

The Three Feathers

Flora Annie Steel

Once upon a time there lived a girl who was wooed and married by a man she never saw; for he came a-courting her after nightfall, and when they were married he never came home till it was dark, and always left before dawn.

Still he was good and kind to her, giving her everything her heart could desire, so she was well content for a while. But, after a bit, some of her friends, doubtless full of envy for her good luck, began to whisper that the unseen husband must have something dreadful the matter with him which made him averse to being seen.

Now from the very beginning the girl had wondered why her lover did not come a-courting her as other girls' lovers came, openly and by day, and though, at first, she paid no heed to her neighbours' nods and winks, she began at last to think there might be something in what they said. So she determined to see for herself, and one night when she heard her husband come into her room, she lit her candle suddenly and saw him.

And, lo and behold! he was handsome as handsome; beautiful enough to make every woman in the world fall in love with him on the spot. But even as she got her glimpse of him, he changed into a big brown bird which looked at her with eyes full of anger and blame.

"Because you have done this faithless thing," it said, "you will see me no more, unless for seven long years and a day you serve for me faithfully."

And she cried with tears and sobs, "I will serve seven times seven years and a day if you will only come back. Tell me what I am to do."

Then the bird-husband said, "I will place you in service, and there you must remain and do good work for seven years and a day, and you must listen to no man who may seek to beguile you to leave that service. If you do I will never return."

To this the girl agreed, and the bird, spreading its broad brown wings, carried her to a big mansion.

"Here they need a laundry-maid," said the bird-husband. "Go in, ask to see the mistress, and say you will do the work; but remember you must do it for seven years and a day."

"But I cannot do it for seven days," answered the girl. "I cannot wash or iron."

“That matters nothing,” replied the bird. “All you have to do is to pluck three feathers from under my wing close to my heart, and these feathers will do your bidding whatever it may be. You will only have to put them on your hand, and say, ‘By virtue of these three feathers from over my true love’s heart may this be done,’ and it will be done.”

So the girl plucked three feathers from under the bird’s wing, and after that the bird flew away.

Then the girl did as she was bidden, and the lady of the house engaged her for the place. And never was such a quick laundress; for, see you, she had only to go into the wash-house, bolt the door and close the shutters, so that no one should see what she was at; then she would out with the three feathers and say, “By virtue of these three feathers from over my true love’s heart may the copper be lit, the clothes sorted, washed, boiled, dried, folded, mangled, ironed,” and lo! there they came tumbling on to the table, clean and white, quite ready to be put away. So her mistress set great store by her and said there never was such a good laundry-maid. Thus four years passed and there was no talk of her leaving. But the other servants grew jealous of her, all the more so, because, being a very pretty girl, all the men-servants fell in love with her and wanted to marry her.

But she would have none of them, because she was always waiting and longing for the day when her bird-husband would come back to her in man’s form.

Now one of the men who wanted her was the stout butler, and one day as he was coming back from the cider-house he chanced to stop by the laundry, and he heard a voice say, “By virtue of these three feathers from over my true love’s heart may the copper be lit, the clothes sorted, boiled, dried, folded, mangled, and ironed.”

He thought this very queer, so he peeped through the keyhole. And there was the girl sitting at her ease in a chair, while all the clothes came flying to the table ready and fit to put away.

Well, that night he went to the girl and said that if she turned up her nose at him and his proposal any longer, he would up and tell the mistress that her fine laundress was nothing but a witch; and then, even if she were not burnt alive, she would lose her place.

Now the girl was in great distress what to do, since if she were not faithful to her bird-husband, or if she failed to serve her seven years and a day in one service, he would alike fail to return; so she made an excuse by saying she could think of no one who did not give her enough money to satisfy her.

At this the stout butler laughed. “Money?” said he. “I have seventy pounds laid by with master. Won’t that satisfy thee?”

“Happen it would,” she replied.

So the very next night the butler came to her with the seventy pounds in golden sovereigns, and she held out her apron and took them, saying she was content; for she had thought of a plan. Now as they were going upstairs together she stopped and said:

“Mr. Butler, excuse me for a minute. I have left the shutters of the wash-house open, and I must shut them, or they will be banging all night and disturb master and missus!”

Now though the butler was stout and beginning to grow old, he was anxious to seem young and gallant; so he said at once:

“Excuse me, my beauty, you shall not go. I will go and shut them. I shan’t be a moment!”

So off he set, and no sooner had he gone than she out with her three feathers, and putting them on her hand, said in a hurry:

“By virtue of the three feathers from over my true love’s heart may the shutters never cease banging till morning, and may Mr. Butler’s hands be busy trying to shut them.”

And so it happened.

Mr. Butler shut the shutters, but—bru-u-u! there they were hanging open again. Then he shut them once more, and this time they hit him on the face as they flew open. Yet he couldn’t stop; he had to go on. So there he was the whole livelong night. Such a cursing, and banging, and swearing, and shutting, never was, until dawn came, and, too tired to be really angry, he crept back to his bed, resolving that come what might he would not tell what had happened to him and thus get the laugh on him. So he kept his own counsel, and the girl kept the seventy pounds, and laughed in her sleeve at her would-be lover.

Now after a time the coachman, a spruce middle-aged man, who had long wanted to marry the clever, pretty laundry-maid, going to the pump to get water for his horses overheard her giving orders to the three feathers, and peeping through the keyhole as the butler had done, saw her sitting at her ease in a chair while the clothes, all washed and ironed and mangled, came flying to the table.

So, just as the butler had done, he went to the girl and said, “I have you now, my pretty. Don’t dare to turn up your nose at me, for if you do I’ll tell mistress you are a witch.”

Then the girl said quite calmly, “I look on none who has no money.”

“If that is all,” replied the coachman, “I have forty pounds laid by with master. That I’ll bring and ask for payment to-morrow night.”

So when the night came the girl held out her apron for the money, and as she was going up the stairs she stopped suddenly and said, “Goody me! I’ve left my clothes on the line. Stop a bit till I fetch them in.”

Now the coachman was really a very polite fellow, so he said at once:

“Let me go. It is a cold, windy night and you’ll be catching your death.”

So off he went, and the girl out with her feathers and said:

“By virtue of the three feathers from over my true love’s heart may the clothes slash and blow about till dawn, and may Mr. Coachman not be able to gather them up or take his hand from the job.”

And when she had said this she went quietly to bed, for she knew what would happen. And sure enough it did. Never was such a night as Mr. Coachman spent with the wet clothes flittering and fluttering about his ears, and the sheets wrapping him into a bundle, and tripping him up, while the towels slashed at his legs. But though he smarted all over he had to go on till dawn came, and then a very weary, woebegone coachman couldn’t even creep away to his bed, for he had to feed and water his horses! And he, also, kept his own counsel for fear of the laugh going against him; so the clever laundry-maid put the forty pounds with the seventy in her box, and went on with her work gaily. But after a time the footman, who was quite an honest lad and truly in love, going by the laundry peeped through the keyhole to get a glimpse of his dearest dear, and what should he see but her sitting at her ease in a chair, and the clothes coming all ready folded and ironed on to the table.

Now when he saw this he was greatly troubled. So he went to his master and drew out all his savings; and then he went to the girl and told her that he would have to tell the mistress what he had seen, unless she consented to marry him.

“You see,” he said, “I have been with master this while back, and have saved up this bit, and you have been here this long while back and must have saved as well. So let us put the two together and make a home, or else stay on at service as pleases you.”

Well, she tried to put him off; but he insisted so much that at last she said:

“James! there’s a dear, run down to the cellar and fetch me a drop of brandy. You’ve made me feel so queer!” And when he had gone she out with her three feathers, and said, “By virtue of the three feathers from over my true love’s heart may James not be able to pour the

brandy straight, except down his throat.”

Well! so it happened. Try as he would, James could not get the brandy into the glass. It splashed a few drops into it, then it trickled over his hand, and fell on the floor. And so it went on and on till he grew so tired that he thought he needed a dram himself. So he tossed off the few drops and began again; but he fared no better. So he took another little drain, and went on, and on, and on, till he got quite fuddled. And who should come down into the cellar but his master to know what the smell of brandy meant!

Now James the footman was truthful as well as honest, so he told the master how he had come down to get the sick laundry-maid a drop of brandy, but that his hand had shaken so that he could not pour it out, and it had fallen on the ground, and that the smell of it had got to his head.

“A likely tale,” said the master, and beat James soundly.

Then the master went to the mistress, his wife, and said: “Send away that laundry-maid of yours. Something has come over my men. They have all drawn out their savings as if they were going to be married, yet they don’t leave, and I believe that girl is at the bottom of it.”

But his wife would not hear of the laundry-maid being blamed; she was the best servant in the house, and worth all the rest of them put together; it was his men who were at fault. So they quarrelled over it; but in the end the master gave in, and after this there was peace, since the mistress bade the girl keep herself to herself, and none of the men would say ought of what had happened for fear of the laughter of the other servants.

So it went on until one day when the master was going a-driving, the coach was at the door, and the footman was standing to hold the coach open, and the butler on the steps all ready, when who should pass through the yard, so saucy and bright with a great basket of clean clothes, but the laundry-maid. And the sight of her was too much for James, the footman, who began to blub.

“She is a wicked girl,” he said. “She got all my savings, and got me a good thrashing besides.”

Then the coachman grew bold. “Did she?” he said. “That was nothing to what she served me.” So he up and told all about the wet clothes and the awful job he had had the livelong night. Now the butler on the steps swelled with rage until he nearly burst, and at last he out with his night of banging shutters.

“And one,” he said, “hit me on the nose.”

This settled the three men, and they agreed to tell their master the moment he came out, and get the girl sent about her business. Now the laundry-maid had sharp ears and had paused behind a door to listen; so when she heard this she knew she must do something to stop it. So she out with her three feathers and said, "By virtue of the three feathers from over my true love's heart may there be striving as to who suffered most between the men so that they get into the pond for a ducking."

Well! no sooner had she said the words than the three men began disputing as to which of them had been served the worst; then James up and hit the stout butler, giving him a black eye, and the fat butler fell upon James and pommelled him hard, while the coachman scrambled from his box and belaboured them both, and the laundry-maid stood by laughing.

So out comes the master, but none of them would listen, and each wanted to be heard, and fought, and shoved, and pommelled away until they shoved each other into the pond, and all got a fine ducking.

Then the master asked the girl what it was all about, and she said:

"They all wanted to tell a story against me because I won't marry them, and one said his was the best, and the next said his was the best, so they fell a-quarrelling as to which was the likeliest story to get me into trouble. But they are well punished, so there is no need to do more."

Then the master went to his wife and said, "You are right. That laundry-maid of yours is a very wise girl."

So the butler and the coachman and James had nothing to do but look sheepish and hold their tongues, and the laundry-maid went on with her duties without further trouble.

Then when the seven years and a day were over, who should drive up to the door in a fine gilded coach but the bird-husband restored to his shape as a handsome young man. And he carried the laundry-maid off to be his wife again, and her master and mistress were so pleased at her good fortune that they ordered all the other servants to stand on the steps and give her good luck. So as she passed the butler she put a bag with seventy pounds in it into his hand and said sweetly, "That is to recompense you for shutting the shutters."

And when she passed the coachman she put a bag with forty pounds into his hand and said, "That is your reward for bringing in the clothes." But when she passed the footman she gave him a bag with a hundred pounds in it, and laughed, saying, "That is for the drop of brandy you never brought me!"

So she drove off with her handsome husband, and lived happy ever after.

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.