



Learn English Through Stories

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CATHERINE AND HER DESTINY

Long ago there lived a rich merchant who, besides possessing more treasures than any king in the world, had in his great hall three chairs, one of silver, one of gold, and one of diamonds. But his greatest treasure of all was his only daughter, who was called Catherine.

One day Catherine was sitting in her own room when suddenly the door flew open, and in came a tall and beautiful woman holding in her hands a little wheel.

'Catherine,' she said, going up to the girl, 'which would you rather have-a happy youth or a happy old age?'

Catherine was so taken by surprise that she did not know what to answer, and the lady repeated again, 'Which would you rather have-a happy youth or a happy old age?'

Then Catherine thought to herself, 'If I say a happy youth, then I shall have to suffer all the rest of my life. No, I would bear trouble now, and have something better to look forward to.' So she looked up and replied, 'Give me a happy old age.'

'So be it,' said the lady, and turned her wheel as she spoke, vanishing the next moment as suddenly as she had come.

Now this beautiful lady was the Destiny of poor Catherine.

Only a few days after this the merchant heard the news that all his finest ships, laden with the richest merchandise, had been sunk in a storm, and he was left a beggar. The shock was too much for him. He took to his bed, and in a short time he was dead of his disappointment.

So poor Catherine was left alone in the world without a penny or a creature to help her. But she was a brave girl and full of spirit, and soon made up her mind that the best thing she could do was to go to the nearest town and become a servant. She lost no time in getting herself ready, and did not take long over her journey; and as she was passing down the chief street of the town a noble lady saw her out of the window, and, struck by her sad face, said to her:

'Where are you going all alone, my pretty girl?'

'Ah, my lady, I am very poor, and must go to service to earn my bread.'

'I will take you into my service,' said she; and Catherine served her well.

Some time after her mistress said to Catherine, 'I am obliged to go out for a long while, and must lock the house door, so that no thieves shall get in.'

So she went away, and Catherine took her work and sat down at the window. Suddenly the door burst open, and in came her Destiny.

'Oh! so here you are, Catherine! Did you really think I was going to leave you in peace?' And as she spoke she walked to the linen press where Catherine's mistress kept all her finest sheets and underclothes, tore everything in pieces, and flung them on the floor. Poor Catherine wrung her hands and wept, for she thought to herself, 'When my lady comes back and sees all this ruin she will think it is my fault,' and starting up, she fled through the open door. Then Destiny took all the pieces and made them whole again, and put them back in the press, and when everything was tidy she too left the house.

When the mistress reached home she called Catherine, but no Catherine was there. 'Can she have robbed me?' thought the old lady, and looked hastily round the house; but nothing was missing. She wondered why Catherine should have disappeared like this, but she heard no more of her, and in a few days she filled her place.

Meanwhile Catherine wandered on and on, without knowing very well where she was going, till at last she came to another town. Just as before, a noble lady happened to see her passing her window, and called out to her, 'Where are you going all alone, my pretty girl?'

And Catherine answered, 'Ah, my lady, I am very poor, and must go to service to earn my bread.'

'I will take you into my service,' said the lady; and Catherine served her well, and hoped she might now be left in peace. But, exactly as before, one day that Catherine was left in the house alone her Destiny came again and spoke to her with hard words: 'What! are you here now?' And in a passion she tore up everything she saw, till in sheer misery poor Catherine rushed out of the house. And so it befell for seven years, and directly Catherine found a fresh place her Destiny came and forced her to leave it.

After seven years, however, Destiny seemed to get tired of persecuting her, and a time of peace set in for Catherine. When she had been chased away from her last house by Destiny's wicked pranks she had taken service with another lady, who told her that it would be part of her daily work to walk to a mountain that overshadowed the town, and, climbing up to the top, she was to lay on the ground some loaves of freshly baked bread, and cry with a loud voice, 'O Destiny, my mistress,' three times. Then her lady's Destiny would come and take away the offering. 'That will I gladly do,' said Catherine.

So the years went by, and Catherine was still there, and every day she climbed the mountain with her basket of bread on her arm. She was happier than she

had been, but sometimes, when no one saw her, she would weep as she thought over her old life, and how different it was to the one she was now leading. One day her lady saw her, and said, 'Catherine, what is it? Why are you always weeping?' And then Catherine told her story.

'I have got an idea,' exclaimed the lady. 'To-morrow, when you take the bread to the mountain, you shall pray my Destiny to speak to yours, and entreat her to leave you in peace. Perhaps something may come of it!'

At these words Catherine dried her eyes, and next morning, when she climbed the mountain, she told all she had suffered, and cried, 'O Destiny, my mistress, pray, I entreat you, of my Destiny that she may leave me in peace.'

And Destiny answered, 'Oh, my poor girl, know you not your Destiny lies buried under seven coverlids, and can hear nothing? But if you will come to-morrow I will bring her with me.'

And after Catherine had gone her way her lady's Destiny went to find her sister, and said to her, 'Dear sister, has not Catherine suffered enough? It is surely time for her good days to begin?'

And the sister answered, 'To-morrow you shall bring her to me, and I will give her something that may help her out of her need.'

The next morning Catherine set out earlier than usual for the mountain, and her lady's Destiny took the girl by the hand and led her to her sister, who lay under the seven coverlids. And her Destiny held out to Catherine a ball of silk, saying, 'Keep this--it may be useful some day;' then pulled the coverings over her head again.

But Catherine walked sadly down the hill, and went straight to her lady and showed her the silken ball, which was the end of all her high hopes.

'What shall I do with it?' she asked. 'It is not worth sixpence, and it is no good to me!'

'Take care of it,' replied her mistress. 'Who can tell how useful it may be?'

A little while after this grand preparations were made for the king's marriage, and all the tailors in the town were busy embroidering fine clothes. The wedding garment was so beautiful nothing like it had ever been seen before, but when it was almost finished the tailor found that he had no more silk. The colour was very rare, and none could be found like it, and the king made a proclamation that if anyone happened to possess any they should bring it to the court, and he would give them a large sum.

'Catherine!' exclaimed the lady, who had been to the tailors and seen the wedding garment, 'your ball of silk is exactly the right colour. Bring it to the king, and you can ask what you like for it.'

Then Catherine put on her best clothes and went to the court, and looked more beautiful than any woman there.

'May it please your majesty,' she said, 'I have brought you a ball of silk of the colour you asked for, as no one else has any in the town.'

'Your majesty,' asked one of the courtiers, 'shall I give the maiden its weight in gold?'

The king agreed, and a pair of scales were brought; and a handful of gold was placed in one scale and the silken ball in the other. But lo! let the king lay in the scales as many gold pieces as he would, the silk was always heavier still. Then the king took some larger scales, and heaped up all his treasures on one side, but the silk on the other outweighed them all. At last there was only one thing left that had not been put in, and that was his golden crown. And he took it from his head and set it on top of all, and at last the scale moved and the ball had found its balance.

'Where got you this silk?' asked the king.

'It was given me, royal majesty, by my mistress,' replied Catherine.

'That is not true,' said the king, 'and if you do not tell me the truth I will have your head cut off this instant.'

So Catherine told him the whole story, and how she had once been as rich as he.

Now there lived at the court a wise woman, and she said to Catherine, 'You have suffered much, my poor girl, but at length your luck has turned, and I know by the weighing of the scales through the crown that you will die a queen.'

'So she shall,' cried the king, who overheard these words; 'she shall die my queen, for she is more beautiful than all the ladies of the court, and I will marry no one else.'

And so it fell out. The king sent back the bride he had promised to wed to her own country, and the same Catherine was queen at the marriage feast instead, and lived happy and contented to the end of her life.