TRICKSTER TALES

The Clever Peasant Girl

Italy

Cultures from India to Italy tell stories about intelligent and witty women who are able to assert themselves and prove that their judgment is superior to their husband’s or even the king’s.

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.


Once upon a time there was a huntsman who had a wife and two children—a son and a daughter; and all lived together in a wood where no one ever came, and so they knew nothing about the world. The father alone sometimes went to the city and brought back the news. The king’s son once went hunting and lost himself in that wood, and while he was seeking his way it became night. He was weary and hungry. Imagine how he felt! But all at once he saw a light shining at a distance. He followed it and reached the huntsman’s house and asked for lodging and something to eat. The huntsman recognized him at once and said: “Highness, we have already supped on our best. But if we can find anything for you, you must be satisfied with it. What can we do? We are so far from the towns, that we cannot procure what we need every day.” Meanwhile, he had a capon cooked for him. The prince did not wish to eat it alone, but called all of the huntsman’s family, and gave the head of the capon to the father, the back to the mother, the legs to the son, and wings to the daughter, and ate the rest himself.

In the house there were only two beds, in the same room. In one the husband and wife slept, in the other the brother and sister. The old people went and slept in the stable, giving up their bed to the prince. When the girl saw that the prince was asleep, she said to her brother: “I will wager that you do not know why the prince divided the capon among us in the manner he did.” “Do you know? Tell me why.” “He gave the head to papa because he is the head of the family, the back to mamma because she has on her shoulders all the affairs of the house, the legs to you because you must be quick in performing the errands which are given you, and the wings to me to fly away and catch a husband.” The prince pretended to be asleep but he was awake and heard these words, and perceived that the girl had much judgment; and as she was also pretty, he fell in love with her.

The next morning he left the huntsman’s; and as soon as he reached the court, he sent him, by a servant, a purse of money. To the young girl he sent a cake in the form of a full moon, thirty patties, and a cooked capon, with three questions: “Whether it was the thirtieth of the month in the wood, whether the moon was full, and whether the capon crowed in the night.” The servant, although a trusty one, was overcome by his gluttony and ate fifteen of the patties, and a good slice of the cake, and the capon. The young girl, who had understood it all, sent back word to the prince the moon was not full but on the wane; that it was only the fifteenth of the month and that the capon had gone to the mill; and that she asked him to spare the pheasant for the sake of the partridge. The prince, too, understood the metaphor, and having summoned the servant, he cried: “Rogue! you have eaten the capon, fifteen patties, and a good slice of the cake. Thank
that girl who has interceded for you; if she had not, I would have hanged you.”

A few months after this, the huntsman found a gold mortar, and wished to present it to the prince. But his daughter said: “You will be laughed at for this present. You will see that the prince will say to you: ‘The mortar is fine and good, but, peasant, where is the pestle?’” The father did not listen to his daughter; but when he carried the mortar to the prince, he was greeted as his daughter had foretold. “My daughter told me so,” said the huntsman. “Ah! if I had only listened to her!” The prince heard these words and said to him: “Your daughter, who pretends to be so wise, must make me a hundred ells of cloth out of four ounces of flax; if she does not I will hang you and her.”

The poor father returned home weeping, and sure that he and his daughter must die, for who could make a hundred ells of cloth with four ounces of flax? His daughter came out to meet him, and when she learned why he was weeping, said: “Is that all you are weeping for? Quick, get me the flax and I will manage it.” She made four small cords of the flax and said to her father: “Take these cords and tell him that when he makes me a loom out of these cords I will weave the hundred ells of cloth.” When the prince heard this answer he did not know what to say, and thought no more about condemning the father or the daughter.

The next day he went to the wood to visit the girl. Her mother was dead, and her father was out in the fields digging. The prince knocked, but no one opened. He knocked louder, but the same thing. The young girl was deaf to him. Finally, tired of waiting, he broke open the door and entered: “Rude girl! who taught you not to open to one of my rank? Where are your father and mother?” “Who knew it was you? My father is where he should be and my mother is weeping for her sins. You must leave, for I have something else to do than listen to you.” The prince went away in anger and complained to the father of his daughter’s rude manners, but the father excused her. The prince, at last seeing how wise and cunning she was, married her.

The wedding was celebrated with great splendor, but an event happened which came near plunging the princess into misfortune. One Sunday two peasants were passing a church; one of them had a hand-cart and the other was leading a she-ass ready to foal. The bell rang for mass and they both entered the church, one leaving his cart outside, and the other tying the ass to the cart. While they were in the church the ass foaled, and the owner of the ass and the owner of the cart both claimed the colt. They appealed to the prince, and he decided that the colt belonged to the owner of the cart, because, he said, it was more likely that the owner of the ass would tie her to the cart in order to lay a false claim to the colt than the owner of the cart would tie it to the ass. The owner of the ass had right on his side, and all the people were in his favor, but the prince had pronounced sentence and there was nothing to say. The poor man then appealed to the princess, who advised him to cast a net in the square when the prince passed. When the prince saw the net, he said: “What are you doing, you fool? Do you expect to find fish in the square?” The peasant, who had been advised by the princess, answered: “It is easier for me to find fish in the square than for a cart to have foals.”

The prince revoked the sentence, but when he returned to the palace, knowing that the princess had suggested the answer to the peasant, he said to her: “Prepare to return to your own home within an hour. Take with you what you like best and depart.” She was not at all saddened by the prospect, but ate a better dinner than usual, and made the prince drink a bottle of wine in which she had put a sleeping potion and when he was sound asleep as a log, she had him put in a carriage and took him with her to her house in the wood. It was in January, and she had the roof of the house uncovered and it snowed on the prince, who awoke and called his servants. “What do you wish?” said the princess. “I command here. Did you not tell me to take from your
house the thing I liked best? I have taken you, and now you are mine.” The prince laughed and they made peace.