

Giambattista Basile  
from *Il Pentamerone*

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Fifth Diversion of the Fifth Day: Sun, Moon, and Talia

*Talia meets her death through a splinter in some flax and is left in a palace where she is found by a King. Two sons are born to her, and they all three fall into the hands of the jealous Queen, who orders the children to be cooked and given to their father to eat, and Talia to be burnt. But the cook saves the children, and Talia is freed by the King, who has his wife thrown into the fire prepared for Talia.*

IT is well known that as a rule the cruel man is his own executioner, and he who spits in the face of Heaven gets it back in his own face. On the reverse of this medal one sees that innocence is a shield of fig-tree wood on which every malicious sword is blunted or broken, so that when a poor man thinks he is dead and buried, he finds himself returning to flesh and blood again: as you shall hear in the story which I shall draw from the cask of my memory with the gimlet of my tongue.<sup>[1]</sup>

THERE was once a great lord who, on the birth of his daughter -- to whom he gave the name of Talia -- commanded all the wise men and seers in the kingdom to come and tell him what her future would be. These wise men, after many consultations, came to the conclusion that she would be exposed to great danger from a small splinter in some flax. Thereupon the King, to prevent any unfortunate accident, commanded that no flax or hemp or any other similar material should ever come into his house.

One day when Talia was grown up she was standing by the window, and saw an old woman pass who was spinning. Talia had never seen a distaff and spindle, and was therefore delighted with the dancing of the spindle. Prompted by curiosity, she had the old woman brought up to her, and taking the distaff in her hand, began to draw out the thread; but unfortunately a splinter in the hemp got under her finger-nail, and she immediately fell dead upon the ground. At this terrible catastrophe the old woman fled from the room, rushing precipitously down the stairs. The stricken father, after having paid for this bucketful of sour wine with a barrelful of tears, left the dead Talia seated on a velvet chair under an embroidered canopy in the palace, which was in the middle of a wood. Then he locked the door and left forever the house which had brought him such evil fortune, so that he might entirely obliterate the memory of his sorrow and suffering.

It happened some time after that a falcon of a King who was out hunting in these parts flew in at the window of this house. As the bird did not return when called back, the King sent someone to knock at the door, thinking the house was inhabited. When they had knocked a long time in vain, the King sent for a vine-dresser's ladder, so that he might climb up himself and see what was inside. He climbed up and went in, and was astonished at not finding a living being anywhere. Finally he came to the room in which sat Talia as if under a spell.

The King called to her, thinking she was asleep; but since nothing he did or said brought her back to her senses, and being on fire with love, he carried her to a couch and, having gathered the fruits of love, left her lying there. Then he returned to his own kingdom and for a long time entirely forgot the affair.

Nine months later, Talia gave birth to two children, a boy and a girl, two splendid pearls. They were looked after by two fairies, who had appeared in the palace, and who put the babies to their mother's breast. Once when one of the babies wanted to suck it could not find the breast, but got into its mouth instead the finger that had been pricked. This the baby sucked so hard that it drew out the splinter, and Talia was roused as if from a deep sleep. When she saw the two jewels at her side, she clasped them

to her breast and held them as dear as life; but she could not understand what had happened, and how she came to be alone in the palace with two sons, having everything she required to eat brought to her without her seeing anyone.

One day the King bethought himself of the adventure of the fair sleeper, and took the opportunity of another hunting expedition to go and see her. Finding her awake and with two prodigies of beauty, he was overpowered with joy. He told Talia what had happened, and they made a great compact of friendship, and he remained several days in her company. Then he left her, promising to come again and take her back with him to his kingdom. When he reached his home he was forever talking of Talia and her sons. At meals the names of Talia, Sun and Moon (these were the children's names) were always on his lips; when he went to bed he was always calling one or the other.

The Queen had already had some glimmering of suspicion on account of her husband's long absence when hunting; and hearing his continued callings on Talia, Sun and Moon, burned with a heat very different from the sun's heat, and calling the King's secretary, said to him: "Listen, my son, you are between Scylla and Charybdis,<sup>[2]</sup> between the doorpost and the door, between the poker and the grate. If you tell me with whom it is that my husband is in love, I will make you rich; if you hide the truth from me, you shall never be found again, dead or alive." The man, on the one hand moved by fear and on the other egged on by interest, which is a bandage over the eyes of honour, a blinding of justice, and a cast horse-shoe to faith, told the Queen all, calling bread bread and wine wine.

Then she sent the same secretary in the King's name to tell Talia that he wished to see his children. Talia was delighted, and sent the children. But the Queen, as soon as she had possession of them, with the heart of a Medea, ordered the cook to cut their throats and to make them into hashes and sauces and give them to their unfortunate father to eat.

The cook, who was tenderhearted, was filled with pity on seeing these two golden apples of beauty, and gave them to his wife to hide, and prepared two kids, making a hundred different dishes of them. When the hour for dinner arrived, the Queen had the dishes brought in, and whilst the King was eating and enjoying them, exclaiming: "How good this is, by the life of Lanfusa! How tasty this is, by the soul of my grandmother!" she kept encouraging him, saying: "Eat away, you are eating what is your own." The first two or three times the King paid no attention to these words, but as she kept up the same strain of music, he answered: "I know very well I am eating what is my own; you never brought anything into the house." And getting up in a rage, he went off to a villa not far away to cool his anger down.

The Queen, not satisfied with what she thought she had already done, called the secretary again, and sent him to fetch Talia herself, pretending that the King was expecting her. Talia came at once, longing to see the light of her eyes, and little guessing that it was fire that awaited her. She was brought before the Queen, who, with the face of a Nero all inflamed with rage, said to her: "Welcome, Madame Troccola!<sup>[3]</sup> So you are the fine piece of goods, the fine flower my husband is enjoying! You are the cursed bitch that makes my head go round! Now you have got into purgatory, and I will make you pay for all the harm you have done me!"

Talia began to excuse herself, saying that it was not her fault and that the King had taken possession of her territory whilst she was sleeping. But the Queen would not listen to her, and commanded that a great fire should be lit in the courtyard of the palace and that Talia should be thrown into it.

The unfortunate Talia, seeing herself lost, threw herself on her knees before the Queen, and begged that at least she should be given time to take off the clothes she was wearing. The Queen, not out of pity for her, but because she wanted to save the clothes, which were embroidered with gold and pearls, said: "Undress, that I agree to." Talia began to undress, and for each garment that she took off she

uttered a shriek. She had taken off her dress, her skirt and bodice, and was about to take off her petticoat, and to utter her last cry, and they were just going to drag her away to reduce her to lye ashes, which they would throw into boiling water to wash Charon's breeches with, when the King saw the spectacle and rushed up to learn what was happening. He asked for his sons, and heard from his wife, who reproached him for his betrayal of her, how she had made him eat them himself.

The King abandoned himself to despair. ♦What!♦ he cried, ♦am I the wolf to my own sheep? Alas! why did my veins not recognise the fountain of their own blood? You renegade Turk, this barbarous deed is the work of your hands? Go, you shall get what you deserve; there will be no need to send such a tyrant-faced one to the Colosseum to do penance!♦

So saying, he ordered that the Queen should be thrown in the fire lighted for Talia, and that the secretary should be thrown in too, for he had been her handle in this cruel game and the weaver of this wicked web. He would have had the same done to the cook who, as he thought, had cut up his children; but the cook threw himself at the King's feet, saying: ♦Indeed, my lord, for such a service there should be no other reward than a burning furnace; no pension but a spike-thrust from behind;<sup>[4]</sup> no entertainment but that of being twisted and shrivelled in the fire; neither could there be any greater honour than for me, a cook, to have my ashes mingle with those of a Queen. But this is not the thanks I expect for having saved your children from that spiteful dog who wished to kill them and return to your body what came from it.♦

The King was beside himself when he heard these words; it seemed to him as if he must be dreaming, and he could not believe his ears. Turning to the cook, he said: ♦If it is true that you have saved my children, you may be sure I will not leave you turning spits in the kitchen; you shall be in the kitchen of my heart, turning my will just as you please, and you shall have such rewards that you will account yourself the luckiest man in the world.♦

Whilst the King was speaking, the cook's wife, seeing her husband's difficulties, brought Sun and Moon up to their father, who, playing at the game of three with his wife and children, made a ring of kisses, kissing first one and then the other. He gave a handsome reward to the cook and made him Gentleman of the Bedchamber. Talia became his wife, and enjoyed a long life with her husband and children, finding it to be true that:

*Lucky people, so 'tis said,  
Are blessed by Fortune whilst in bed.*

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## NOTES

*Day V. Tale 5.* ♦ This tale will at once remind readers of Perrault's "La belle au bois dormant" (for which see Saintyves, *Les Contes de Perrault*, pp. 61-101, especially p. 77) and Grimm No. 50, "Dornroschen" (Bolte and Polfvka, Vol. I. pp. 434-42).

The ♦fate♦ *motif* has already occurred in *Pent.* III. 3 and IV. 6.

p. 130. *but got into its mouth instead the finger that had been pricked.*

The sucking of a finger to obtain milk is found in many early Sanskrit works. A well-known example occurs in the *Mahabharata* (III. 126), where Mandhatr, who was born from his father's left side, was given Indra's finger to suck ♦ with most surprising results, as far as his stature and strength were

concerned. See, further, A. Wesselski, *Erleneses*, Prag. 1928, ◆Der saugende Finger,◆ pp. 144-50.

p. 131. *Eat away, you are eating what is your own.*

Here the Queen only imagined that her husband was eating his children's flesh, but there are numerous folk-tales in which the heart or other parts of the body of a relation or loved one are eaten by mistake, usually through revenge.

See, e.g., the *Decamerone*, IV. 9 and el. the analogues in A. C. Lee, *The Decamerone, its Sources and Analogues*, Ldn., x1909, pp. 143-52 (wrongly quoted by me in *Ocean of Story*, Vol. II. p. 114, where I put ◆Day IV. Nov. 10◆ and ◆Lee pp. 152-6◆ in error. The tale of Somadeva is interesting, as it unites the *motif* under consideration here, and that of the ◆letter of death.◆ See pp. 112-5 of *Ocean, cir. sup.*). Cf. also *Gento Novelle Antiche* (Gualteruzzi's edition); and Grimm, ◆Die bose Schwiegermutter◆ (No. 84 in the 1st edit., 1812, but afterwards relegated to Bruchsticke 5 ◆ Hunt's translation, Vol. II. p. 468), and see Bolte and Polfvka, Vol. III. p. 488, where the tale appears as No. 215.

There is a curious tale in Somadeva (*Ocean of Story*, Vol. VIII. pp. 58 *et seqq.*), in which an ascetic lives with a nymph, who subsequently becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child. The nymph is now forced to depart, but informs the ascetic that they can be united by his cooking and eating the baby. This he does, with the desired result. Furthermore, Marubhuti, the hero of the tale, eats two grains of rice from the dish, and immediately acquires the power of spitting gold (cf. *Pent.* IV. 7). Thus we see that the eating of human flesh is capable of producing supernatural powers ◆ a theory far from being confined to folk-tales (see, e.g., Crooke in ◆Aghori,◆ Hastings' *Ency. Rel. Eth.*, Vol. I. p. 212 and MacCulloch, ◆Cannibalism,◆ *ibid.*, Vol. III. pp. 197-200).

There is a story in Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Vol. I. pp. 168, 169) which resembles the present one as far as the connection between the hero and the sleeping girl is concerned, although all details are left to the reader's imagination. It is entitled ◆The Brown Bear of the Green Glen,◆ and relates how John, the youngest son of a King in Erin, meets a woman [apparently asleep] in a little house. He kisses [?] her and departs, and subsequently the girl gives birth to a child, to her great surprise. She is anxious to find out the identity of the father, which she does by the help of a bird which settles on John's head.

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[1] This beginning is missing in Beltrano's original version of 1636 and also in Cavallo's reprint of 1644; but since it is found in the later editions, it must either come from some intermediate reprint, from a new reading of the author's manuscript, or (what is more probable) must have been added by later editors to fill the obvious gap in the argument of the introductory moral. [It is also missing from the 1645 edition. This is only to be expected, as the so-called "1644" was actually published in 1654, and so post-dates that of 1645.]

[2] Neap. text: *fra Sciglia e Scariglia*.

[3] [Apparently the same as the Neapolitan *trocula*, i.e. *tabella*, a clapper, and so a chatterer, busy-body, etc.]

[4] *Piazza morta*, *aiuto di costa*, *trattenimento*, are all expressions of Spanish origin, previously explained, and refer to army pensions, allowances, etc.

