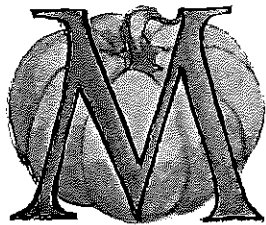


# CLEVER MARCELA



Marcela was working in her father's pumpkin patch, looking pretty as a pumpkin herself, when the king rode by on his fine white horse, hunting for wild pigs.

"Hey, girl," he called to Marcela, "get me some water to drink, and be quick about it. Can't you see I'm thirsty?"

"Hey, king," Marcela called back, "you're so grand and we're so poor. We haven't any cup good enough for *you* to drink from, I'm sure. If we had a cup of gold, well, then I'd gladly bring you some water."

"Never mind the cup," the king replied, smiling, for he thought he'd never seen a girl so pretty as this poor peasant's daughter. "Just bring me some water, and if it's cool and clean, that's good enough for me."

So Marcela brought the king some water in a clay cup her mother had made. After the king had drunk from it, she looked him straight in the eye and threw the cup hard against the wall of her father's cottage, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

The king was shocked. "Now, why did you do that?" he cried angrily. "You know I'm of royal blood, the king of this country, and you are nothing but a poor peasant girl. Who are you, to act so proud?"

Marcela curtsied sweetly and lowered her eyes. "Oh, my king, I broke the cup, made for me by my dear dead mother so long ago, because now that you have drunk from it, I wouldn't want it to be used by another."

The king could think of nothing to say to this. As a matter of fact, he looked quite flattered. He just smiled at Marcela and went quietly on his way.

Back at his palace, he found he couldn't stop thinking about Marcela and her saucy smile and pretty eyes. He'd been looking all over the kingdom for the girl clever enough to be his bride, and now perhaps he'd found her. As a test, he sent one of his soldiers back to Marcela's pumpkin patch. "Give her this large round bottle, which has such a very small neck. Tell the girl to put one of her pumpkins inside, without breaking the bottle, and send it back to me."

When the soldier came to Marcela's cottage, he found her sitting outside, sorting seeds and telling stories to entertain her old father. The soldier presented the king's bottle to Marcela and ordered her to put a whole pumpkin inside without breaking the bottle.

Marcela's father trembled with fear. "Dear Daughter, what kind of a request is this? Not even a sorcerer could fit a pumpkin into a bottle with such a narrow neck. Now the king will surely have us thrown into prison."

But Marcela only laughed. "Don't worry, Father. I know how to please this king of ours." She sent the soldier back to the palace, telling him she didn't have any pumpkins fine enough for the king at present, but as soon as she did, her father would bring one straight to the palace.

Then she planted a pumpkin seed inside the bottle. Each day she watered the seed. She let it sit in the sunniest spots of the garden and sang songs to it, until soon the pumpkin plant produced the finest little pumpkin ever seen, sitting snugly inside the king's bottle.

"My pumpkin is ready," she said to her father. "Take it to the palace tomorrow. And when you see the king, tell him to take out the pumpkin without breaking the bottle and send the bottle home with you, so I may grow him another."

Marcela's father went off to the palace and delivered the pumpkin to the king, along with his daughter's message.

When the king saw the pumpkin in the bottle and heard her request, he was sure Marcela must be as clever as she was pretty. Of course he couldn't take the pumpkin out of the bottle. She was just trying to trick him. He decided to see if he could outwit her in return.

"Tell your daughter I thank her very much, but I have no use for another pumpkin. Instead of the bottle, I'm sending her this sheep. She must sell the sheep for six pieces of silver and send me back the money — but it must be carried back to me on this very same sheep."

Marcela's father brought the sheep home to his daughter, worrying all the way that the king would throw them into prison, for surely his daughter would never be able to sell the sheep and still send it back to the king alive — it was impossible!

When Marcela saw the sheep and heard the message, she laughed. "You know, Father," she said, "this king of ours is quite a clever man. He's almost as clever as I am, and he's handsome as well. I just might have to marry him."

Her father begged her to mind her tongue, but Marcela only tossed her head and led the sheep off to the fields. There she sheared off all its wool. Then she wove the wool into a fine piece of cloth, which she took to market and sold for six silver pieces. The next day Marcela's father carried the sheep back to the king's palace, the money tied to its neck with a handkerchief.

When the king saw that Marcela had again proved more clever than he, he became a little irritated. Trying once more to outwit her, he sent her a tiny bird, ordering her to make him seven dinners from it.

Marcela listened to the king's message, looked at the tiny bird, which couldn't possibly make even one dinner, and thought for five minutes. Then she pulled a pin out of her skirt and handed it to her father. "Give this to the king, Father dear. Ask him to make me a steel frying pan, a knife, and a spit out of it, so that I can cook him the bird properly."

This time the king was forced to admit that he would never outwit the peasant's clever daughter. He threw up his hands. "In all the kingdom, there's no one as clever as your daughter, old man. I think I'll have to marry her."

The next day Marcela came to the palace, and she and the king were married in a grand ceremony that lasted seven days and seven nights. When the wedding was over, however, the king had a serious talk with his new queen.

"Now, my dear, I know you are very clever, but I don't want you meddling in my affairs," he said. "I'm the king, after all, and if I ever hear you've interfered with my decisions, I'll send you right back to the pumpkin patch."

Marcela swore she had no interest in trying to run affairs of state. "After all, I'm just a poor peasant girl, and you are the king, my lord," she said. But the king looked at her with suspicion, for he knew well enough that she was just as able to run the kingdom as he.

To please her husband, Marcela kept her word and didn't try to meddle in the king's business. But one day two men came before the king, begging him to settle their dispute. One man owned a mare, who had foaled in the marketplace. The colt ran under a wagon, and the owner of the wagon was now claiming the colt as his property.

The king, who wasn't really listening to the story, carelessly pronounced, "The man who owns the wagon is, of course, the owner of the colt."

When Marcela heard of the king's foolish decision, she decided she needed to teach him a lesson in good judgment. She called for the man who had lost the case and whispered a plan to help him win his colt back. "But remember," she warned in parting, "you mustn't tell the king who gave you this advice."

That afternoon the king went riding out to hunt. Before he had traveled far, however, his horse became tangled up in a fishnet spread across the dusty road.

"What in the world are you doing with a fishnet spread across the road?" he asked the man standing by the net.

## *Clever Marcela*

"I'm trying to catch fish, my king," the man replied.

"And how do you expect to catch fish in the middle of the road?"

"Well, sire, it's as easy for me to catch fish in the road as it is for a wagon to give birth to a colt" was the man's answer.

The king recognized the fisherman as the plaintiff who had come before him that very morning, and he realized he had made a poor decision in the case. He promised the man he would have his colt returned to him. But the king also knew that Marcela must be at the bottom of this, for only his wife was clever enough to think of such a witty plan. He rode straight back to the palace, growing angrier and angrier as he thought of his wife's disobedience.

"You promised me you wouldn't interfere in affairs of state, and now you have broken your promise," he fumed. "Get out of my house. Take whatever you want in the palace — gold, jewels, whatever pleases you. Just get out of my sight. Our marriage is finished."

"Very well, my lord," said Marcela, bowing her head sadly. "I will be gone by morning."

That evening Marcela cooked the king a delicious meal, seasoning it with plenty of salt. She served him his dinner with two bottles of wine, and the salt made the king so thirsty that he drank up all the wine and soon fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. As he slept, Marcela bundled him into a cart and pushed him to her father's house.

The king woke the next morning to find himself in Marcela's father's little cottage, surrounded by the pumpkin patch. Of course he was very surprised. "Marcela, what is the meaning of this?" he cried.

Marcela kissed him soundly. "Well, dearest king," she said with a smile, "you told me to take whatever I wanted from the palace, and I wanted you. I hope you don't mind too much."

The king realized that once again, his clever wife had outwitted him. He took Marcela and her father back to the palace, and he decreed that from that time forth Marcela should be chief justice and decide all court cases. This she agreed to, and everyone lived well and happily all the rest of their days.