it open. At this noise and disturbance the seven brothers at once came home, and hearing themselves accused by the ogre of treachery for making their chamber a refuge for one of his women enemies, Giangrazio, who was the eldest and had more sense than the others, and saw matters going badly, said to the ogre, "We know nothing of this affair, and it may be that this wicked woman has perchance come into the room whilst we were at the chase; but as she has fortified herself inside, come with me and I will take you to a place where we can seize her without her being able to defend herself."

Then they took the ogre by the hand, and led him to a deep, deep pit, where, giving him a push, they sent him headlong to the bottom; and taking a shovel, which they found on the ground, they covered him with earth. Then they bade their sister unfasten the door, and they rated her soundly for the fault she had committed, and the danger in which she had placed herself; telling her to be more careful in future, and to beware of plucking grass upon the spot where the ogre was buried, or they would be turned into seven doves.

"Heaven keep me from bringing such a misfortune upon you!" replied Cianna. So taking possession of all the ogre's goods and chattels, and making themselves masters of the whole house, they lived there merrily enough, waiting until winter should pass away, and the Sun, on taking possession of the house of the Bull, give a present to the Earth of a green gown embroidered with flowers, when they might set out on their journey home.

Now it happened one day, when the brothers were gone to the mountains to get firewood to defend themselves against the cold, which increased from day to day, that a poor pilgrim came to the ogre's wood, and made faces

at an ape that was perched up in a pine-tree; whereupon the ape threw down one of the fir-apples from the tree upon the man's pate, which made such a terrible bump that the poor fellow set up a loud cry. Cianna hearing the noise went out, and taking pity on his disaster, she quickly plucked a sprig of rosemary from a tuft which grew upon the ogre's grave; then she made him a plaster of it with boiled bread and salt, and after giving the man some breakfast she sent him away.

Whilst Cianna was laying the cloth, and expecting her brothers, lo! she saw seven doves come flying, who said to her, "Ah! better that your hand had been cut off, you cause of all our misfortune, ere it plucked that accursed rosemary and brought such a calamity upon us! Have you eaten the brains of a cat, O sister, that you have driven our advice from your mind? Behold us, turned to birds, a prey to the talons of kites, hawks, and falcons! Behold us made companions of water-hens, snipes, goldfinches, woodpeckers, jays, owls, magpies, jackdaws, rooks, starlings, woodcocks, cocks, hens and chickens, turkey-cocks, blackbirds, thrushes, chaffinches, tomtits, jenny-wrens, lapwings, linnets, greenfinches, crossbills, flycatchers, larks, plovers, kingfishers, wagtails, redbreasts, redfinches, sparrows, ducks, fieldfares, woodpigeons and bullfinches! A rare thing you have done! And now we may return to our country to find nets laid and twigs limed for us! To heal the head of a pilgrim, you have broken the heads of seven brothers; nor is there any help for our misfortune, unless you find the Mother of Time, who will tell you the way to get us out of trouble."

Cianna, looking like a plucked quail at the fault she had committed, begged pardon of her brothers, and offered to go round the world until she should find the dwelling of the old woman. Then praying them not to stir from the house until she returned, lest any ill should betide them, she set out, and journeyed on and on without ever tiring; and though she went on foot, her desire to aid her brothers served her as a sumpter-mule, with which she made three miles an hour. At last she came to the seashore, where with the blows of the waves the sea was banging the rocks which would not repeat the Latin it gave them to do. Here she saw a huge whale, who said to her, "My pretty maiden, what go you seeking?" And she replied, "I am seeking the dwelling of the Mother of Time." "Hear then what you must do," replied the whale; "go straight along this shore, and on coming to the first river, follow it up to its source, and you will meet with some one who will show you the way: but do me one kindness,—when you find the good old woman, beg of her the favour to tell me some means by which I may swim about safely, without so often knocking upon the rocks and being thrown on the sands."

"Trust to me," said Cianna, then thanking the whale for pointing out the way, she set off walking along the

shore; and after a long journey she came to the river, which like a clerk of the treasury was disbursing silver money into the bank of the sea. Then taking the way up to its source, she arrived at a beautiful open country, where the meadow vied with the heaven, displaying her green mantle starred over with flowers; and there she met a mouse who said to her, "Whither are you going thus alone, my pretty girl?" And Cianna replied, "I am seeking the Mother of Time."

"You have a long way to go," said the mouse; "but do not lose heart, everything has an end. Walk on, therefore, toward yon mountains, which, like the free lords of these fields, assume the title of Highness, and you will soon have more news of what you are seeking. But do me one favour,—when you arrive at the house you wish to find, get the good old woman to tell you what you can do to rid us of the tyranny of the cats; then command me, and I am your slave."

Cianna, after promising to do the mouse this kindness, set off towards the mountains, which, although they appeared to be close at hand, seemed never to be reached. But having come to them at length, she sat down tired out upon a stone; and there she saw an army of ants, carrying a large store of grain, one of whom turning to Cianna said, "Who art thou, and whither art thou going?" And Cianna, who was courteous to every one, said to her, "I am an unhappy girl, who, for a matter that concerns me, am seeking the dwelling of the Mother of Time."

"Go on farther," said the ant, "and where these mountains open into a large plain you will obtain more news. But do me a great favour,—get the secret from the old woman, what we ants can do to live a little longer; for it seems to me a folly in worldly affairs to be heaping up such a large store of food for so short a life, which, like an auctioneer's candle, goes out just at the best bidding of years."

"Be at ease," said Cianna, "I will return the kindness you have shown me."

Then she passed the mountains and arrived at a wide plain; and proceeding a little way over it, she came to a large oak-tree,—a memorial of antiquity, whose fruit (a mouthful which Time gives to this bitter age of its lost sweetness) tasted like sweetmeats to the maiden, who was satisfied with little. Then the oak, making lips of its bark and a tongue of its pith, said to Cianna, "Whither are you going so sad, my little daughter? Come and rest under my shade." Cianna thanked him much, but excused herself, saying that she was going in haste to find the Mother of Time. And when the oak heard this he replied, "You are not far from her dwelling; for before you

have gone another day's journey, you will see upon a mountain a house, in which you will find her whom you seek. But if you have as much kindness as beauty, I prithee learn for me what I can do to regain my lost honour; for instead of being food for great men, I am now only made the food of hogs."

"Leave that to me," replied Cianna, "I will take care to serve you." So saying, she departed, and walking on and on without ever resting, she came at length to the foot of an impertinent mountain, which was poking its head into the face of the clouds. There she found an old man, who, wearied and wayworn, had lain down upon some hay; and as soon as he saw Cianna, he knew her at once, and that it was she who had cured his bump.

When the old man heard what she was seeking, he told her that he was carrying to Time the rent for the piece of earth which he had cultivated, and that Time was a tyrant who usurped everything in the world, claiming tribute from all, and especially from people of his age; and he added that, having received kindness from Cianna, he would now return it a hundredfold by giving her some good information about her arrival at the mountain; and that he was sorry he could not accompany her thither, since his old age, which was condemned rather to go down than up, obliged him to remain at the foot of those mountains, to cast up accounts with the clerks of Time—which are the labours, the sufferings, and the infirmities of life—and to pay the debt of Nature. So the old man said to her, "Now, my pretty, innocent child, listen to me. You must know that on the top of this mountain you will find a ruined house, which was built long ago, time out of mind. The walls are cracked, the foundations crumbling away, the doors worm-eaten, the furniture all worn out—and, in short, everything is gone to wrack and ruin. On one side are seen shattered columns, on another broken statues; and nothing is left in a good state except a coat-of-arms over the door, quartered on which you will see a serpent biting its tail, a stag, a raven, and a phoenix. When you enter, you will see on the ground, files, saws, scythes, sickles, pruning-hooks, and hundreds and hundreds of vessels full of ashes, with the names written on them, like gallipots in an apothecary's shop; and there may be read Corinth, Saguntum, Carthage, Troy, and a thousand other cities, the ashes of which Time preserved as trophies of his conquests.

"When you come near the house, hide yourself until Time goes out; and as soon as he has gone forth, enter, and you will find an old, old woman, with a beard that touches the ground and a hump reaching to the sky. Her hair, like the tail of a dapple-grey horse, covers her heels; her face looks like a plaited collar, with the folds stiffened by the starch of years. The old woman is seated upon a clock, which is fastened to a wall; and her eyebrows are so large that they overshadow her eyes, so that she will not be able to see you. As soon as you

enter, quickly take the weights off the clock, then call to the old woman, and beg her to answer your questions; whereupon she will instantly call her son to come and eat you up. But the clock upon which the old woman sits having lost its weights, her son cannot move, and she will therefore be obliged to tell you what you wish. But do not trust any oath she may make, unless she swears by the wings of her son, and you will be content.”

So saying, the poor old man fell down and crumbled away, like a dead body brought from a catacomb to the light of day. Then Cianna took the ashes, and mixing them with a pint of tears, she made a grave and buried them, praying Heaven to grant them quiet and repose. And ascending the mountain till she was quite out of breath, she waited until Time came out, who was an old man with a long, long beard, and who wore a very old cloak covered with slips of paper, on which were worked the names of various people. He had large wings, and ran so fast that he was out of sight in an instant.

When Cianna entered the house of his mother, she started with affright at the sight of that black old chip; and instantly seizing the weights of the clock, she told what she wanted to the old woman, who, setting up a loud cry, called to her son. But Cianna said to her, “You may butt your head against the wall as long as you like, for you will not see your son whilst I hold these clock-weights.”

Thereupon the old woman, seeing herself foiled, began to coax Cianna, saying, “Let go of them, my dear, and do not stop my son’s course; for no man living has ever done that. Let go of them, and may Heaven preserve you! for I promise you, by the acid of my son, with which he corrodes everything, that I will do you no harm.”

“That’s time lost,” answered Cianna, “you must say something better if you would have me quit my hold.”

“I swear to you by those teeth, which gnaw all mortal things, that I will tell you all you desire.”

“That is all nothing,” answered Cianna, “for I know you are deceiving me.”

“Well, then,” said the old woman, “I swear to you by those wings which fly over all that I will give you more pleasure than you imagine.”

Thereupon Cianna, letting go the weights, kissed the old woman’s hand, which had a mouldy feel and a nasty smell. And the old woman, seeing the courtesy of the damsel, said to her, “Hide yourself behind this door, and when Time comes home I will make him tell me all you wish to know. And as soon as he goes out again—for he

never stays quiet in one place—you can depart. But do not let yourself be heard or seen, for he is such a glutton that he does not spare even his own children; and when all fails, he devours himself and then springs up anew.”

Cianna did as the old woman told her; and, lo! soon after Time came flying quick, quick, high and light, and having gnawed whatever came to hand, down to the very mouldiness upon the walls, he was about to depart, when his mother told him all she had heard from Cianna, beseeching him by the milk she had given him to answer exactly all her questions. After a thousand entreaties, her son replied, “To the tree may be answered, that it can never be prized by men so long as it keeps treasures buried under its roots; to the mice, that they will never be safe from the cat unless they tie a bell to her leg to tell them when she is coming; to the ants, that they will live a hundred years if they can dispense with flying—for when the ant is going to die she puts on wings; to the whale, that it should be of good cheer, and make friends with the sea-mouse, who will serve him as a guide, so that he will never go wrong; and to the doves, that when they alight on the column of wealth, they will return to their former state.”

So saying, Time set out to run his accustomed post; and Cianna, taking leave of the old woman, descended to the foot of the mountain, just at the very time that the seven doves, who had followed their sister's footsteps, arrived there. Wearied with flying so far, they stopped to rest upon the horn of a dead ox; and no sooner had they alighted than they were changed into handsome youths as they were at first. But while they were marvelling at this, they heard the reply which Time had given, and saw at once that the horn, as the symbol of plenty, was the column of wealth of which Time had spoken. Then embracing their sister with great joy, they all set out on the same road by which Cianna had come. And when they came to the oak-tree, and told it what Cianna had heard from Time, the tree begged them to take away the treasure from its roots, since it was the cause why its acorns had lost their reputation. Thereupon the seven brothers, taking a spade which they found in a garden, dug and dug, until they came to a great heap of gold money, which they divided into eight parts and shared among themselves and their sister, so that they might carry it away conveniently. But being wearied with the journey and the load, they laid themselves down to sleep under a hedge. Presently a band of robbers coming by, and seeing the poor fellows asleep, with their heads upon the clothfuls of money, bound them hand and foot to some trees and took away their money, leaving them to bewail not only their wealth—which had slipped through their fingers as soon as found—but their life; for being without hope of succour, they were in peril of either soon dying of hunger or allaying the hunger of some wild beast.

As they were lamenting their unhappy lot, up came the mouse, who, as soon as she heard the reply which Time had given, in return for the good service, nibbled the cords with which they were bound and set them free. And having gone a little way farther, they met on the road the ant, who, when she heard the advice of Time, asked Cianna what was the matter that she was so pale-faced and cast down. And when Cianna told her their misfortune, and the trick which the robbers had played them, the ant replied, "Be quiet, I can now requite the kindness you have done me. You must know, that whilst I was carrying a load of grain underground, I saw a place where these dogs of assassins hide their plunder. They have made some holes under an old building, in which they shut up all the things they have stolen. They are just now gone out for some new robbery, and I will go with you and show you the place, so that you may recover your money."

So saying, she took the way towards some tumbled-down houses, and showed the seven brothers the mouth of the pit; whereupon Giangrazio, who was bolder than the rest, entering it, found there all the money of which they had been robbed. Then taking it with them, they set out, and walked towards the seashore, where they

found the whale, and told him the good advice which Time—who is the father of counsel—had given them. And whilst they stood talking of their journey and all that had befallen them, they saw the robbers suddenly appear, armed to the teeth, who had followed in their footsteps. At this sight they exclaimed, “Alas, alas! we are now wholly lost, for here come the robbers armed, and they will not leave the skin on our bodies.”

“Fear not,” replied the whale, “for I can save you out of the fire, and will thus requite the love you have shown me; so get upon my back, and I will quickly carry you to a place of safety.”

Cianna and her brothers, seeing the foe at their heels and the water up to their throats, climbed upon the whale, who, keeping far off from the rocks, carried them to within sight of Naples. But being afraid to land them on account of the shoals and shallows, he said, “Where would you like me to land you? On the shore of Amalfi?” And Giangrazio answered, “See whether that cannot be avoided, my dear fish. I do not wish to land at any place hereabouts; for at Massa they say barely good-day, at Sorrento thieves are plenty, at Vico they say you may go your way, at Castel-a-mare no one says how are ye.”

Then the whale, to please them, turned about and went toward the Salt-rock, where he left them; and they got put on shore by the first fishing-boat that passed. Thereupon they returned to their own country, safe and sound and rich, to the great joy and consolation of their mother and father. And, thanks to the goodness of Cianna, they enjoyed a happy life, verifying the old saying—

“Do good whenever you can, and forget it.”

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