LA 10

Folk Tales- Chile

“Crystal the Wise” retold by Carmen Rivera

Listen and learn it, learn to tell it, and tell it to teach it; if any can’t learn it they’ll buy it if any can sell it. The shoe fits, yes? No? Ouch! It pinches my toe.

There was once a gentleman who had quite a daughter. Her godmother had been a fortune teller and had given her a little slipper that knew all and told all whenever it was asked a question, though it spoke only to the goddaughter and wouldn’t tell anybody else a thing.

The gentleman was rich beyond words. He hired private teachers so his daughter could learn foreign languages, history, and Castilian. But she knew more than they did just by talking to the slipper. They couldn’t think what to teach her. She was quicker at history and all the rest than the people who had invented those subjects. And arithmetic? She knew the household accounts. The whole world marveled at what she knew.

People who couldn’t learn anything from teachers came to her, she explained it, and they went away knowing it. Since she made no charge, naturally she had lots of students. They called her Crystal, and the name suited her well because her mind was like a crystal ball.

Word of this young wise woman reached the ears of a king who had a son and daughter, and he summoned the young woman’s father for a talk.

“Greetings to you, sir.”

“Greetings, Sacred Crown. At your service.”

“Good sir, could you lend me your daughter for a couple of months? They tell me she’s a genius, and I have a son and a daughter in need of instruction. My son is a young man already and a good student, but the girl is lagging behind. If you daughter could go over her lessons with her, she might learn more than she’s learning from her tutors.”

“At your command, Sacred Crown. Ready to serve you.” And when the gentleman returned to his daughter and explained what the king wanted, she said, “Very well.”

Off she went to the palace, where the king, the queen, and the princess greeted her warmly. But the prince looked down his nose. He himself had offered to go over his little sister’s lessons, and the king had said to him, “Someone else can do a better job than you.”

So the instruction began, and the king and queen were delighted with the results. The princess for a change seemed to understand her lessons. One day, while Crystal was with the princess, the prune came into the room and sat down. Immediately he objected to the manner of instruction and said so. They had a heated argument. And from them on, day after day, the prince interrupted the lesson and contradicted the teacher. Once when Crystal and the princess were having tea in the princess’s room, the prince came in and started his usual nagging. “That’s no way to teach. That’s not how I learned it.” And on and on, until finally the teacher threw down her teacup and gave the prince a slap on the face. He got up and left the room without a word.

Time passed and the princess mastered her lessons. Her parents were well pleased and offered to pay for the instruction. But Crystal refused, saying it had been an honor for her to be a teacher of a princess. Then a strange thing happened. The prince, who had never come again to taunt the teacher, told his father he wanted to marry Crystal in order, as he put it, to pay back a debt. The king, who knew nothing of the incident, imagined that the prince had attended the classes as a dutiful student and was simply filled with gratitude. Since the young teacher’s father was a gentleman of high standing, the king gave his permission and the marriage was celebrated with all the festivities.

The prince had made arrangements for a cottage on the palace grounds to be fixed up as a retreat where he and his new wife could settle comfortably. And on their wedding night, when all the guests had gone to bed, he came into the room where his bride was getting into her nightclothes and said, “Crystal, do you remember the slap you gave me? Are you ready to apologize?”

“Apologize? I wouldn’t dream of it. In fact, I’ll give you another if you keep on like this.”

At that, he flew into a rage and shoved her into a corner of the room where there was a trap door, which he pulled open, saying, “Since you won’t repent, off to the underworld!” He pushed her down a staircase and locked her up in a cell he had prepared for just that purpose. She made no complaint and spent the night sitting upright in a little chair. In the morning, the prince came back and asked if she was ready to say she was sorry. Again she said no. To device the king and Crystal’s father, the prince sent a carriage off at daybreak carrying a maidservant dressed in the bride’s clothes, while he himself rode alongside on a horse as if accompanying her. He let it be known that they would be spending time at a friend’s place in the country. He was determined to keep his bride locked up until she relented. But as she would not, he became more and more enraged. Every night he would open the trap door and call downstairs, “Aren’t you sorry?” And every night she would give the same answer. Her prison cell was wearisome, but nothing could move her to ask his forgiveness.

One day she noticed that a mouse had gnawed a hole in the floor boards. Bending over for a closer look, she heard rushing water. An underground stream flowed directly beneath the floor. With a table knife that had been left in the cell, she enlarged the opening and saw that the stream was quite deep and that daylight appeared not far in the distance. Slipping into the water, she swam out into the open, then ran home to her father, who all this time thought she was vacationing in the country. When she had told him everything, he was as angry as you can imagine and was about to go storming off to the king. But she said, “Keep quiet. Just send me decent food, and I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

“As you wish,” he said, and under the king’s very nose he had the underground stream diverted so he could go visit his daughter, who meanwhile had returned to her cell without being missed. The prince only opened the trapdoor at night and never went down the stairs; he just lowered her meals in a basket tied to a string. So he had no idea what she was up to. One day, after shouting down the stairs, “Do you repent?” and receiving her usual answer, “Never!” the prince added, “I’ll be in Paris for awhile, enjoying myself, and while I’m gone a servant will lower you food.” She replied, “That’s perfect. Have a good time and don’t get into trouble.” Exasperated, he slammed the trapdoor with his foot and went on his way.

Meanwhile she crept out of her cell, ran home to her father, and told him she needed lots of money and a special sleeping coach to get her to Paris nonstop. By the time the prince arrived, after dallying along the route, she was already installed in a magnificent palace across the street from the very palace the king of Paris had rented to the prince himself. Every day she swung out in a coach drawn by four horses. The prince, who also took rides, noticed her and was struck by how much she looked like his wife. He started off by greeting her. Soon he was stopping to talk. In no time he was paying her visits, asking her if she was married. She said no. Smitten, he asked her to be his wife. She said yes, and they had a wedding.

Nine months later she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. She decided to name them Paris and Frances. And that’s what they were called. After three years of marriage, the prince broke the news that he had gotten a telegram calling him home. His father, the king, had dropped dead. Crystal wanted to go too. “Not yet,” he said. “I need time to calm my mother’s nerves.” But she managed to have him sign two declarations, one for each child, stating that they were his own and would be his heirs.

Then off he went. But the truth is that the prince had written home to say his wife had died in childbirth and the king, who was alive and perfectly well, had written back saying, “Come at once. I’ve found the ideal bride for you. And no dallying. The bride’s father, who is the king of Spain, insists she be married immediately.”

Need it be said, Crystal had her suspicions. She and her two children boarded the night train and got home ahead of the prince, who was delayed choosing gifts for his new bride. She went straight to her father’s house, having sent him a telegram the day before, so that he would expect her. When the prince arrived, he called the servant that had been paid to lower the food every day. In fact, the servant had pocketed the money and never opened the trapdoor once. He said to the prince, “She died of a broken heart not long ago, and I nailed the door shut so no one will ever find her.”

Completely satisfied with this report, the prince got ready for his wedding. As it happened, the king of Spain’s daughter was no beauty, but she was young and as rich as you could ever wish. Besides, she struck the prince as timid, and he thought, “Now here’s one that won’t cross me.” When the prince and his bride entered the cathedral, which was all lit up for the wedding, he was taken aback at the sight of a lady dressed in white, heavily veiled, and at her side two little children, also veiled. Suddenly the lady came forward, and as she stood in front of the prince, she dropped her veil, and there was Crystal, dressed like a queen, wearing a diamond tiara. The children, likewise, dropped their veils, and there they were: Paris and Frances, waving papers that turned out to be the declarations the prince had signed.

The children rushed at him, shouting, “Papa!” And the price, dazzled by his wife’s beauty, fell to his knees and begged for her forgiveness, confessing to all his crimes. Everybody clapped their hands and cried, “Cheers!” to the prince, his wife, and their two little heirs. And the poor Spanish princess, mad as could be, just stood there with no husband and no kingdom.

My tale is done, and the wind blows it off.