

Three Feathers

An English Tale

Once upon a time there was a girl who was married to a husband that she never saw. And the way this was, was that he was only at home at night, and would never have any light in the house. The girl thought that was funny, and all her friends told her there must be something wrong with her husband, some great deformity that made him want not to be seen.

Well, one night when he came home she suddenly lit a candle and saw him. He was handsome enough to make all the women of the world fall in love with him. But scarcely had she seen him when he began to change into a bird, and then he said: "Now you have seen me, you shall see me no more, unless you are willing to serve seven years and a day for me, so that I may become a man once more." Then he told her to take three feathers from under his side, and whatever she wished through them would come to pass. Then he left her at a great house to be laundry-maid for seven years and a day.

And the girl used to take the feathers and say:

"By virtue of my three feathers may the copper be lit, and the clothes washed, and mangled, and folded, and put away to the missus's satisfaction."

And then she had no more care about it. The feathers did the rest, and the lady set great store by her for a better laundress she had never had. Well, one day the butler, who had a notion to have the pretty laundry-maid for his wife, said to her, he should have spoken before but he did not want to vex her. "Why should it when I am but a fellow-servant?" the girl said. And then he felt free to go on, and explain he had 70 pounds laid by with the master, and how would she like him for a husband.

And the girl told him to fetch her the money, and he asked his master for it, and brought it to her. But as they were going upstairs, she cried, "O John, I must go back, sure I've left my shutters undone, and they'll be slashing and banging all night."

The butler said, "Never you trouble, I'll put them right." and he ran back, while she took her feathers, and said: "By virtue of my three feathers may the shutters slash and bang till morning, and John not be able to fasten them nor yet to get his fingers free from them."

And so it was. Try as he might the butler could not leave hold, nor yet keep the shutters from blowing open as he closed them. And he was angry, but could not help himself, and he did not care to tell of it and get the laugh on him, so no one knew.

Then after a bit the coachman began to notice her, and she found he had some £40 with the master, and he said she might have it if she would take him with it.

So after the laundry-maid had his money in her apron as they went merrily along, she stopt, exclaiming: "My clothes are left outside, I must run back and bring them in." "Stop for me while I go; it is a cold frost night," said William, "you'd be catching your death." So the girl waited long enough to take her feathers out and say, "By virtue of my three feathers may the clothes slash and blow about till morning, and may William not be able to take his hand from them nor yet to gather them up." And then she was away to bed and to sleep.

The coachman did not want to be every one's jest, and he said nothing. So after a bit the footman comes to her and said he: "I have been with my master for years and have saved up a good bit, and you have been three years here, and must have saved up as well.

Let us put it together, and make us a home or else stay on at service as pleases you." Well, she got him to bring the savings to her as the others had, and then she pretended she was faint, and said to him: "James, I feel so queer, run down cellar for me, that's a dear, and fetch me up a drop of brandy." Now no sooner had he started than she said: "By virtue of my three feathers may there be slashing and spilling, and James not be able to pour the brandy straight nor yet to take his hand from it until morning."

And so it was. Try as he might James could not get his glass filled, and there was slashing and spilling, and right on it all, down came the master to know what it meant!

So James told him he could not make it out, but he could not get the drop of brandy the laundry-maid had asked for, and his hand would shake and spill everything, and yet come away he could not.

This got him in for a regular scrape, and the master when he got back to his wife said: "What has come over the men, they were all right until that laundry-maid of yours came. Something is up now though. They have all drawn out their pay, and yet they don't leave, and what can it be anyway?"

But his wife said she could not hear of the laundry-maid being blamed, for she was the best servant she had and worth all the rest put together.

So it went on until one day as the girl stood in the hall door, the coachman happened to say to the footman: "Do you know how that girl served me, James?" And then William told about the clothes. The butler put in, "That was nothing to what she served me," and he told of the shutters clapping all night.

Just then the master came through the hall, and the girl said: "By virtue of my three feathers may there be slashing and striving between master and men, and may all get splashed in the pond."

And so it was, the men fell to disputing which had suffered the most by her, and when the master came up all would be heard at once and none listened to him, and it came to blows all round, and the first they knew they had shoved one another into the pond.

When the girl thought they had had enough she took the spell off, and the master asked her what had begun the row, for he had not heard in the confusion.

And the girl said: "They were ready to fall on any one; they'd have beat me if you had not come by."

So it blew over for that time, and through her feathers she made the best laundress ever known. But to make a long story short, when the seven years and a day were up, the bird-husband, who had known her doings all along, came after her, restored to his own shape again. And he told her mistress he had come to take her from being a servant, and that she should have servants under her. But he did not tell of the feathers.

And then he bade her give the men back their savings.

"That was a rare game you had with them," said he, "but now you are going where there is plenty, leave them each their own." So she did; and they drove off to their castle, where they lived happy ever after.