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The Three Sisters

Giambattista Basile

Once upon a time there was woman who had three daughters, two of whom were so unlucky that nothing ever succeeded with them; all their projects went wrong and all their hopes never happened. But the youngest, who was named Nella, was born to good luck. The Sky gave her the perfection of its light, Venus a matchless beauty of form, Love the first dart of his power, Nature the flower of manners. Everything she did, went well. Everything she made, was perfect. Every time she stood up to dance, she sat down with a huge applause. Her sisters and even her own mother were very jealous of her and wanted to have her killed.

Now, in the same country, there was an enchanted prince, who saw the beautiful Nella and fell in love with her. He did everything he could to make her fall in love with him as well. And she did! They secretly got married. In order to enjoy each another's company without her mother or sisters knowing (because they would surely not approve) the enchanted prince made a crystal passage, which led from the royal palace directly into Nella's room. The prince also gave her a magical powder and said, "Every time you wish to feed me, like a sparrow, with a sight of your charming beauty, throw a little of this powder into the fire, and instantly I will come through the passage as quick as a bird, running along a crystal road to gaze upon your beautiful face."

Every night the prince came through 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 it. They went and broke the passage. The next time Nella threw the powder into the fire, the prince came along the passage as always, but he hurt himself badly on the broken passage and was unable to pass further on. He turned back, all cut and slashed. Then he laid himself in his bed, and sent for all the doctors in the town; but as the crystal was enchanted, the wounds were mortal, and no human remedy would help. When the king saw this, he sent out a proclamation, that whoever would cure the wounds of the prince, would either marry the prince or get half the kingdom.



When Nella heard this, she disguised herself as a beggar, and unknown to her sisters she left home, to go and see him before his death. She left late in the afternoon and soon it would become dark, so she looked for a place to sleep. Nella was in the woods, close to the house of an ogre, to stay safe she climbed up into a tree to sleep. Meanwhile the ogre and his wife were sitting at table, with the windows open, in order to enjoy the fresh air while they ate; and 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 heard every word they spoke.

Among other things, the ogress said to her husband, "My gorgeous, tell me, what is the news? What is going on in the world?" And he answered with a smile, "Everything is going topsy-turvy and awry."—"What has happened?" replied his wife.—"Why, I could tell pretty stories of all the confusion that is going on," said the ogre; "But I will merely tell you what has happened to the king's son. He had made a crystal path, along which he used to go to visit a pretty lady; but the road was broken by her two evil sisters; and as he was going along the passage as usual he has wounded himself in such a manner, that he will die. The king has issued a proclamation, with great promises to whoever cures his son; but it is all labour lost, and the best thing he can do is to get ready to mourn and prepare the funeral."

When Nella heard the cause of the prince's illness, she sobbed and wept bitterly, and said to herself, "Why did my sisters break the passage? Why would they want to take away my happiness?" But the ogress went on speaking, so Nella was as silent as a mouse and listened.

"Is there really no medicine that can help him?" asked the ogress.

"No human medicine will help" replied the ogre, "there is one thing only that could save his life; but don't ask me to tell it you."

"Do tell me!" cried the ogress. "Well then," said the ogre, "I will tell you, but you have to keep it a secret; for if anyone would find out it would be the destruction of our lives." "Fear nothing, my dear sweet little husband," replied the ogress; "I will keep it a secret." 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, he will be cured."

Nella, who overheard everything, let them finish their chat; and then got down from the tree, and taking heart, she knocked at the ogre's door, crying, "Ah! 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, she went on knocking and knocking at the door.

Upon hearing the girl cry, the ogress was going to throw her half a loaf and send her away; but the ogre, who was more greedy of human 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 she may be eaten up by some wolf."

The ogress opened the door for Nella, with the ogre planning to eat her. But the ogre and ogress had drank quite a bit during their dinner and they quickly fell asleep. Nella took a knife from a cupboard and ended them both; then she put all the fat into a pail, and went straight to the king. Where presenting herself before the king she offered to cure the prince. At this the king was overjoyed, and led her to the room of his son. As soon as she anointed him well with the fat, the wound closed and he was his old self again.

When the king saw this, he said to his son, "This good woman deserves the reward promised by the proclamation. You will marry her." But the prince replied, "I will not. I am hopelessly in love already." Nella, hearing this, replied, "You will no longer love that girl when you hear who made you so sick. It was her sisters!"—"I know that my misfortune has been brought on me by her sisters," answered 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 didn't recognize Nella, because she was still disguised as a beggar. Nella called for a basin of clean water and washed her face; and as soon as the dirt was removed, the sun shone and the prince recognized her! They

embraced and officially got married. Then he had her sisters thrown into an oven.

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