



The Three Sisters

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

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It is a great truth that from the same wood are formed the statues of idols and the rafters of gallows, kings' thrones and cobblers' stalls; and another strange thing is that from the same rags are made the paper on which the wisdom of sages is recorded, and the crown which is placed on the head of a fool. The same, too, may be said of children: one daughter is good and another bad; one idle, another a good housewife; one fair, another ugly; one spiteful, another kind; one unfortunate, another born to good luck, and who being all of one family ought to be of one nature. But leaving this subject to those who know more about it, I will merely give you an example in the story of the three daughters of the same mother, wherein you will see the difference of manners which brought the wicked daughters into the ditch and the good daughter to the top of the Wheel of Fortune.

There was at one time a woman who had three daughters, two of whom were so unlucky that nothing ever succeeded with them, all their projects went wrong, all their hopes were turned to chaff. But the youngest, who was named Nella, was born to good luck, and I verily believe that at her birth all things conspired to bestow on her the best and choicest gifts in their power. The Sky gave her the perfection of its light; Venus, matchless beauty of form; Love, the first dart of his power; Nature, the flower of manners. She never set about any work that it did not go off to a nicety; she never took anything in hand that it did not succeed to a hair; she never stood up to dance, that she did not sit down with applause. On which account she was envied by her jealous sisters and yet not so much as she was loved and wished well to by all others; as greatly as her sisters desired to put her underground, so much more did other folks carry her on the palms of their hands.

Now there was in that country an enchanted Prince who was so attracted by her beauty that he secretly married her. And in order that they might enjoy one another's company without exciting the suspicion of the mother, who was a wicked woman, the Prince made a crystal passage which led from the royal palace directly into Nella's apartment, although it was eight miles distant. Then he gave her a certain powder saying, "Every time you wish to see me throw a little of this powder into the fire, and instantly I will come through this passage as quick as a bird, running along the crystal road to gaze upon this face of silver."

Having arranged it thus, not a night passed that the Prince did not go in and out, backwards and forwards, along the crystal passage, until at last the sisters, who were spying the actions of Nella, found out the secret and laid a plan to put a stop to the sport. And in order to cut the thread at once, they went and broke the passage here and there; so that, when the unhappy girl threw the powder into the fire, to give the signal to her husband, the Prince, who used always to come running in furious haste, hurt himself in such a manner against the broken crystal that it was truly a pitiable sight to see. And being unable to pass further on he turned back all cut and slashed like a Dutchman's breeches. Then he sent for all the doctors in the town; but as the crystal was enchanted the wounds were mortal, and no human remedy availed. When the King saw this, despairing of his son's condition, he sent out a proclamation that whoever would cure the wounds of the Prince—if a woman she should have him for a husband—if a man he should have half his kingdom.

Now when Nella, who was pining away from the loss of the Prince, heard this she dyed her face, disguised herself, and unknown to her sisters she left home to go to see him before his death. But as by this time the Sun's gilded ball with which he plays in the Fields of Heaven, was running towards the west, night overtook her in a wood close to the house of an ogre, where, in order to get out of the way of danger, she climbed up into a

tree. Meanwhile the ogre and his wife were sitting at table with the windows open in order to enjoy the fresh air while they ate; as soon as they had emptied their cups and put out the lamps they began to chat of one thing and another, so that Nella, who was as near to them as the mouth to the nose, heard every word they spoke.

Among other things the ogress said to her husband, "My pretty Hairy-Hide, tell me what news; what do they say abroad in the world?" And he answered, "Trust me, there is no hand's breadth clean; everything's going topsy-turvy and awry." "But what is it?" replied his wife. "Why I could tell pretty stories of all the confusion that is going on," replied the ogre, "for one hears things that are enough to drive one mad, such as buffoons rewarded with gifts, rogues esteemed, cowards honoured, robbers protected, and honest men little thought of. But, as these things only vex one, I will merely tell you what has befallen the King's son. He had made a crystal path along which he used to go to visit a pretty lass; but by some means or other, I know not how, all the road has been broken; and as he was going along the passage as usual, he has wounded himself in such a manner that before he can stop the leak the whole conduit of his life will run out. The King has indeed issued a proclamation with great promises to whoever cures his son; but it is all labour lost, and the best he can do is quickly to get ready mourning and prepare the funeral."

When Nella heard the cause of the Prince's illness she sobbed and wept bitterly and said to herself, "Who is the wicked soul who has broken the passage and caused so much sorrow?" But as the ogress now went on speaking Nella was as silent as a mouse and listened.

"And is it possible," said the ogress, "that the world is lost to this poor Prince, and that no remedy can be found for his malady?"

"Hark-ye, Granny," replied the ogre, "the doctors are not called upon to find remedies that may pass the bounds of nature. This is not a fever that will yield to medicine and diet, much less are these ordinary wounds which require lint and oil; for the charm that was on the broken glass produces the same effect as onion juice does on the iron heads of arrows, which makes the wound incurable. There is one thing only that could save his life, but don't ask me to tell it to you, for it is a thing of importance."

"Do tell me, dear old Long-tusk," cried the ogress; "tell me, if you would not see me die."

"Well then," said the ogre, "I will tell you provided you promise me not to confide it to any living soul, for it would be the ruin of our house and the destruction of our lives."

“Fear nothing, my dear, sweet little husband,” replied the ogress; “for you shall sooner see pigs with horns, apes with tails, moles with eyes, than a single word shall pass my lips.” And so saying, she put one hand upon the other and swore to it.

“You must know then,” said the ogre, “that there is nothing under the sky nor above the ground that can save the Prince from the snares of death, but our fat. If his wounds are anointed with this his soul will be arrested which is just at the point of leaving the dwelling of his body.”

Nella, who overheard all that passed, gave time to Time to let them finish their chat; and then, getting down from the tree and taking heart, she knocked at the ogre’s door crying, “Ah! my good masters, I pray you for charity, alms, some sign of compassion. Have a little pity on a poor, miserable, wretched creature who is banished by fate far from her own country and deprived of all human aid, who has been overtaken by night in this wood and is dying of cold and hunger.” And crying thus, she went on knocking and knocking at the door.

Upon hearing this deafening noise, the ogress was going to throw her half a loaf and send her away. But the ogre, who was more greedy of flesh than the squirrel is of nuts, the bear of honey, the cat of fish, the sheep of salt, or the ass of bran, said to his wife, “Let the poor creature come in, for if she sleeps in the fields, who knows but she may be eaten up by some wolf.” In short, he talked so much that his wife at length opened the door for Nella; whilst with all his pretended charity he was all the time reckoning on making four mouthfuls of her. But the glutton counts one way and the host another; for the ogre and his wife drank till they were fairly tipsy. When they lay down to sleep Nella took a knife from a cupboard and made a hash of them in a trice. Then she put all the fat into a phial, went straight to the court, where, presenting herself before the King, she offered to cure the Prince. At this the King was overjoyed and led her to the chamber of his son, and no sooner had she anointed him well with the fat than the wound closed in a moment just as if she had thrown water on the fire, and he became sound as a fish.

When the King saw this, he said to his son, “This good woman deserves the reward promised by the proclamation and that you should marry her.” But the Prince replied, “It is hopeless, for I have no store-room full of hearts in my body to share among so many; my heart is already disposed of, and another woman is already the mistress of it.” Nella, hearing this, replied, “You should no longer think of her who has been the cause of all your misfortune.” “My misfortune has been brought on me by her sisters,” replied the Prince, “and they shall repent it.” “Then do you really love her?” said Nella. And the Prince replied, “More than my own life.”

“Embrace me then,” said Nella, “for I am the fire of your heart.” But the Prince seeing the dark hue of her face answered, “I would sooner take you for the coal than the fire, so keep off—don’t blacken me.” Whereupon Nella, perceiving that he did not know her, called for a basin of clean water and washed her face. As soon as the cloud of soot was removed the sun shone forth; and the Prince, recognising her, pressed her to his heart and acknowledged her for his wife. Then he had her sisters thrown into an oven, thus proving the truth of the old saying—

“No evil ever went without punishment.”

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