

In the first chapter of the "Childhood" section of My Brilliant Friend, the narrator compares Don Achille to an "ogre from fairy tales." Following is an example of the sort of fairy tale to which Elena is referring. It is taken from Il Pentamerone, a 17th folk tale collection published in Naples by the Italian poet and courtier Giambattista Basile, written in the Neapolitan dialect. Because this collection is so well-known in Italy, Elena almost certainly would have been familiar with this particular story.

"Corvetto" (a story from the *Pentamerone*)
Collected and retold by Giambattista Basile
Translated from Neapolitan by J.E. Taylor (edited by
E.F. Strange)



Giambattista Basile
1566-1632

I once heard say that Juno went to Candia to find Falsehood.¹ But if any one were to ask me where fraud and hypocrisy might truly be found, I should know of no other place to name than the Court, where detraction always wears the mask of amusement; where, at the same time, people cut and sew up, wound and heal, break and glue together-- of which I will give you one instance in the story that I am going to tell you.

There was once upon a time in the service of the King of Wide-River an excellent youth named Corvetto, who, for his good conduct, was beloved by his master; and for this very cause was disliked and hated by all the courtiers. These courtiers were filled with spite and malice, and bursting with envy at the kindness which the

King showed to Corvetto; so that all day long, in every corner of the palace, they did nothing but tattle and whisper, murmur and grumble at the poor lad, saying, "What sorcery has this fellow practised on the King that he takes such a fancy to him? How comes he by this luck that not a day passes that he receives some new favours, whilst we are for ever going backward like a rope-maker, and getting from bad to worse, though we slave like dogs, toil like field-labourers, and run about like deer to hit the King's pleasure to a hair? Truly one must be born to good fortune in this world, and he who has not luck might as well be thrown into the sea. What is to be done? We can only look on and envy." These and other words fell from their mouths like poisoned

¹ Juno was the Roman goddess of marriage. The Kingdom of Candia was the name for Crete while it was an overseas colony of Venice (during the 13th to 17th centuries). This anti-Cretan slur (claiming that Cretans were liars), suggests a Venetian origin for the tale, where many of the stories from the *Pentamerone* were originally collected.

arrows aimed at the ruin of Corvetto as at a target. Alas for him who is condemned to that den the Court, where flattery is sold by the kilderkin,² malignity and ill-offices are measured out in bushels, deceit and treachery are weighed by the ton! But who can count all the attempts these courtiers made to bring him to grief, or the false tales that they told to the King to destroy his reputation! But Corvetto, who was enchanted, and perceived the traps, and discovered the tricks, was aware of all the intrigues and the ambuscades, the plots and conspiracies of his enemies. He kept his ears always on the alert and his eyes open in order not to take a false step, well knowing that the fortune of courtiers is as glass. But the higher the lad continued to rise the lower the others fell; till at last, being puzzled to know how to take him off his feet, as their slander was not believed, they thought of leading him to disaster by the path of flattery, which they attempted in the following manner.

Ten miles distant from Scotland, where the seat of this King was, there dwelt an ogre,³ the most inhuman and savage that had ever been in Ogreland, who, being persecuted by the King, had fortified himself in a lonesome wood on the top of a mountain, where no bird ever flew, and was so thick and tangled that one could never see the sun there. This ogre had a most beautiful horse, which looked as if it were formed with a pencil; and amongst other wonderful things, it could speak like any man. Now the courtiers, who knew how wicked the ogre was, how thick the wood, how high the mountain, and how difficult it was to get at the horse, went to the King, and telling him minutely the perfections of the animal, which was a thing worthy of a King, added that he ought to endeavour by all means to get it out of the ogre's claws, and that Corvetto was



ogre from the *Pentamerone* (illustration by Leonard Paul)

² a small barrel

³ Although the word *ogre* probably derives from the French, it was the Neapolitan Basile who popularized the term in the *Pentamerone* (*uerco* in the original Neapolitan). The word derives from the Etruscan god Orcus (who fed on human flesh) and in fairy tales has come to signify any large, hideous, manlike monster that eats human beings.

just the lad to do this, as he was expert and clever at escaping out of the fire. The King, who knew not that under the flowers of these words a serpent was concealed, instantly called Corvetto, and said to him, "If you love me, see that in some way or another you obtain for me the horse of my enemy the ogre, and you shall have no cause to regret having done me this service."

Corvetto knew well that this drum was sounded by those who wished him ill; nevertheless, to obey the King, he set out and took the road to the mountain. Then going very quietly to the ogre's stable, he saddled and mounted the horse, and fixing his feet firmly in the stirrup, took his way back. But as soon as the horse saw himself spurred out of the palace, he cried aloud, "Hollo! be on your guard! Corvetto is riding off with me." At this alarm the ogre instantly set out, with all the animals that served him, to cut Corvetto in pieces. From this side jumped an ape, from that was seen a large bear; here sprang forth a lion, there came running a wolf. But the youth, by the aid of bridle and spur, distanced the mountain, and galloping without stop to the city, arrived at the Court, where he presented the horse to the King.

Then the King embraced him more than a son, and pulling out his purse, filled his hands with crown-pieces. At this the rage of the courtiers knew no bounds; and whereas at first they were puffed up with a little pipe, they were now bursting with the blasts of a smith's bellows, seeing that the crowbars with which they thought to lay Corvetto's good fortune in ruins only served to smooth the road to his prosperity. Knowing, however, that walls are not levelled by the first attack of the battering-ram, they resolved to try their luck a second time, and said to the King, "We wish you joy of the beautiful horse! It will indeed be an ornament to the royal stable. But what a pity you have not the ogre's tapestry, which is a thing more beautiful than words can tell, and would spread your fame far and wide! There is no one, however, able to procure this treasure but Corvetto, who is just the lad to do such a kind of service."

Then the King, who danced to every tune, and ate only the peel of this bitter but sugared fruit, called Corvetto, and begged him to procure for him the ogre's tapestry. Off went Corvetto and in four seconds was on the top of the mountain where the ogre lived; then passing unseen into the chamber in which he slept, he hid himself under the bed, and waited as still as a mouse, until Night, to make the Stars laugh, puts a carnival-mask on the face of the Sky. And as soon as the ogre and his wife were gone to bed, Corvetto stripped the walls of the chamber very quietly, and wishing to steal the counterpane⁴ of the bed likewise, he began to pull it gently. Thereupon the ogre, suddenly starting up, told his wife not to pull so, for she was dragging all the clothes off him, and would give him his death of cold.

⁴ a quilt

"Why you are uncovering me!" answered the ogress.

"Where is the counterpane?" replied the ogre; and stretching out his hand to the floor he touched Corvetto's face; whereupon he set up a loud cry,-- "The imp! the imp! Hollo, here, lights! Run quickly!"-- till the whole house was turned topsy-turvy with the noise. But Corvetto, after throwing the clothes out of the window, let himself drop down upon them. Then making up a good bundle, he set out on the road to the city, where the reception he met with from the King, and the vexation of the courtiers, who were bursting with spite, are not to be told. Nevertheless they laid a plan to fall upon Corvetto with the rear-guard of their roguery, and went again to the King, who was almost beside himself with delight at the tapestry-- which was not only of silk embroidered with gold, but had besides more than a thousand devices and thoughts worked on it. And amongst the rest, if I remember right, there was a cock in the act of crowing at daybreak, and out of its mouth was seen coming a motto in Tuscan: IF I ONLY SEE YOU. And in another part a drooping heliotrope⁵ with a Tuscan motto: AT SUNSET-- with so many other pretty things that it would require a better memory and more time than I have to relate them.



Corvetto with the ogre's counterpane and tapestry (illustration by Warwick Goble)

When the courtiers came to the King, who was thus transported with joy, they said to him, "As Corvetto has done so much to serve

⁵ a purplish flower

you, it would be no great matter for him, in order to give you a signal pleasure, to get the ogre's palace, which is fit for an emperor to live in; for it has so many rooms and chambers, inside and out, that it can hold an army. And you would never believe all the courtyards, porticoes, colonnades, balconies, and spiral chimneys which there are-- built with such marvellous architecture that Art prides herself upon them, Nature is abashed, and Stupor is in delight."

The King, who had a fruitful brain which conceived quickly, called Corvetto again, and telling him the great longing that had seized him for the ogre's palace, begged him to add this service to all the others he had done him, promising to score it up with the chalk of gratitude at the tavern of memory. So Corvetto instantly set out heels over head; and arriving at the ogre's palace, he found that the ogress, whilst her husband was gone to invite the kinsfolk, was busying herself with preparing the feast. Then Corvetto entering, with a look of compassion, said, "Good-day, my good woman! Truly, you are a brave housewife! But why do you torment the very life out of you in this way? Only yesterday you were ill in bed, and now you are slaving thus, and have no pity on your own flesh."

"What would you have me do?" replied the ogress. "I have no one to help me."

"I am here," answered Corvetto, "ready to help you tooth and nail."

"Welcome, then!" said the ogress; "and as you proffer me so much kindness, just help me to split four logs of wood."

"With all my heart," answered Corvetto, "but if four logs are not enow, let me split five." And taking up a newly-ground axe, instead of striking the wood, he struck the ogress on the neck, and made her fall to the ground like a pear. Then running quickly to the gate, he dug a deep hole before the entrance, and covering it over with bushes and earth, he hid himself behind the gate.

As soon as Corvetto saw the ogre coming with his kinsfolk, he set up a loud cry in the courtyard, "Stop, stop! I've caught him!" and "Long live the King of Wide-River." When the ogre heard this challenge, he ran like mad at Corvetto, to make a hash of him. But rushing furiously towards the gate, down he tumbled with all his companions, head over heels to the bottom of the pit, where Corvetto speedily stoned them to death. Then he shut the door, and took the keys to the King, who, seeing the valour and cleverness of the lad, in spite of ill-fortune and the envy and annoyance of the courtiers, gave him his daughter to wife; so that the crosses of envy had proved rollers to launch Corvetto's bark of life on the sea of greatness; whilst his enemies remained confounded and bursting with rage, and went to bed without a candle; for--

"The punishment of ill deeds past,
Though long delay'd, yet comes at last."