

La Cenerentola

Adapted from the opera by Giacomo Rossini
By Shira Eliaser



They call me Queen of France and say I lived with Henry IV. They call me Queen of Germany and don't say when I lived. They all call me something. They all tell my story.

You may think you've heard it before, but I should warn you... I'm really quite an ordinary woman. My godmother is a toothless old baroness in Persano, and I couldn't squeeze my foot into a glass slipper if I tried. (I did try once. The glass gave me bruises.)

My name is Cenerentola and I am the Queen of Salerno.

Yes, my name really is Cenerentola: Angelina Cenerentola Ada de Montefiascone. And it's not because of all that sleeping-in-the-fireplace nonsense. It's because, unlike my mother and stepsisters, whose hair was bright chestnut, mine was black, black, black as coal cinders.

I was born on the seacoast of Italy on the estate belonging to my mother the baroness. I don't remember my mother very well. She died when I was quite young and left my stepfather to raise me. I never liked my stepfather very much. I always suspected him of marrying my mother for her money. He certainly liked spending money, my stepfather. Money and clothes, fine wines and flowers in January, he spent and spent and spent. Spent until he had nothing left to spend.

My stepfather always dreamed of being a gentleman and never having to work for a living. When my stepsisters and I were little girls, he'd never lift a finger around the house. He paid the servants extra to do things we really ought to have done ourselves. My stepsisters were the same way, with their curls and their laces and their mirrors, too prissy to even set foot in the kitchen.

So when Papa had spent all the money Mama left us and we had nothing to pay the servants with, guess who ended up doing all the work!

All the stories say that my father and sisters beat me and forced me to work like a slave. That's not the way it was. They weren't wicked, my family, just lazy. I cooked the meals and swept the floors and washed the linens simply because if I didn't no one else would. And that bit about sleeping in the fireplace-- I had a bed, a nice good soft one. But when you're the only one doing anything at all on an estate that once had twenty servants, you don't have that much time to spend snoozing in bed! My stepsisters always laughed when they found me asleep by the fire. They thought I should spend my time making myself pretty, "making myself into a lady," as they said. But whenever they needed someone to mend a dress or fix a hairdo or iron a ribbon, they expected me to take care of it!

If it hadn't been for the Prince, we'd have lost everything and been forced to live as common tradesmen. I knew it at the time and I wasn't particularly unhappy about it. I worked for a living already, you see-- the only thing I had to lose was a title, and when you're wearing homespun and baking brown bread, a title isn't really worth that much. But then the messenger came from the castle saying that the Prince was looking for a bride, and everything changed.

I guess it all started with the beggar.

I heard him knocking on the kitchen gate early in the morning. He was very old, and his back was bent so low I could hardly see his face. He wore a great brown cloak which came all the way down to the ground. "Pardon me, miss," he groaned. "But I am only a poor old man. I have no home and no friends. May I sit by your fire and warm myself for just a minute?"

My sister Clorinda poked her head into the kitchen to see who it was. "Eeee!" she exclaimed. "You horrid old clod! Get out of our nice clean kitchen!"

"Who is it?" called Tisbe from the dining room. "Is that a beggar? Be off, you rogue! Get yourself a job!"

"Take the bacon in to Father," I said firmly, giving Clorinda a platter and shooing her back into the dining room. "You must forgive my stepsisters, sir," I explained to the beggar. "They're good souls, but they don't always remember other people's feelings. Of course you may come in."

"You're very kind, miss," said the beggar, striding in with quite a heavy tread and sitting down by the fire. "God will reward you."

"God's got enough on his plate already without bothering with the likes of us," I said crisply. "Are you hungry? We have bread and cheese and bacon. Plenty of all, if not very fine."

"Thank you, miss," mumbled the beggar. He took some bread and cheese into a corner and ate quietly. So quietly that I didn't even notice when he left.

The messenger knocked on the door later that same morning. "Who is it?" I called. I had just started the ironing and was very busy.

"Cenerentola, answer the door!" called my sister Tisbe from the upstairs window. "It's someone important! Hurry!"

My sisters were all waiting in the hall when I came in, but they hadn't opened the door-- I had to let the messenger in myself. It was a royal groom, all dressed in fine brown with feathers in his cap. "I bring the Prince Ramiro's greetings to Don Munifico and his daughters," he said.

(Munifico wasn't our real name, but everyone called us that because my father spent so much money so freely. I don't know if anyone in the principality still remembered that our real name was Montefiascone.) "As you know, our royal King has decreed that the Prince must take a wife before the end of this year. In keeping with his father's will, the Prince has decided to entertain all the noble ladies in the kingdom so that he may choose one of them for his bride. The Baron Munifico and his three daughters are hereby invited to dine tonight with the Prince at his summer palace."

Oh, you should have heard my sisters scream! They shrieked and laughed and danced up and down. They hugged each other and hugged my father and even tried to hug the messenger. "Oh my!" I cried. "The Prince himself! This very night! I'll get our finest dresses ironed and aired right now!"

The messenger turned around. He looked at my rough hands and my cinder-covered work dress. He looked at his letter. He looked at my father. "This letter says Don Munifico has three daughters," he said. "Has one of them died?"

"Oh yes," said my father hurriedly. "Very sad. Cenerentola, run up and get my best wig! I need it combed and brushed and dusted immediately!"

"And my best dress!" added Clorinda. "The pink one with the ruffles. And the ribbons that go with it."

"And my curling rags!" begged Tisbe. "I'll need to curl my hair."

They were acting as if I was a servant!

I opened my mouth to say, "I, sir, am the third lady of this house!" but my stepfather interrupted me. "Quickly!" he barked.

The messenger bowed. "I am very sorry to hear that she is dead," he said. "I will trouble you no further. The Prince will send his carriage for you and your two daughters in the afternoon."

Until that morning, I had never seen my stepfather or my stepsisters rush or hustle for anything. But now, everyone was running upstairs and downstairs, hurrying and scurrying as if the world was coming to an end. And guess who was in the center of it all! "Cenerentola, where are my laces?" "Cenerentola, do get me my dancing-slippers!" "Cenerentola, my pendants!" "Cenerentola, my wig!!!!" Clorinda tried to do her own hair, but she made such a frightful mess of it that she cried and howled and threw things; I finally had to come up and do it for her, if only to get her to stop wailing.

"Now I must go!" I insisted. "Or I'll never get myself ready in time!"

"Ready???" asked my stepsister.

"Ready," I said. "I am not a servant and I am not dead. I too am going to dine with the Prince this evening."

My father poked his head into the room. "Cenerentola, where is my wig? Wench, haven't you got it ready yet? Stop standing around gossiping and get my wig!!!"

By the middle of the afternoon, the wig had been dredged up and dusted and fixed and curled, and my stepfather looked the very picture of a gracious old baron. My sisters fluttered down the stairs in their silken gowns, all powdered and perfumed, looking very lovely with their ribbons and their jewels. I, of course, had barely had the time to wash the cinders off my face.

Just as I sat down to the looking-glass, there was a knock at the door. "Cenerentola!" Barefoot, my hair falling all over my shoulders, I ran downstairs. "What is it?"

"Don't just stand there, wench! Open the door!" As I scurried through the hall, I swore that one of these days, I would teach my stepfather how to work a door-latch. But when I opened the door and looked out to see a splendid gold carriage standing at the gates, I forgot all about my stepfather and the door-latch and my own feet and everything else, because there in front of me was the Honest To Goodness Prince.

He was a lot fatter than I thought he'd be.

Prince Ramiro swept right past me and saluted my father on both cheeks. "Baron Munifico! It is I, your royal Prince, come to escort you to my summer palace!" By the time he had finished this greeting, about fifty servants had followed him into the hall. This Prince Ramiro fellow didn't travel light.

My father bowed so low that his wig almost fell off. "Your Grace! ...I mean, Your Majesty! ...I mean, Your Royal Highness! Allow me to present to you my two bee-yoo-tee-ful daughters, Clorinda and Tisbe." No one had yet noticed I existed.

My sisters came running up, curtsying and simpering and giggling and accidentally kicking the Prince in the shins. "Your Majesty! It's such an honor to meet you!" "My heart's all a flutter!" "You're so much more handsome than your picture!" "Oh what a fine suit you're wearing!" (You get the idea.)

Really, the suit wasn't so attractive. It was had so many sashes and slashes and laces that it made him look rather like a large birthday present. And that hat! It had so many feathers I almost expected it to fly right off his head. The Prince looked... overdressed.

But when my sisters began to giggle about how splendid he looked, he turned pink and purple with pleasure. "Ah, the little beauties!" he said fondly. "As the honeybee frolics through the April garden, inhaling the delights of the lily and the rose, so I take you under my wings. So lovely! So gracious! And such a sweet little papa, too!"

As the *what* frolics through the *what*?

My sisters sighed passionately as though he'd just said something terribly wise. Only the Prince's valet seemed to realize what nonsense his master had actually spouted, and murmured something in his ear. From where I was standing, it sounded like, "Don't bury yourself in the part," but that didn't make much sense either. At any rate, I couldn't hear any more, because at that point each one of my stepsisters seized hold of a princely arm and started chattering about their favorite flowers, and together they managed to march Prince Ramiro over towards our shabby parlor.

I ran over to where my stepfather was standing. "Papa," I whispered. "While they talk, I will run upstairs and get ready. I shall be all dressed by the time the Prince wants to depart."

My stepfather whirled around. "You!" he hissed angrily. "Look at you! The Prince of Salerno comes to our house and look how you greet him!"

Whose fault was it that I hadn't had the time to get dressed yet?

No point in bringing that up. "I didn't mean to, Father. There wasn't time for me to finish dressing. But I'll run up and hurry."

"You!" repeated my stepfather. "You are an embarrassment to this house! Tonight may be the most important night in this family's life, and just look at you! You're ruining your sisters' chances of impressing the Prince!"

I, an embarrassment to the house! I, the one who had worked and worked and done everything to keep it together! Now I too was angry. "And you are ruining my one chance to be treated like the lady I am!" I spat.

My stepfather's face turned red. He smacked me across the face. "Minx!" he hissed. "How dare you speak to your father that way! You march yourself into the kitchen and don't let me set eyes on you for the entire night!"

I sat down at the kitchen table and rubbed the angry red mark on my face. I tried not to cry. For the first time in a long while, I thought about my mother. I wondered if she would have called me an embarrassment to the house.

The gentle sound of the kitchen door startled me, and I turned around. It was the Prince's valet, a handsome young man with golden hair and a very simple brown suit. "I didn't mean to startle you," he apologized. "I... I... I wanted to see if you were all right."

Nobody had ever bothered about me being all right before.

"Oh, it's nothing," I mumbled. Even in his plain clothes, he was handsome and stately and I was embarrassed.

The valet sat down next to me and looked at the fading mark on my cheek. "He shouldn't have hit you."

"It's all right," I babbled hastily. "It was my fault. I was rude."

My friend stood up sharply. "No one," he said sternly, "no one has a right to hit you for any reason! To hit another person because they make you angry is the mark of a bully and a coward." He stopped and glanced away. For some strange reason, he seemed as embarrassed as I was.

"I..." he began again. "My..." And then a third time, he managed to fumble out, "My name is... Dandini. I'm... the Prince's valet."

I shook his hand with dark cheer. "I'm Cenerentola," I said brightly. "I'm a mess."

Dandini looked at my loose hair and work-stained clothes. "I don't think you're a mess," he replied. "I think you're beautiful."

This admission seemed to frighten him, because he jumped out of his chair and seized his hat as if I would bite him. "I shouldn't have said that," he muttered hastily. "I must go!" And with that he ran out of the room.

No one had ever called me beautiful before.

After a few minutes, I quietly stuck my head out of the kitchen.

"Papa," I whispered. "I'm so sorry I was impertinent. It won't happen again. If I run upstairs and make myself into a lady--" my sisters' phrase-- "may I come to the palace with you?"

My stepfather shot me a glare that would have felled an ox. "So you can vent your impertinence at His Majesty too? You little saucy! If you ruin our chances of marrying into the royal family, I swear I'll rip that saucy little head off your shoulders! Back into that kitchen where you belong!"

"Please..." I begged. "Just for an hour... half an hour! Just once in my life I want to dine like a gentlewoman!"

"Kitchen!" roared my father. And that was the end of that.

The Prince was helping my sisters with their wraps and didn't notice a thing. But I thought that the valet saw, for he paused on his way out the door and looked sadly towards the kitchen, where I sat crying.

Now as I look over the events of that remarkable night, I think it must have been no more than fifteen minutes that I sat by the fire, howling as if my heart would break. But at the time it seemed like forever and a day. I cried and cried and cried until no more tears would come, and just as I was drawing a long breath, someone knocked at the kitchen door.

It was the beggar. "La!" I cried. "You frightened me! I thought you had gone away."

"I did," said the beggar. "But I came back again."

"If you're looking for supper, we've got none," I griped. "The Baron and my stepsisters are dining out."

"I know," said the old man. "I saw them go out at the front gate. Why aren't you with them?"

My head dropped to the table as I started crying again. "Be-be-because they say I'm an embarrassment to the house and ought not to be seen with them. They say I'll ruin everything just by showing up!"

"Tcha!" cried the beggar angrily. "A sweet, kind, generous, hardworking young lady like you, an embarrassment to the house? Never! A credit to the family, yea, and all its ancestors, that's what you are. It's them that's the embarrassment."

For some reason this made me cry even harder.

"There, there, daughter," said the old man kindly. "Dry your eyes. God has heard your cries."

I took the handkerchief from the old man's hands and opened my mouth to say something really nasty about God, but the words never came. For beneath my fingers I felt French silk and Venetian lace, and I stopped to wonder why a homeless old beggar man was carrying a handkerchief fit for a duke.

The old man had unbent himself and stood tall and imposing, his thick and well-groomed white beard cascading down his massive chest. Underneath his heavy brown cloak was a rich black velvet cassock and a fine lace collar. I even caught a flash of gold at his throat.

The questions *what* and *who* mixed themselves up into a confused, "Whr...?"

Smiling delightedly, the old man wrapped his cloak about my shoulders and handed me to my feet as if I were a queen. "Come, Madamina," he smiled. "You are to dine with the Prince tonight, and it won't do to be late."

In the gathering twilight, I could see the form of a carriage waiting.

In the garden of Prince Ramiro's summer palace, the air was heavy with the scent of early summer roses. Over the beautifully pruned hedges and topiaries, the shrill sounds of my sisters' giggles could be heard. The Prince was showing them his splendid garden maze, and needless to say, my stepsisters had become hopelessly lost. As they fluttered around the hedges crying, "O Princey-wincey!" (I kid you not!), Ramiro stole stealthily down another row. He seemed to be trying to get away from them.

In the far corner of the maze stood my friend Dandini, shifting uneasily from foot to foot as if he were waiting for something. He looked up expectantly as the red-suited Prince came bouncing around the corner. "So?" he asked eagerly. "What do you think?"

Ramiro groaned aloud. "Not so loud!" hissed his chestnut-clad companion. "They'll hear you!"

Ramiro shook his head with gloomy amusement. "Those silly things? Hear? The day those two hear anything but the sound of their own brainless giggling, that'll be a day indeed!" His companion's face darkened as he continued, "Those girls have fastened on to me like leeches. They're driving me crazy! They're haughty and vain and greedy and don't seem to have done a stitch of work in their lives. In short, they're the most grating dinner guests I've ever had to serve and I can't tell you how grateful I am to be out of their company!"

The handsome young man in brown looked very distressed indeed. "I don't understand," he whispered. "Wise Alidoro said that in this family was a kind and generous woman fit to marry a prince."

His flashy red companion shook his head again. "Well, sire, your tutor Alidoro is a Mincing Fool if he sees anything kind or generous in those giggling blockheads. I tell you, they're haughty and vain and greedy to the last. I certainly don't know where Master Alidoro thinks he was this morning, but it wasn't at their house."

"I don't understand," man in brown repeated. "Wise Alidoro has never failed me."

"Do you still want to go forward with the Plan?" asked the man in red, sounding very much as if he hoped that the answer would be "No!"

"Yes," said his friend, with great authority. "As long as we've begun, we might as well continue. Let us indeed go forward with the plan."

By the time the ladies and gentlemen had found their way out of the maze, twilight had descended and pages had appeared with torches to light the lamps. "I think His Majesty looks more handsome than ever by candlelight!" babbled Clorinda. "I could just eat you up! And speaking of eating, do we dine soon and will there be ice cream?"

"Ice cream, ice cream, ice cream!" mimicked Tisbe. "All you ever think about is food. I care about more important things like Marriage and Family."

Prince Ramiro sat down on a garden bench. "Ladies, ladies!" he sighed. "Such spirit! Such beauty! You are both so very magnificently alluring. But you know I cannot marry both of you."

"I'm the eldest!" cried Clorinda possessively. "I have the prior claim!"

Tisbe was right behind her. "I'm younger and so I'll grow old more slowly!"

The Prince looked amused. "The little beauties!" he smiled. "How could I part with either one of you? What if... what if I were to choose the lady I liked best, and her sister... her sister could marry my valet. We'd all be together forever like a little family!"

My stepsisters recoiled in horror. "A valet???" they shrieked. "Eeee!"

Poor Dandini looked very hurt. "I'd be tender and loving," he pleaded.

"Nasty common fellow!" cried Clorinda and Thisbe breathlessly. "Vulgar habits!" "No manners at all!"

"I'd be gentle and kind and never raise my voice in anger."

"To give my beauty and breeding to such a coarse rogue!" "To think a baroness like me could ever marry a toad like you!"

This cruel scene was interrupted by the entrance of a page. "Your majesty," announced the boy. "A lady stands at your gates. She holds a royal invitation and says you have invited her to dine this evening."

Prince Ramiro looked confused. "Valet?" he whispered. "Did I invite another lady to dinner this evening?"

"It's obviously some misunderstanding!" barked Clorinda angrily. "She obviously has invited herself in order to thrust her attentions on the His Majesty. Tell her to go away and come back some other time."

"Shameless hussy!" echoed Tisbe. "What some people will do to marry a Prince."

But Ramiro had other ideas. He positively brightened at the notion that he would have someone else besides my stepsisters to talk to for the rest of the evening. "Go tell the lady that her gracious monarch the Prince of Salerno bids her welcome," he told Dandini eagerly. "You shall send fifty of my finest servants to escort her to the dining hall. Seat her next to me and tell her that we are all coming in to dinner."

Dandini made a swift half-bow and ran out of the garden. My sisters watched him go with very ugly expressions on their faces. "If she steals the Prince from us, I'll... I'll... I'll do something awful!" whispered Clorinda angrily. "She's got not right! He's ours for the taking!"

"Who is this lady?" Tisbe asked the page haughtily. "Is she beautiful?"

"Well ye-es... and no," mumbled the page.

"Yes and no? Make up your mind!" snapped my sister. "What do you mean?"

"You'll understand when you see her," said the page.

The great oaken doors swung open with a boom. Fifty splendid servants stood in ten rows to escort me into the great dining hall. The Lord Mayor of Salerno bowed me into a seat at the head of the table and the handsome Dandini unfolded a beautiful embroidered napkin into my lap. At the other end of the table I could see my stepfather the baron, who stood up when I entered the room and was staring at me with amazement. His face was red with fine wine and he turned to the Chief of the King's Cellars next to him to whisper, "Who is that lady?"

It was no surprise that he could not recognize me. Instead of the smutty kitchen wench he had left crying in the kitchen, I stood like a lady, tall and proud. A splendid evening gown of black and silver brocade fell from my shoulders, its full skirt sewn with hundreds of little winking diamonds. My work-roughened hands were covered in black silk gloves and even my unruly hair was pinned and curled and perfumed, strung about with thin strands of jewels. For once in my life, I felt like the Baroness Montefiascone.

Dear me! I have neglected to mention the mask. Yes, I was also wearing a black and silver lacquered mask, which is probably why my stepfather did not recognize me. I was taking no chances that evening, and although it was not Carnival season, I begged my guardian the old man to provide me also with a mask. So it was, when the Prince came in with one sister on each arm, they all gaped and stared and not one of them even thought of saying, "Is that you, Cenerentola?" (That was also why the page could not tell if I was beautiful or not. He's a good little boy, that page, and we are friends now.)

The Prince sat down next to me and plied me with conversation all throughout dinner. I liked him even less than when he was spouting all that flowers-and-bees nonsense in our hall. He was long-winded and pompous and laughed at his own terrible jokes. He had awful table

manners and talked with food in his mouth. He used the most coarse language. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to marry him, even if he was Prince of Salerno.

Faithful Dandini did not seem to mind his master's obnoxious habits. He stayed at the Prince's side all evening, respectful, courteous, and sweet. Whenever Ramiro said something stupid, Dandini made a funny remark to distract the lords and ladies. When the servers forgot to bring the salads, he told everyone that it was the new fashion to eat salads last, just so the boys wouldn't be embarrassed in front of the company. He was kind and attentive and always noticed when my glass needed refilling or I needed more of something. "Please, Madama, allow me," he would always say.

I couldn't help myself. I fell in love with him.

After dinner my stepsisters dragged the Prince into the salon, and I took the opportunity to look at the fine paintings in the great hall. Part of me hoped that Dandini would come out and talk to me. But when the doors to the dining hall opened and someone scuttled out, it wasn't the humble valet, but the Prince. He seemed to be running away from someone.

"Ah, my beauty, there you are!" he cried happily.

I sighed crossly. "How do you know that I am beautiful when you all you can see is my clothes?" I asked. "Under this jeweled mask I could be a dirty kitchen wench."

Prince Ramiro scratched his head stupidly. "But... but... you don't look like a kitchen wench. You look like a beautiful lady!" he insisted.

"Only from the outside," I pressed.

A merry voice came from behind us. "And if the Prince of Salerno does not know better than to look past the outside, then God help his kingdom." I couldn't believe my ears-- it was Dandini! Where I came from, servants who spoke that way their masters were dismissed or whipped... or both!

But Prince Ramiro ignored this disrespectful remark. He blustered on, "Beauty is beauty and truth is truth. And the truth of beauty is that you are beautiful and I love you. Marry me and I will make you Princess of Salerno!"

This was awful. I had only wanted to come to dinner-- I didn't want to marry this clumsy oaf! "Please don't say you love me," I mumbled awkwardly. "It makes me uncomfortable. You don't even know me!"

"I don't need to know you!" babbled the Prince. (What an awful thing to say!) "Out of all the most beautiful ladies in the kingdom I have chosen you. Will you not love me?"

I shot a pained look towards the doors, but I couldn't simply run away. "Please, Your Majesty," I cried. "Don't do this to me. You're a nice man, and I don't want to hurt you."

"How could you hurt me?" asked the Prince. (What cavernous spaces there must be between that man's ears!) "Tell me you love me."

This was too much. "I cannot, Signiori," I whispered. "Because I am already in love with someone else."

To my surprise, this statement did not seem to upset the Prince as much as I thought it would. Innocently curious, he asked, "Oh? Who?"

I did not want to speak, with Dandini's master towering over me. But the Prince coaxed and begged and pressed and promised that he wouldn't be angry, so finally I mumbled brokenly, "Your valet."

Everything happened very fast. The Prince sighed and stepped aside and there was a rush of footsteps and suddenly I was in someone's arms and Dandini, handsome golden Dandini, was looking down at me with wonder in his soft brown eyes. "Say it again," he whispered.

I tried to look at the Prince, but Dandini would not let me turn my head. "Say it again," he begged.

"I love you," I admitted. "I loved you from the first. I don't care about your birth or your breeding. You're a kind man, a good man, and no matter what I try to tell myself, I will always love you."

"You would marry me," pressed my love, "and live forever with a humble servant?"

"I would marry you," I insisted, "and live forever with the greatest, kindest heart in the kingdom."

"Sire..." came the Prince's voice from behind us. "It seems you have found what you have long sought."

Dandini kissed me very hard and this prevented me from voicing my surprise. Why was the Prince calling the valet "sire"?

"No mask or glove or veil could ever hide your beauty," affirmed Dandini. "Yours is the true heart which I have been searching for. Salerno was never graced with such a paragon to be their queen. All the people will love you for your kind heart and gentle humility, but none will love you as much as I do."

Queen? People?

My love took the scepter of royalty from the hands of the plump man in red, who relinquished it with servile resignation. To my utter confusion, he knelt at my feet and presented it to me! "I am Ramiro, Prince of Salerno," he explained. "I beg of you, take my hand in marriage, and with it my fortunes."

I did not take the scepter. "I don't understand!" I cried. "I can't marry the Prince... I don't want to marry the Prince! I want only you..."

Prince Ramiro-- the true Prince Ramiro-- remained on his knees. "I am the Prince," he repeated imploringly. "This man who has entertained you all evening is my faithful servant Dandini. We switched places, but now I am come into my own again."

I still stood frozen, staring wildly, so he went on. "So many ladies want to marry a Prince. Any old Prince. They want to wear silk dresses and command fifty servants and eat ice cream every day. They don't care who they marry as long as they get to be Queen some day. I don't want to marry a woman like that.

"I want to marry someone who loves me," explained the Prince. "Someone who wants to marry me, not someone who wants to marry the Prince of Salerno. So every time I am supposed to be entertaining the great ladies of the kingdom, my faithful Dandini takes my place. He becomes the great Prince and I become a humble servant. And all the ladies try to marry him and never notice me at all."

The plump little man in the fancy red suit smiled awkwardly. "It was great fun to be a Prince," he murmured. "The clothes and the horses and the servants. And all the ladies in the kingdom fawning over me. They're really a very silly lot, most of them." He sighed sadly and

then winked at me. "You're the best of the bunch, you know. I should have liked to win you for myself, but you've got better things on your platter."

"You alone actually cared about me for who I am," finished the Prince triumphantly. "Of all the greatest ladies in the kingdom, only you! And you alone shall reign as queen of my heart - and some day, Queen of Salerno, too!"

This was a nightmare. The Prince of Salerno, His Royal Highness, on his knees to the dirty little daughter of a penniless spendthrift! What would the King and Queen say when they knew that their son wanted to marry the shabbiest derelict in the kingdom? I would be laughed out of the court and sent back where I came from! A wave of unspeakable shame washed over me, shame at Ramiro's greatness, shame at my own nothingness. Sensing my distress, Ramiro stood up and tried to embrace me, but I wriggled out of his arms and backed towards the doors. "I can't marry a Prince!" I shrieked hysterically. "You can't marry me... you don't know who I am!"

The light went out of Ramiro's brown eyes and left them dark and sad, but I carried on. "I am nothing! I have nothing! I can't be a Princess! No one would have me!"

"I would have you!" cried Ramiro. "I don't care what you have! You have the greatest heart in the kingdom and that is enough for me."

All this time I had continued to scuttle towards the great doors. "If you truly mean that..." I begged, "if you really truly mean that... you will let me go. You will let me go and you will not follow me or try to see where I run."

My hand was on the door now and the horrified Ramiro stretched out his hands imploringly. "Please don't leave me!" he begged. "I love you! No matter your birth or breeding, I will have no other woman in the world but you. If you leave me like this I shall die of grief."

Even this failed to move me. *Men have died and worms have eaten them*, as the English poet says, *but not for love*. "Let me go!" I repeated. "Let me go and do not follow! If ever you find me again... if you are still willing to have me, knowing what I am... then I will come and be your bride. But now, let me go!" I turned to run.

"Wait!" shrieked Ramiro. "How am I to find you again?"

I pulled the little silver bracelet off my right wrist and dropped it on the floor. "Here is my bracelet," I said. "Wherever I go and whoever I am, I shall be wearing its mate of my left wrist." And with that, I turned and fled from the palace.

I don't remember much of the rest of the night. I must have left my gown in Alidoro's chapel and put on my old dress. Presumably I ran on from there, through the dark roads and deserted fields, and somehow reached home—surely was a miracle that I didn't lose my way in the night. (Can you imagine anyone running that three miles from the palace to our estate in glass slippers? The idea!) I remember bursting through the kitchen door and running throughout the house from room to room as if I had lost something. My stepfather and stepsisters were not home yet.

I sat down at the kitchen table and stared at the silver bracelet of my left wrist. Why had I kept it? If Ramiro came for me, would he live up to his fine words? He had been kind to Cenerentola when she looked like a serving girl, but would he want to claim her for his bride?

The sound of horses in the lane brought me to my senses. The Baron and his daughters were returning. I pushed the bracelet up under my sleeve and stoked the fire to make it seem like I'd been home all night. I smudged some cinders onto my face to make it look convincing.

My stepfather slammed the front door with a clap that shook the house. "Never!" he roared. "Never in my life have I been so insulted!"

"A beautiful young gentlewoman like me wasting her graces on a servant!" wailed Tisbe. "I'm forever disgraced. I shall throw myself in the river for shame!" So they had found out about the false Prince.

Clorinda stuck her head into the kitchen. "What are you still doing up?" she snarled.

"I was keeping the fire warm for you," said I.

My sister's eyes snapped. "You witless weasel!" she screeched. "Why on earth do we need a fire in the summertime?"

"Weasel yourself!" I shot back. "What on earth is wrong with you?" I was in no mood to bandy words with Clorinda.

"Go to blazes!" screamed Clorinda, and stomped off to bed.

I arose early the next morning and made the fires and boiled the water. Though the kitchen floor was still clean, I decided to sweep it, partly to give myself something to do, and partly to keep out of my family's way. Clorinda and Tisbe were probably still in foul tempers.

My stepfather had just come downstairs when we heard the sound of hoofbeats and carriage-bells in the lane. Excitement flooded my brain and dismay seized my heart and in my joy and fear I could not move.

Someone quite strong pounded on the front gate. "Open, in the name of His Majesty the Prince!" For once in his life, my stepfather answered the door. I heard the sounds of heavy booted feet on the threshold and of my sisters' slippers on the stairs. My heart stood still.

"Don Munifico." That was the stately tenor of Prince Ramiro.

"You Majesty!" That was my stepfather's scratchy baritone. "Your Majesty, I demand an apology for the outrageous behavior practiced upon me last night! My name! My honor! I demand... I demand..."

My stepfather trailed off into fearful silence. After a minute's pause Ramiro's voice sounded again. "Signior Baron Ottavio de Munifico de Montefiascone, I am the Prince of Salerno and no one demands anything from me."

Something that sounded like "mumblewumble" from my stepfather. A shrill feminine squawk and a thumping sound that I couldn't quite identify.

"That's better," said Prince Ramiro sternly. "And now, I would like to speak with your daughter Cenerentola."

My brain told my arms to drop the stupid broom but my arms pretended they hadn't heard. There was complete silence from the hall.

The door to the kitchen swung open and Prince Ramiro walked in. He was dressed in blue velvet and white silk and looked more handsome than ever. "Hello, Cenerentola," he smiled.

He did not seem at all surprised to find me plainly dressed and sweeping the floor. I couldn't believe it when he actually walked over and picked up the dustpan. "Please, Madama, allow me," he said, and actually took the broom out of my hands. Deftly sweeping a few stray

ashes into the pan, he opened that back door and tossed the dust and chaff out into the garden. The Prince of Salerno sweeping up our kitchen! I just stood there staring at him like an idiot. "Sire...!" I finally managed to stammer.

Ramiro put the broom back in its corner and walked back over to me. Gently he rolled up my left sleeve until he found the silver bracelet. He held my arm up to the light to make the silver sparkle in the morning sun. He grinned broadly. "So I've found you." He gave me a saucy wink that said quite clearly *That wasn't so hard!*

I had to laugh. How silly of me to think I had been fooling him! Ramiro put his hands around my waist and laughed too. "I think I would have figured it out myself in a day or two if Alidoro hadn't told me," he added, tickling my waist to make me laugh even harder.

"So you found me," I avowed, but I stopped laughing. "And here I am," I continued soberly, "The youngest Baroness Montefiascone, daughter of the shabbiest spendthrift in Italy. I keep the house and sweep the floors. I have no fortune, no dowry, nothing-- not a penny to call my own."

Ramiro stopped laughing too, but he wrapped his arms around me and held me close. "You said it to me last night," he stated calmly, "And I said it to you, and today I will say it a third time. You have the greatest kindest heart in the kingdom and that is enough for me."

"I don't need money," he went on. "I'm the Prince of Salerno-- I've got more gold and silver than I know what to do with. What I do need is love: simple, pure love."

He wiggled his eyebrows at me like a merchant making a sale. "So? Have I found it?"

He led me out into the hall, still smiling happily. There was Dandini waving at me from behind the kitchen door, and old Alidoro standing opposite him, looking equally pleased. Next to Alidoro stood my stepfather, but he did not look quite so pleased. His face was white and pinched, and he stared at Ramiro and me as if we were the End of the World incarnate. Tisbe was staring at us too, from the staircase where she still stood in her dressing gown and slippers. Clorinda lay at her feet, having fainted away entirely; apparently they had not forgotten the ugly scene in the garden and the terrible things they had said to the disguised Prince.... Oh, how mortified they were! Through the still-open door I could see several of Ramiro's servants waiting patiently outside.

"Master Alidoro," said the Prince loudly. "I have found my bride. I thank you for your help and counsel. Call my coachman and we will be off at once!"

At the word "bride," Tisbe suddenly found her voice. "Your Majesty!" she shrieked. "I... I... Your servant deceived me! I knew not what I said! If you only give me one more chance I will be the most loving and obedient Princess in Salerno!"

Ramiro snorted in disgust. "To think a baroness like you could ever marry a toad like me!" he mimicked. "I don't want the most loving and obedient Princess in Salerno. You might talk to him, though--" he waved towards Dandini, who was now dressed in the simple brown clothes of a servant.

Both parties had the same response to this idea: "Eeeeeeeee!!!" Tisbe fled from the hall and silly Dandini actually ran out the front door to hide behind the carriage! He looked so comical with his fat bottom wobbling and his feathers flapping in the wind that I couldn't help laughing.

Papa thought I was laughing at Tisbe. "You scheming little snickerpuss!" snarled my stepfather. "You planned this all along! You've always hated your sisters and me and now you're going to ruin us all! You tramp! You vixen!"

After all I had done for my family, all I had worked and built for us, they thought I hated them? What had I ever done to deserve those names they put on me?

The Prince was too quick for me-- before I had time to even speak he threw back his cloak and put his hand on his sword. "Have a care, Baron!" he thundered. "This woman is your Princess, and you will speak to her with more respect or you will find yourself in prison!"

Heavens! I didn't want my stepfather in prison, I just wanted him to be a little nicer! "Please...! No...!" I interrupted Ramiro.

I couldn't say what I meant and the Prince didn't quite understand. He wrapped his cloak around me as if I were a little girl and said gently, "Let's go home."

We were married in seven days in a quiet little ceremony at the palace chapel. To my surprise, the King and Queen approved of me; they had heard the whole story from Alidoro and called me "a sweet little dear." (I'm not quite sure what that means, but I take it they approve, and I won't inquire any further.) When I told them I didn't have a dowry, the King frowned, but the Queen patted my head and told me not worry about base things like money. Ramiro, of course, was deliriously happy and didn't want to leave my side even for a minute.

I must admit, it was rather nice to be a Princess. Instead of helping other people fix themselves up, other people helped fix me up. I could dress like a lady every day and see the King and Queen whenever I liked. Every night there was something new for the Prince and Princess to do, a play or dancing or music. It was delightful to be able to pick the music I liked and hire musicians to play it for me! And of course there was Ramiro, wonderful golden Ramiro, who never left my side and kept telling me I was the best thing that had ever happened to him, his family, and all of Salerno.

I tried not to think about my family.

But that didn't work for very long. Ramiro and I had only been married ten days when the heralds announced that two ladies had come to see the Princess Angelina. I could guess who my guests were, and even though Ramiro told me not to let them in, I decided to see them. We went into Ramiro's great study to receive them-- I figured that Clorinda and Tisbe wouldn't be as mean if the Prince and his servants were there. But my sisters weren't angry at all.

"Please have mercy on us!" they cried. "Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!"

"We're so sorry for everything!" wailed Tisbe.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you!" wept Clorinda.

"What's all this?" I gasped.

It took a while for my sisters to stop howling and explain. "Your mother..." said Clorinda, between breathy sobs. "Your mother... And Papa... and he didn't mean to... pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease have mercy on us! Don't turn us out into the street!"

This was not particularly enlightening. Tisbe had a slightly more helpful version of things. "Your mother, when she died, left you a very large sum of money. It was put in your name-- Papa wasn't supposed to touch it. It was supposed to be your dowry... you were supposed to take it when you came of age and use it to start your own household."

She blinked guiltily and continued, "But Papa took it and spent it. He spent it all-- there isn't a penny left. And now the King has come asking about your dowry... he says that if Papa hasn't got it, he will have our house! He says he'll sell everything we own and give you the

money that's rightfully yours! And... and that's right and just of course and you should have your money, but we didn't do it and we didn't have anything to do with it and there's nothing we can do about it now!"

My mother...? My dowry...? The King was going to turn my family out into the street?

Clorinda had pulled herself together. "Please, Cenerentola!" she begged. "Please! Don't let the King make paupers of us! We'd starve! I didn't mean to yell at you that last time... I was so upset about everything... I shouldn't have taken it out on you!"

"Please, Cenerentola!" echoed Tisbe. "I know we haven't been the kindest or most understanding sisters in the world. I know we did less than our share of the work... we... we... we know we're lazy sloths. And we're sorry. You're the only one who's been keeping this family and this household together... we know that. And we... we are grateful, even though we don't say so very much. But... but... if only you'll stand up for us now..." She trailed off weakly.

"We didn't do it!" shrieked Clorinda. "We didn't know about Papa and your dowry! You've been dreadfully wronged, but why take it out on us?"

"Papa didn't mean to steal from you!" Tisbe again. "He says he always meant to pay you back... But you know how he is with money! He never counts anything or remembers where anything came from. He's not really wicked, just dreadfully careless."

"Please speak to the King!"

"Please tell us that we'll be able to keep the house!"

"We're sorry for everything!"

"We'll change!"

"Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!"

I turned to Ramiro. "Is this true?" I asked. "Is your father planning to turn the Baron and his family out into the street?"

Ramiro nodded. "They stole from you. Everything they have was built by you. My father is prepared to do whatever is necessary to make sure you receive what's rightfully yours. It's their just punishment."

I was appalled. "Ramiro!" I cried. "What an awful thing to say! Just because it's just doesn't make it right!"

"You can still have mercy on these people, after what they've done to you?" asked the Prince. "After all those years of working and cleaning and cooking while they sat and curled their hair? After your stepfather stole your money from you?"

I sighed deeply. He was right. My stepfather and stepsisters did deserve to learn how hard life truly was. But it wasn't so simple.

"Yes," I said at last. "Yes I can."

"I'm sure Papa meant to repay my money. He isn't a wicked man. But I of all people know how stupid he is about money. He doesn't ever stop to think, and it gets him into trouble. And I won't deny that you two are as aggravating a pair of two-toed sloths as I've ever had to feed. But we are family, and family forgives. Especially if certain members of the family turn over a new leaf and take a little bit more responsibility for running the household."

The expressions on my sisters' faces were priceless. They stared at me with open-mouthed grateful smiles as if I were a goddess on a throne.

Ramiro shuffled his feet abashedly. "You're wonderful," he said to me. He thought for a minute and said, "I will buy the Montefiascone House from the King, and then I will give it to your stepsisters as a gift. Then you will have what is rightfully yours and they will be able to keep what they have."

Clorinda and Tisbe exploded with praise and gratitude. "Your Highness, we're so thankful!" "Cenerentola, you're a saint!" "You'll see, we'll mend our ways!" "We'll run the house ourselves!" "Oh, both of you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Oh, Cenerentola, you really deserve to have married a Prince!"

I had to smile at that.

So everything's all right now. Don Munifico and Clorinda and Tisbe and I all get along as family should, especially since we don't see that much of each other. I have made my stepfather Head Taster of the King's Wines, which he likes very much. Besides having access to the Royal Cellar, he also gets to live on one of the Royal Estates and be looked after by the Head Housekeeper. That was really why I gave him the job, you know. (Clorinda and Tisbe's promises notwithstanding, our old home would go to pieces in a day if he had to live there without my help!)

Only Tisbe lives at the Montefiascone House now. Clorinda managed to net herself a French nobleman named Beauregard and lives in faraway France. (Personally I think that Count Beauregard is a perfect blockhead, but she seems content with him, and that's what's important.) Interestingly enough, after all her screeching about commoners with vulgar habits, Tisbe actually married a servant. His name is Giuseppe, he's the Queen's Head Tailor, and he's terribly excited to be the new Baron de Montefiascone. Giuseppe is a sober, hardworking man whom no one would ever think of calling "Munifico"; he gives Tisbe all of the cast-off dresses that the Queen no longer wears, and she thinks she's got it made. As long as she's happy, I always say.

I, of course, am very happy. Ramiro and I have a little daughter now, Artemisia. She's a wild little thing with black hair like mine and she keeps me very busy. When I'm not running after Artemisia, I work on royal business or affairs of state; I am trying to build a national series of inns where poor travelers can eat, and I have taken fifty new artists under my patronage. After all, a Princess has to do a lot more than just be married to a Prince.

So old Alidoro smiles at me and tells me that this is my reward for being so humble and industrious and good. Perhaps he's right. Or perhaps it was just good luck. Either way it's an interesting tale, don't you think? My new composer Giacomo Rossini declares that he's writing an opera that will tell my wonderful story to the world. He says he's "spruced it up a bit" and says the opera will be wonderfully popular.

"Spruced it up a bit"???

I don't like the sound of that!

Oh well. As long as it ends in, "happily ever after," I'll take it.