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The legend of Cinderella first reached the world in its currently accepted and grievously distorted guise in Charles Perrault's HISTOIRES OU CONTES DU TEMPS PASSÉ AVEC DES MORALITÉS (*Paris, circa 1697*). *In the following 250 years it has regrettably become a vital part of Western culture. The first successful theatrical adaptation was an opera by the Maltese composer Nicolas Isouard, known as Nicolo, in 1810, followed by later operas by Rossini (1816) and Massenet (1899) — of which the Rossini demands restoration to the standard repertory, not only for its musical brilliance but because the librettist Ferretti revealed a glimmer of the generally suppressed truth. The Cinderella story is an essential stand-by of English Christmas pantomimes; it has served without acknowledgement as the basis of untold films, plays, novels and magazine stories; and most recently it has been recreated by the genius of Walt Disney (in a version in which the superbly evil cat Lucifer and the absurd mice Jaq and Gus-Gus happily steal the show from the human protagonists). But only once, in this quarter millennium, has an author dared to come out boldly and disclose the full truth about Cinderella. In the London Mercury in 1935 Jan Struther, creator of Mrs. Miniver and captivating guest star of* Information, Please!, *made her courageous revelation, which we, as responsible scholars concerned with Truth, are proud to present to you here.*

Ugly Sister

by JAN STRUTHER

MY SISTER and I are old women now. Sophonisba's sight, never good, is failing, and I myself am getting dreadfully deaf; but we both, thank God, have active minds and clear memories, and while this happy state still lasts I feel it is my duty to write down the true history of that distressing episode in our lives about which so many misconceptions have sprung up in the public mind.

If I had only myself to consider, I would not waste ink and paper on clearing the matter up; but I am thinking of Sophonisba. I cannot endure that that gallant, humorous, lovable soul shall go down to history as a ma-

licious, sour-tempered woman; and if in clearing her character I also make my own a little less misunderstood by posterity, so much the better.

Qui s'excuse s'accuse: but in our case all the accusations are such common property that we can well afford to put forward our defence. Everyone admits that there are two sides to every story, but unfortunately the side that is heard first is the one that sticks in people's heads, especially if it is told by a pretty mouth. Add to this that all the world loves a lover, and that three-quarters of it is very partial to a princess, and you will see how little chance we had of gaining the public sympathy.

We were so happy before mother married again. We lived in a small university town where my father had been a Don. Mother had kept up with all his old friends, who often used to drop in to see us in the evenings. Sophie and I had inherited a good many of father's tastes, and mother, though not intellectual, was a gay and witty talker. We were used, therefore, to "good" conversation and the interchange of stimulating ideas; and though I do not wish to boast, both of us were extremely good at the more amusing and strenuous kind of paper-game.

We were both in the early thirties. Most of the men we met were either contemporaries of my father's, or else young undergraduates with whom we were on terms of pleasant intellectual companionship. I honestly do not think that we ever thought about marriage. I see now that Mother must have realized in our early youth how extremely unlikely we were, with faces like ours, to find husbands, and that she very wisely decided to encourage us in other interests. We were indeed as ugly as we could well be, short of actual deformity. Sophonisba was tall, thin and bony, with sparse, sandy hair, small short-sighted eyes, a sharp nose and a long, ironical upper lip. I, Augusta, was short and fat; my eyebrows were bushy and met in the middle; my nose was snub (snub noses, alas, were not in fashion then); my hair was thick but lustreless, my complexion sallow and my walk ungainly.

Looking back, I have no doubt that people must have felt very sorry for us: but ugliness has its compensations. I do not think that any beautiful woman can ever have a truly deep and wholehearted friendship with a man — or, perhaps, with another woman either; and when an ugly woman grows old, she can face her looking-glass tranquilly, without bitterness, since there is no ghost of her own lost beauty to stand mocking behind her shoulder.

Sophonisba and I hated our mother's remarriage. Our stepfather was a dull pompous city man, handsome in a heavy way, who came to stay from time to time with the Dean. What my mother saw in him I cannot imagine. We were miserable at leaving our beloved little town where we had been known by everyone and liked, I think, by most. In London we knew nobody.

The people who came to the house were mainly business friends of my stepfather's, who could talk of nothing but food, wines and the stock-market. Any attempt to introduce other subjects would be met with an archly wagged finger and a "Now, Miss Augusta, I can see you two young ladies are regular blue-stockings." And then they would turn an approving eye upon Cinderella, who would respond at once with that swift radiant smile of hers — that smile which we soon perceived to be purely automatic, born of pretty teeth and a vacuous mind.

Not that Cinderella was vain in the ordinary sense; she did not pat or prink before her looking-glass, or spend time and money on new clothes: but her apparent carelessness in these matters was really the outcome of a subtle and deep-rooted arrogance. Nothing could mar her rare beauty, and she knew it. If she appeared with her hair untidy, it only drew people's attention to its exquisite colouring and texture: you could almost hear the words "ripe corn" and "unruly tendrils" forming in their minds. If she wore an old plain ragged frock it showed up all the better the delicate grace of her figure: you could see people thinking "How lovely she looks — even in that!" When she went barefoot, as she often did, she would laugh merrily and put it down to economy ("You see, I take ones in shoes and I always have to have them made for me — such an expense"): but Sophonisba and I, seeing all eyes riveted upon those tiny arched insteps, knew better. Moreover, in an age when both were in vogue she used neither paint nor powder, saying that she was afraid she was old-fashioned enough not to care for them: as who would, in God's name, whose face was wild rose petals strewn on snow? It is the plain woman that fills the dressmaker's pockets and sends the children of the cosmetic manufacturer to school.

For the first time in our lives Sophonisba and I became fully conscious of our own ugliness; and that is not a happy piece of knowledge. But even so we did not grudge Cinderella her beauty, since it was compensated for by an almost complete absence of brains. She was, as I believe the modern usage has it, dead from the neck up. She never opened a book, except for an occasional romantic novel, or passed a remark, except to comment on the weather or to retail a piece of domestic gossip. Worst of all, she was quite hopeless at even the simplest paper-games. If asked for an animal beginning with B she wrote down "Bird"; and when patiently reminded that an adverb was, roughly speaking, something that ended in "ly" she said "Oh, yes, I remember — like 'silly' and 'Sally.'" And when we teased her about it (quite gently, for we were fond of her at first), she tossed her head, refused to play any more, and sat for the rest of the evening pouting like a child and very ostentatiously darning her father's socks.

As time went on she affected more and more this domestic rôle; partly, I

think, to show that she too had her accomplishments, and partly because its attitudes became her. Many a man has lost his heart to the nape of a neck that's bent over sewing in the lamplight, or to the sweeping curve of a pectoral muscle as an arm is raised to dust the cobwebs from a shelf. There was no harm in all this — though for my part I think the world contains a thousand studies more absorbing than housewifery and a thousand places more interesting than a store-cupboard; besides, it upset the servants, who found themselves with too little to do. But what did exasperate us was the way she was always trying to make a martyr of herself and put us in the wrong. If we asked her to come out with us to a play or a concert, she would say "No, you two go, I've got a mass of mending to do — and besides, I don't like to leave Mother and Father *all* alone." (*Mother* and Father, mark you!) If anyone was needed to wind wool, arrange flowers, pack up parcels, or exercise the dog, Cinderella always managed to say angelically, "*I'll* do it — *I* don't mind," before Sophie and I had time to speak — though in nine cases out of ten *we* should not have minded either. And if anybody in the house was ill she fairly leapt at the opportunity for self-sacrifice. "*I'll* sit up with her, Mother; Sophie and Gussie were out so late last night at the opera, they must be dying for bed. I often think I ought to have gone in for nursing — it seems to come natural to me." In the face of such a genius for masochism, Sophie and I could do nothing but stand aside.

When we first knew her we thought it remarkable that she was not already married, but we soon discovered the reason. True, a young man had only to look at her and he lost his heart: but he had only to listen to her conversation and he recovered it. We saw this happen over and over again. The eyes which had been bright with admiration would gradually glaze with boredom; the lips which had been parted in eager wonder would compress themselves upon a stifled yawn; and then the young man would either leave off coming to the house altogether or else strike up a queer lopsided friendship with Sophie and me. They all seemed to regard us as immensely old but rather entertaining. Sometimes they would even discuss Cinderella with us.

"Miss Sophie," they would say, "it's a pity about Cinders, isn't it? I mean, she's perfectly lovely and all that, but — well, what I mean is, she's *dumb*." And Sophie (who was never quite as quick as I am to assimilate the modern idiom) would answer, drily, "That's just what she *isn't*, more's the pity."

The remainder of the story is well, though inaccurately, known. I will not repeat it in detail, but will merely try to refute one or two essential errors. There is no foundation for the popular belief that Cinderella was not invited to the Court Ball: we were all asked, and we all accepted. Cinderella was as excited as any of us at the prospect of going, though she

flatly refused to buy a new gown for the occasion, saying (with a sweet glance at us) that she didn't want to run her father into any more expense and that her old brown linsey would do quite well. Sophie and I thought that this was carrying self-satisfaction a little too far, but, of course, we couldn't say so. Nor could we conceal from ourselves the fact that neither Sophie's new yellow tarlatan nor my own crimson paduasoy would make us look like anything but a pair of frights with whom nobody would want to dance. Still, we looked forward to going. Sophie always enjoyed watching pageantry, and for my part, I was writing a novel at the time and I regarded everything as copy.

On the very day of the ball my stepfather was seized with a violent attack of gout. This was neither surprising, since he lived far too well, nor unusual, since it happened about every three months. But Cinderella could not let pass such a golden opportunity for martyrdom. She declined point-blank to go to the ball, saying that she must stay at home and look after him. In vain my mother protested that if anybody stayed it should be herself, as she was his wife; in vain Sophie and I vowed that it would spoil our enjoyment to think of her moping at home; in vain my stepfather raged and stormed, and pointed out that he had had many worse attacks of gout before and that in any case her presence would do nothing to alleviate it. She merely looked at him with eyes like a wounded deer, took up a basket of mending and settled herself down obstinately in the chimney corner. It was no good arguing. My father stumped upstairs to bed and the rest of us went off to the ball, our spirits somewhat dashed by the contretemps.

For my account of what followed I am indebted to Cinderella's godmother, with whom Sophie and I afterwards became very friendly: a sensible witty woman, though undoubtedly a little fey. It appears that she happened to look in unexpectedly that evening, and found Cinderella sitting by the fire, shedding upon her work-basket those easy and becoming tears of self-pity which never made an eye red yet. It took her godmother about two minutes to size up the situation and about five to get it well in hand.

"Off you go to the ball!" she said. "You'd do your poor father better service by trying to find yourself a husband than by staying at home to make him hot possets, which one of the servants could do just as well, if not better."

Cinderella then complained that she had no coach to go in; whereupon her godmother sent the scullery-maid round to the nearest tavern, which was also a livery-stable, to hire the best vehicle which they could provide. The absurd rumours of black magic which still persist in connection with Cinderella's coach can be traced to the fact that this tavern rejoiced in the somewhat unusual name of the "Mouse and Pumpkin."

While they waited for the horses to be put to, her godmother tackled Cinderella on the subject of clothes.

"You can't go in *that* old rag," she said crisply.

"It's all I've got," said Cinderella, with (I've no doubt) a slight quiver of that unfailingly rosy lip; and then came out with her usual line about not wanting to put her father to expense. This met with a merciless snub.

"Stuff and nonsense, child! Your father would sooner stump up the price of a new gown to catch a husband than go on paying your board and lodging for life." So Cinderella had to fall back on her real reason. "I look very nice in this," she said, sulkily. "No doubt," snapped her godmother, who, though fey, had a healthy respect for royalty; "but you'll look more like a lady in *this*."

With that she whisked off her own flowered silk — she had never lost her trim youthful figure and took a pride in dressing to it — and made Cinderella put it on. I cannot deny that it suited her to perfection. Finally came the question of shoes — and here, of course, even the godmother was powerless to provide anything small enough; so she ordered Cinderella to wear the newest pair she had, which happened to be some high-heeled bedroom slippers trimmed with fur. The confusion between *vair* [fur] and *verre* [glass] in the French version of the story has already been pointed out by many learned commentators.

"And look here, child," said her godmother as Cinderella stepped into the coach, "there's one thing you *must* remember if this ball of yours is to result in a proposal: *Come home on the stroke of twelve, before supper is announced.* Your beauty's undeniable and your dancing, I know, accomplished, but no young man, however much attracted, could still want to marry you after listening to your conversation for a solid half-hour. Mark my words — if you stay to supper, you're lost. And" (she added tartly) "I shall take steps to see that you don't." With that she vanished, and Cinderella, chastened in spirit but resplendent in appearance, galloped off to the ball.

The rest is plain sailing. I have nothing to add to the incidents which have been so often described — the Prince's infatuation with Cinderella, her forgetfulness of the time, the extraordinary change which appeared to come over her dress at midnight (a mesmeric trick of her godmother's, no doubt), the flight from the palace, the dropped slipper, the royal proclamation, and so forth. The Prince was so transported when he eventually discovered her that he married her by special licence that very day; and if he subsequently found her conversation tedious and her personality exasperating, it was by then too late to mend. In those days marriages *were* marriages, especially royal ones.

There is the true story. My stepfather died soon afterwards of cirrhosis of the liver; my mother, Sophie and I lost no time in returning to our beloved university town, where we soon slipped back into the congenial circle of friends which we had left. And ever since my mother's death, Sophonisba and I have lived on here together, active members of the Literary Society and, I think I may say, the friends and confidantes of an endless succession of undergraduates. I suppose by now we are what you would call "characters." There are worse fates.

We never see Cinderella, except when she comes down (shrunken, white-haired and leaning on a stick) to open a bazaar or lay a foundation stone. They say that death is a great leveller: but I sometimes think that he has little of it left to do when age has got there before him.