

The Two Cakes

Stories From The Pentamerone

Italian

Advanced
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I have always heard say, that he who gives pleasure finds it: the bell of Manfredonia says, “Give me, I give thee”: he who does not bait the hook of the affections with courtesy never catches the fish of kindness; and if you wish to hear the proof of this, listen to my story, and then say whether the covetous man does not always lose more than the liberal one.

There were once two sisters, named Luceta and Troccola, who had two daughters, Marziella and Puccia. Marziella was as fair to look upon as she was good at heart; whilst, on the contrary, Puccia by the same rule had a face of ugliness and a heart of pestilence, but the girl resembled her parent, for Troccola was a harpy within and a very scare-crow without.

Now it happened that Luceta had occasion to boil some parsnips, in order to fry them with green sauce; so she said to her daughter, “Marziella, my dear, go to the well and fetch me a pitcher of water.”

“With all my heart, mother,” replied the girl, “but if you love me give me a cake, for I should like to eat it with a draught of the fresh water.”

“By all means,” said the mother; so she took from a basket that hung upon a hook a beautiful cake (for she had baked a batch the day before), and gave it to Marziella, who set the pitcher on a pad upon her head, and went to

the fountain, which like a charlatan upon a marble bench, to the music of the falling water, was selling secrets to drive away thirst. And as she was stooping down to fill her pitcher, up came a hump-backed old woman, and seeing the beautiful cake, which Marziella was just going to bite, she said to her, "My pretty girl, give me a little piece of your cake, and may Heaven send you good fortune!"

Marziella, who was as generous as a queen, replied, "Take it all, my good woman, and I am only sorry that it is not made of sugar and almonds, for I would equally give it you with all my heart."

The old woman, seeing Marziella's kindness, said to her, "Go, and may Heaven reward you for the goodness you have shown me! and I pray all the stars that you may ever be content and happy; that when you breathe roses and jessamines may fall from your mouth; that when you comb your locks pearls and garnets may fall from them, and when you set your foot on the ground lilies and violets may spring up."

Marziella thanked the old woman, and went her way home, where her mother, having cooked a bit of supper, they paid the natural debt to the body, and thus ended the day. And the next morning, when the Sun displayed in the market-place of the celestial fields the merchandise of light which he had brought from the East, as Marziella was combing her hair, she saw a shower of pearls and garnets fall from it into her lap; whereupon calling her mother with great joy, they put them all into a basket, and Luceta went to sell a great part of them to a usurer, who was a friend of hers. Meanwhile Troccola came to see her sister, and finding Marziella in great delight and busied with the pearls, she asked her how, when, and where she had gotten them. But the maiden, who did not understand the ways of the world, and had perhaps never heard the proverb, "Do not all you are able, eat not all you wish, spend not all you have, and tell not all you know," related the whole affair to her aunt, who no longer cared to await her sister's return, for every hour seemed to her a thousand years until she got home again. Then giving a cake to her daughter, she sent her for water to the fountain, where Puccia found the same old woman. And when the old woman asked her for a little piece of cake she answered gruffly, "Have I nothing to do, forsooth, but to give you cake? Do you take me to be so foolish as to give you what belongs to me? Look ye, charity begins at home." And so saying she swallowed the cake in four pieces, making the old woman's mouth water, who when she saw the last morsel disappear and her hopes buried with the cake, exclaimed in a rage, "Begone! and whenever you breathe may you foam at the mouth like a doctor's mule, may toads drop from your lips, and every time you set foot to the ground may there spring up ferns and thistles!"

Puccia took the pitcher of water and returned home, where her mother was all impatience to hear what had befallen her at the fountain. But no sooner did Puccia open her lips, than a shower of toads fell from them, at the sight of which her mother added the fire of rage to the snow of envy, sending forth flame and smoke through nose and mouth.

Now it happened some time afterwards that Ciommo, the brother of Marziella, was at the court of the King of Chiunzo; and the conversation turning on the beauty of various women, he stepped forward, unasked, and said that all the handsome women might hide their heads when his sister made her appearance, who beside the beauty of her form, which made harmony on the song of a noble soul, possessed also a wonderful virtue in her hair, mouth, and feet, which was given to her by a fairy. When the King heard these praises he told Ciommo to bring his sister to the court; adding that, if he found her such as he had represented, he would take her to wife.

Now Ciommo thought this a chance not to be lost; so he forthwith sent a messenger post-haste to his mother, telling her what had happened, and begging her to come instantly with her daughter, in order not to let slip the good luck. But Luceta, who was very unwell, commending the lamb to the wolf, begged her sister to have the kindness to accompany Marziella to the court of Chiunzo for such and such a thing. Whereupon Troccola, who saw that matters were playing into her hand, promised her sister to take Marziella safe and sound to her brother, and then embarked with her niece and Puccia in a boat. But when they were some way out at sea, whilst the sailors were asleep, she threw Marziella into the water; and just as the poor girl was on the point of being drowned there came a most beautiful syren, who took her in her arms and carried her off.

When Troccola arrived at Chiunzo, Ciommo, who had not seen his sister for so long a time, mistook Puccia, and received her as if she were Marziella, and led her instantly to the King. But no sooner did she open her lips than toads dropped on the ground; and when the King looked at her more closely he saw, that as she breathed hard from the fatigue of the journey, she made a lather at her mouth, which looked just like a washtub; then looking down on the ground, he saw a meadow of stinking plants, the sight of which made him quite ill. Upon this he drove Puccia and her mother away, and sent Ciommo in disgrace to keep the geese of the court.

Then Ciommo, in despair and not knowing what had happened to him, drove the geese into the fields, and letting them go their way along the seashore, he used to retire into a little straw shed, where he bewailed his lot

until evening, when it was time to return home. But whilst the geese were running about on the shore, Marziella would come out of the water, and feed them with sweetmeats, and give them rose-water to drink; so that the geese grew as big as sheep, and were so fat that they could not see out of their eyes. And in the evening when they came into a little garden under the King's window, they began to sing—

“Pire, pire pire!

The sun and the moon are bright and clear,

But she who feeds us is still more fair.”

Now the King, hearing this goose-music every evening, ordered Ciommo to be called, and asked him where, and how, and upon what he fed his geese. And Ciommo replied, “I give them nothing to eat but the fresh grass of the field.” But the King, who was not satisfied with this answer, sent a trusty servant after Ciommo to watch and observe where he drove the geese. Then the man followed in his footsteps, and saw him go into the little straw shed, leaving the geese to themselves; and going their way they had no sooner come to the shore than Marziella rose up out of the sea; and I do not believe that even the mother of that blind boy who, as the poet says, “desires no other alms than tears,” ever rose from the waves so fair. When the servant of the King saw this, he ran back to his master, beside himself with amazement, and told him the pretty spectacle he had seen upon the seashore.

The curiosity of the King was increased by what the man told him, and he had a great desire to go himself and see the beautiful sight. So the next morning, when the Cock, the ringleader of the birds, excited them all to arm mankind against the Night, and Ciommo went with the geese to the accustomed spot, the King followed him closely; and when the geese came to the seashore, without Ciommo, who remained as usual in the little shed, the King saw Marziella rise out of the water. And after giving the geese a trayful of sweetmeats to eat and a cupful of rose-water to drink, she seated herself on a rock and began to comb her locks, from which fell handfuls of pearls and garnets; at the same time a cloud of flowers dropped from her mouth, and under her feet was a Syrian carpet of lilies and violets.

When the King saw this sight, he ordered Ciommo to be called, and, pointing to Marziella, asked him whether he knew that beautiful maiden. Then Ciommo, recognising his sister, ran to embrace her, and in the presence of the King heard from her all the treacherous conduct of Troccola, and how the envy of that wicked creature had brought that fair fire of love to dwell in the waters of the sea.

The joy of the King is not to be told at the acquisition of so fair a jewel; and turning to the brother he said that he had good reason to praise Marziella so much, and indeed that he found her three times more beautiful than he had described her; he deemed her, therefore, more than worthy to be his wife if she would be content to receive the sceptre of his kingdom.

“Alas, would to Heaven it could be so!” answered Marziella, “and that I could serve you as the slave of your crown! But see you not this golden chain upon my foot, by which the sorceress holds me prisoner? When I take too much fresh air, and tarry too long on the shore, she draws me into the waves, and thus keeps me held in rich slavery by a golden chain.”

“What way is there,” said the King, “to free you from the claws of this syren?”

“The way,” replied Marziella, “would be to cut this chain with a smooth file, and to loose me from it.”

“Wait till to-morrow morning,” answered the King; “I will then come with all that is needful, and take you home with me, where you shall be the pupil of my eye, the core of my heart, and the life of my soul.” And then exchanging a shake of the hands as the earnest-money of their love, she went back into the water and he into the fire—and into such a fire indeed that he had not an hour’s rest the whole day long. And when the black old hag of the Night came forth to have a country-dance with the Stars, he never closed an eye, but lay ruminating in his memory over the beauties of Marziella, discoursing in thought of the marvels of her hair, the miracles of her mouth, and the wonders of her feet; and applying the gold of her graces to the touchstone of judgment, he found that it was four-and-twenty carats fine. But he upbraided the Night for not leaving off her embroidery of the Stars, and chided the Sun for not arriving with the chariot of light to enrich his house with the treasure he longed for—a mine of gold which produced pearls, a pearl-shell from which sprang flowers.

But whilst he was thus at sea, thinking of her who was all the while in the sea, behold the pioneers of the Sun appeared, who smooth the road along which he has to pass with the army of his rays. Then the King dressed

himself, and went with Ciommo to the seashore, where he found Marziella; and the King with his own hand cut the chain from the foot of the beloved object with the file which they had brought, but all the while he forged a still stronger one for his heart; and setting her on the saddle behind him, she who was already fixed on the saddle of his heart, he set out for the royal palace, where by his command all the handsome ladies of the land were assembled, who received Marziella as their mistress with all due honour. Then the King married her, and there were great festivities; and among all the casks which were burnt for the illuminations, the King ordered that Troccola should be shut up in a tub, and made to suffer for the treachery she had shown to Marziella. Then sending for Luceta, he gave her and Ciommo enough to live upon like princes; whilst Puccia, driven out of the kingdom, wandered about as a beggar; and, as the reward of her not having sown a little bit of cake, she had now to suffer a constant want of bread; for it is the will of Heaven that—

“He who shows no pity finds none.”

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