NOODLEHEADS, TALL TALES, AND HUMOROUS TALES

Bastianelo and the Three Fools

Italy

Being able to laugh at one’s forebodings helps one cope with life (Wolfenstein, 1978; Ziv, 1988). The bride in this story and her counterparts in the English “Three Sillies” as well as the German “Clever Elsie” (AT 1450) demonstrate the paralyzing effect of an imagination run wild.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.

From: Italian Popular Tales by T. F. Crane. Houghton Mifflin, 1885; “Bastianelo” (Venice) p. 279-282 and “The Peasant of Larcâra” (Sicily) p. 282 were combined and adapted by J. V. Lechner.

Once upon a time a young man had his eye on the gardener’s daughter, and having obtained his parents’ consent, he went courting. He asked her parents for her hand in marriage and they too agreed. They invited the young man for dinner, and when they ran out of wine, the girl said, in order to show what a good housekeeper she is, that she would fetch more from the cellar. But as she opened the barrel’s tap to fill her bottles, she began to think: “Suppose we had a son, and I should name him Bastianelo, and suppose he fell down the cistern, oh how I should weep! Oh how I should weep!” At that, she began to weep. She wept and she wept, unmindful of the wine which began to flow all over the cellar floor.

Since the girl had been gone from the table for a long time, her mother said: “I will go down to the cellar to see what is keeping our daughter.” So she went down to the cellar, and when she saw her daughter weeping and the wine flowing out over the floor, she asked “What is the matter with you that weep so bitterly?” The daughter told her “Ah! my mother, I was thinking that if I had a son, and I should name him Bastianelo, and suppose he fell down the cistern, oh how I should weep. Oh, how I should weep.” Upon hearing this the girl’s mother began to weep too, while the wine continued to flow all over the floor until it covered the first step. Meanwhile, the young man and the father were waiting and waiting upstairs. Finally the father said, “I will go and see what is keeping my wife and daughter,” and he too went down to the cellar. When he saw his wife and daughter weeping, and the cellar filling up with wine, he asked “What terrible thing has happened that you two are weeping so?” “Nothing,” said the girl, “but I was thinking that if I had a son and I named him Bastianelo, and he should one day fall down the cistern, oh how I would weep. Oh, how I would weep.” At this the father too began to cry.

Finally the young man himself came down to the cellar, and when he learned why the girl he had chosen for his bride and her parents were weeping while the cellar was filling up with wine, he exclaimed in disgust: “I have never seen such fools in all my life, nor will I marry you unless I can find three people in the world who are greater fools than the three of you.” And so he left.

He had a bread-cake made, took a bottle of wine, a sausage, and some linen, and made a bundle, which he put on a stick and carried over his shoulder. He journeyed and journeyed but
found no fools. At last, worn out and discouraged he was ready to return home when he saw a man wet and sweaty laboring at a well. The young man said, “What are you doing, sir that you are so covered with water and sweat?” The man said “Oh, leave me alone for I have been working well-over an hour trying to fill up my pail.” “What are you using to draw the water?” asked the young man. “Why this sieve,” said the man. Then the young man, after obtaining a bucket from a nearby house, quickly filled the pail. “Thank you good sir, God knows how long I should have had to remain here!” said the man. “Here is one who is a greater fool than my bride”, said the young man to himself.

As the young man continued on his way he saw a wedding procession which had stopped because the groom and the other members of the wedding were engaged in a great debate. “What is all this discussion?” asked the young man. The groom replied, “It is the custom in our city for the bride to pass through the city gate riding horseback. But my bride is too tall and the horse is too high. What are we to do, I do not wish to have her head cut off, and the horse’s owner won’t hear of having the horse’s feet chopped off?” Without reply, the young man slapped the girl on the back of her head, which made her duck, and at the same time he slapped the horse’s rump. The horse broke into a trot and the bride was through the gate. The grateful groom said, “Bless you, for without your help we would be here for a very long time trying to solve this problem.” The young man thought, “Well, that is two, I may find one more fool greater than my bride after all!”

As the young man continued on his way, he saw a woman who was spinning and had dropped her spindle. She called to her pig, whose name was Tony, to pick it up but he did nothing except grunt. The woman, exasperated with her pig, cried out in anger, “You won’t pick it up? May your mother die! The young man, who had overheard all this, took a piece of paper and folded it like a letter, then knocked on the door. “Who is it,” asked the woman. “It is a message from Tony’s mother,” said the young man. “She is ill and wishes to see her son one more time.” The woman, surprised at how quickly her words had taken effect, and feeling regretful, readily agreed to let the messenger take the pig to its mother. Not only this, but she loaded a mule with food for three days and everything necessary for the comfort of the dying pig. The young man happily led the pig away, and realized that he had now met three fools greater than his bride and her family. He returned home and married the young girl.