

The Stone in the Cock's Head

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Advanced
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The robber's wife does not always laugh; he who weaves fraud works his own ruin; there is no deceit which is not at last discovered, no treachery that does not come to light; walls have ears, and are spies to rogues; the earth gapes and discovers theft, as I will prove to you if you pay attention.

There was once in the city of Dark-Grotto a certain man named Minecco Aniello, who was so persecuted by fortune that all his fixtures and moveables consisted only of a short-legged cock, which he had reared upon bread-crumbs. But one morning, being pinched with appetite (for hunger drives the wolf from the thicket), he took it into his head to sell the cock, and, taking it to the market, he met two thievish magicians, with whom he made a bargain, and sold it for half-a-crown. So they told him to take it to their house, and they would count him out the money. Then the magicians went their way, and, Minecco Aniello following them, overheard them talking gibberish together and saying, "Who would have told us that we should meet with such a piece of good luck, Jennarone? This cock will make our fortune to a certainty by the stone which, you know, he has in his pate. We will quickly have it set in a ring, and then we shall have everything we can ask for."

“Be quiet, Jacovuccio,” answered Jennarone; “I see myself rich and can hardly believe it, and I am longing to twist the cock’s neck and give a kick in the face of beggary, for in this world virtue without money goes for nothing, and a man is judged of by his coat.”

When Minecco Aniello, who had travelled about in the world and eaten bread from more than one oven, heard this gibberish he turned on his heel and scampered off. And, running home, he twisted the cock’s neck, and opening its head found the stone, which he had instantly set in a brass ring. Then, to make a trial of its virtue, he said, “I wish to become a youth eighteen years old.”

Hardly had he uttered the words when his blood began to flow more quickly, his nerves became stronger, his limbs firmer, his flesh fresher, his eyes more fiery, his silver hairs were turned into gold, his mouth, which was a sacked village, became peopled with teeth; his beard, which was as thick as a wood, became like a nursery garden—in short, he was changed to a most beautiful youth. Then he said again, “I wish for a splendid palace, and to marry the King’s daughter.” And lo! there instantly appeared a palace of incredible magnificence, in which were apartments that would amaze you, columns to astound you, pictures to fill you with wonder; silver glittered around, and gold was trodden underfoot; the jewels dazzled your eyes; the servants swarmed like ants, the horses and carriages were not to be counted—in short, there was such a display of riches that the King stared at the sight, and willingly gave him his daughter Natalizia.

Meanwhile the magicians, having discovered Minecco Aniello’s great wealth, laid a plan to rob him of his good fortune, so they made a pretty little doll which played and danced by means of clockwork; and, dressing themselves like merchants, they went to Pentella, the daughter of Minecco Aniello, under pretext of selling it to her. When Pentella saw the beautiful little thing she asked them what price they put upon it, and they replied that it was not to be bought with money, but that she might have it and welcome if she would only do them a favour, which was to let them see the make of the ring which her father possessed, in order to take the model and make another like it, then they would give her the doll without any payment at all.

Pentella, who had never heard the proverb, “Think well before you buy anything cheap,” instantly accepted this offer, and, bidding them return the next morning, she promised to ask her father to lend her the ring. So the magicians went away, and when her father returned home Pentella coaxed and caressed him, until at last she persuaded him to give her the ring, making the excuse that she was sad at heart, and wished to divert her mind

a little.

When the next day came, as soon as the scavenger of the Sun sweeps the last traces of the Shades from the streets and squares of Heaven, the magicians returned, and no sooner had they the ring in their hands than they instantly vanished, and not a trace of them was to be seen, so that poor Pentella had like to have died with terror.

But when the magicians came to a wood, where the branches of some of the trees were dancing the sword-dance, and the boughs of the others were playing together at hot-cockles, they desired the ring to destroy the spell by which the old man had become young again. And instantly Minecco Aniello, who was just at that moment in the presence of the King, was suddenly seen to grow hoary, his hairs to whiten, his forehead to wrinkle, his eyebrows to grow bristly, his eyes to sink in, his face to be furrowed, his mouth to become toothless, his beard to grow bushy, his back to be humped, his legs to tremble, and, above all, his glittering garments to turn to rags and tatters.

The King, seeing the miserable beggar seated beside him at table, ordered him to be instantly driven away with blows and hard words, whereupon Aniello, thus suddenly fallen from his good luck, went weeping to his daughter, and asked for the ring in order to set matters to rights again. But when he heard the fatal trick played by the false merchants he was ready to throw himself out of the window, cursing a thousand times the ignorance of his daughter, who, for the sake of a silly doll had turned him into a miserable scarecrow, and for a paltry thing of rags had brought him to rags himself, adding that he was resolved to go wandering about the world like a bad shilling, until he should get tidings of those merchants. So saying he threw a cloak about his neck and a wallet on his back, drew his sandals on his feet, took a staff in his hand, and, leaving his daughter all chilled and frozen, he set out walking desperately on and on until he arrived at the kingdom of Deep-Hole, inhabited by the mice, where, being taken for a big spy of the cats, he was instantly led before Rosecone, the King. Then the King asked him who he was, whence he came, and what he was about in that country; and Minecco Aniello, after first giving the King a cheese-paring, in sign of tribute, related to him all his misfortunes one by one, and concluded by saying that he was resolved to continue his toil and travel, until he should get tidings of those thievish villains who had robbed him of so precious a jewel, taking from him at once the flower of his youth, the source of his wealth, and the prop of his honour.

At these words Rosecone felt pity nibbling at his heart, and, wishing to comfort the poor man, he summoned the eldest mice to a council, and asked their opinions on the misfortunes of Minecco Aniello, commanding them to use all diligence and endeavour to obtain some tidings of these false merchants. Now, among the rest, it happened that Rudolo and Saltariello were present—mice who were well used to the ways of the world, and had lived for six years at a tavern of great resort hard by; and they said to Aniello, “Be of good heart, comrade! matters will turn out better than you imagine. You must know that one day, when we were in a room in the hostelry of the Horn,’ where the most famous men in the world lodge and make merry, two persons from Hook Castle came in, who, after they had eaten their fill and had seen the bottom of their flagon, fell to talking of a trick they had played a certain old man of Dark-Grotto, and how they had cheated him out of a stone of great value, which one of them, named Jennarone, said he would never take from his finger, that he might not run the risk of losing it as the old man’s daughter had done.”

When Minecco Aniello heard this, he told the two mice that if they would trust themselves to accompany him to the country where these rogues lived and recover the ring for him, he would give them a good lot of cheese and salt meat, which they might eat and enjoy with his majesty the King. Then the two mice, after bargaining for a reward, offered to go over sea and mountain, and, taking leave of his mousy majesty, they set out.

After journeying a long way they arrived at Hook Castle, where the mice told Minecco Aniello to remain under some trees on the brink of a river, which like a leech drew the moisture from the land and discharged it into the sea. Then they went to seek the house of the magicians, and, observing that Jennarone never took the ring from his finger, they sought to gain the victory by stratagem. So, waiting till Night had dyed with purple grape-juice the sunburnt face of Heaven, and the magicians had gone to bed and were fast asleep, Rudolo began to nibble the finger on which the ring was, whereupon Jennarone, feeling the smart, took the ring off and laid it on a table at the head of the bed. But as soon as Saltariello saw this, he popped the ring into his mouth, and in four skips he was off to find Minecco Aniello, who, with even greater joy than a man at the gallows feels when a pardon arrives, instantly turned the magicians into two jackasses; and, turning his mantle over one of them, he bestrode him like a noble count, then he loaded the other with cheese and bacon, and set off toward Deep-Hole, where, having given presents to the King and his councillors, he thanked them for all the good fortune he had received by their assistance, praying Heaven that no mouse-trap might ever lay hold of them, that no cat might ever harm them, and that no arsenic might ever poison them.

Then, leaving that country, Minecco Aniello returned to Dark-Grotto even more handsome than before, and was received by the King and his daughter with the greatest affection in the world. And, having ordered the two asses to be cast down from a rock, he lived happily with his wife, never more taking the ring from his finger that he might not again commit such a folly, for—

“The cat who has been burnt with fire ever after fears the cold hearthstone.”

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