

The Story of Stoneowl

by *Francesco Lanza*

Translated into English by Gaetano Cipolla

In Capodarso, one December night, while the Salso River shone like silver and the mountain was like a sapphire, Mirimì's wife suddenly felt birth pangs while she was sifting some flour. She leaned out of the window in anguish and called out as loudly as she could for her husband to run. Mirimì who was helping a sheep give birth, dropped what he was doing and started to run with his hands in his hair, not knowing what to do. But he had barely gotten to the door that his son had been born.

His wife handed the baby to him, white and delicate like a lily of the fields and instead of crying like all the other infants, he looked here and there with wide open eyes that were as purple as the Salvo and the tips of the mountains at dusk. Mirimì filled a ladle with water and poured it over his head saying:

I hereby baptize you
In the name of the Lord
As you enter this house
You are kissed by the Angel.
And he called him Stoneowl, like a mountain.

It was marvelous to see how the baby was growing always attached to his mother's breast, that were whiter and harder than cheese, and Mirimì was ecstatic over that baby and would spend long hours admiring him, with his mouth open, often forgetting to take his sheep to pasture, in spite of their filling the air with bleating so loud you could hear it from a hundred miles.

Stoneowl was really handsome and the mother believed that one day he would become a king, and when she was alone with him she would undress him completely examining him carefully to see if he did have the mark of the lily on his shoulder like Fioravanti or the little red cross over his breast like King Roger. The baby soberly kicked his legs in the air. He never cried and never slept, always with his two eyes wide open that were of a darker purple than the violets In March, serious like a king on his litter, and he was growing taller before your eyes like a palm in the desert.

Mirimì said the boy would be lucky and he would have broken the spell of the treasure of Sabucina and Capodarso; and his mother as she rocked him to make him fall asleep in his wicker basket covered with the skin of a he-goat, sang to him with a pensive voice:

Fortune, I bring you my son;
in the orchard I bring him,
I have brought him from far
Lay your hand upon him.

But Stoneowl would not sleep and he raised his little hands as though to touch fortune himself. Then his mother took him out of the crib and played with him and once in a while she whispered in his ear:

“Sleep, my child, for Fortune will kiss you, she will take you with her, she will give you silver and gold, she will make you a king.”

But Stoneowl kept his eyes wide open looking for Fortune and when he was tired of looking, he attached himself to her breast that was swollen with milk.

When he grew bigger, he was the most handsome little shepherd of the region and in Pasquasia, Grottacalda and Marcato Bianco there was no one who stand next to him. When he leaned over the bridge to look at himself in the water of the Salso, the coons and the ducks scurried in group to admire him, shrieking with glee and they allowed him to pick them up. The little falcons coming down from their clouds flew around his head in celebration.

With his little jacket of flannel, his fur shoes at his feet and the velvet cap on his head, Stoneowl looked like a little prince. And everybody told him that: the flowers in the mountain and the bushes in the river; and when he cared for the herds the dogs would bark in glee as though he were the master.

Whenever Mirimì managed to steal him away from his mother who was jealous of her son, he took him to tend to the sheep. And then they would walk endlessly, never stopping, as though they were pushed by a mysterious force: Stoneowl ahead and Mirimì after him with his sheep and the dogs with their tongues hanging out from fatigue. But nobody breathed a sound and when the sheep returned to the herd in Capodarso, they had their teats swollen with milk as though they had foraged the entire day, and Mirimì with the dogs next to him would fall asleep immediately on the hay dreaming about the treasure of Sabucina. When he woke up in the morning, he did not remember anything. Stoneowl was the only one who never closed his eyes and was not happy, because his mouth did not laugh as children do. His mother, to cheer him, related the little stories that she had learned when she was alone in Capodarso, but it was all in vain. Mirimì too played songs on his flute, all the songs he had learned in the mountains or clapped his hands dancing in front of him like a bear, but in vain. The two of them could not find peace and kept asking the farmer from Pasquasia who knew the secrets of herbs and could cure animals from every disease, but Stoneowl who did not want to be touched, ran away like a sprite and would not show his face for the rest of the day.

“You’ll see,” the man said, “that your son has a little hole in his head and his brain will escape. We have to plug the hole.”

And he gave them a grain of wax and a little rue leaf on which he had uttered some magic words. But no matter how closely she examined him, Stoneowl did not have any holes in his head and so Mirimì threw the grain of wax and the leaf in the river.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you, my son?” asked his mother when they were alone in the house. “You are handsome and attractive, but if you never laugh,

what are you? You are a sheep herder, but if you have no peace, who will want you, who will kiss you in the mouth?"

For his part, Mirimì made him little cheese horses and little ricotta fish to get him to confide in him, but Stoneowl preferred to talk with the waters of the river and answer the coons and little falcons.

"Why don't you laugh, my son?" asked him Mirimì. "If you don't, you cannot break the spell of the treasure of Sabucina and you cannot kiss Fortune on her mouth who will make you king of a realm."

But Stoneowl, on hearing him, ran away like a sprite and walked and walked without ever stopping; and when he threw himself on the ground exhausted, the little flowers pricking his ear asked him:

"Why don't you go away and look for Fortune, o handsome Stoneowl?"

And then as the leaves of the trees rustled in the wind they whispered to him:

"Go look for Fortune, o noble Stoneowl!"

Stoneowl's heart would then swell like the Salvo River when it floods and the music of the forest reverberated in his head and in his aching ear he heard the words of an ancient singsong:

"Fortune will kiss you
and it will make you
golden."

For this reason, he could not find peace and he turned around to look in every direction as a spirit possessed with those violet eyes of his more violet than the evening sky.

As he grew to be a shepherd, Mirimì entrusted him to take the sheep to the mountain and gave him his rod made of ash on which the story of Saint Michael Arcangel was carved. "Go then, my son!" he told him, "And may the Lord accompany you."

The mother was weeping in the corner, hiding her eyes so he could not see her, and as he was ready to leave after kissing her, she ran after him and hugged him tightly not to let him leave.

"Wait, my son," she said as she wept, "Wait. I have not given you the supplies and if I don't, you will starve to death."

And she told him of the pains she suffered when she gave birth to him and in bringing him up and how much she had loved him and how much she would love him in the future. Mirimì with shiny eyes kept urging her to have courage, for he would return, and Stoneowl caressed her sweetly. Then she placed a little sack on his shoulder with a whole bread big as a wheel.

Stoneowl pushed the sheep ahead of him and left and her mother's scream filled the waters of the Salso River and the coons and the ducks clouded the sun with their shrieks. Mirimì followed him for a long while and forced himself to be cheerful, but

when the moment of separation came, sobs broke through his voice and waving goodbye to his son who was slowly disappearing, he did not know what to say. And when his son was no longer in sight, he dropped to the ground, and nobody ever heard from him anymore.

Stoneowl kept walking and walking without ever stopping. The sheep went before him, and the dogs followed him with their tongues hanging out. The flowers in the field wished him a good journey. On hearing the he-goats' bells and the whining of the dogs, the peasants and the shepherds turned around to look with their hands on their eyes and it looked as if that herd would never end.

"They must be the Viceroy's sheep," they said. "Or Falco's or Baucina's that cover the mountain like a cloud down to the sea. Stoneowl kept moving forward and it seemed like the land never ended before him. At times, he saw a market, at other times he passed through a farm, and everyone on hearing the traipsing turned around with amazement. The dogs would run to lick Stoneowl's hands and to jump on him joyfully.

"Where are you going?" The farmers asked him bewitched by how handsome he was.

"To look for Fortune," he answered and continued his journey.

Sometimes someone invited him to stop and rest after so long a journey and to convince him boasted about the goodness of his cheeses, his wine and the delights of the place, but he never even turned to look; others, feeling pity for him, shouted that he should let his sheep and his dogs rest at least, letting them drink at the cool springs and feed on the sweet grass, but the animals as though they were bound to him did not want to distance themselves, and they went on and on as pleased the feet of their master.

But no matter how long he walked, he never arrived and the land he measured with his steps was endless, and when he went through villages many were the sighs he left behind him.

He was in Pietraperzia where the young women leaning on their balconies morning and night await the husband to take them away, like birds in the hand; and the bleating filled the streets.

"Stop!" The young women repeated at his every step. "Stop, handsome young shepherd!"

I have all my good linen sheets,
take me away dear husband,
my sweet.

But Stoneowl went by without even looking at them and the ringing of bells stunned the air.

But in Piazza, where the young women are as savory as chervil, they all ran out to see him and steal him away and some of them more daring than others sought out his mouth whispering into his ear:

sugar and honey are mine,

Take me, sweet shepherd, as thine
If you don't, for me the sun won't shine.

But he did not hear and the dogs began howling for them to leave him alone.

It was in Valguarnera where the young women sigh in vain fogging their windows with longings and the time that flows is just lost, and as the bleating was heard in the air and the footsteps on the cobblestones all the windows flew open and greedy eyes devoured the handsome young shepherd, quickly falling in love; but no matter how burning or sad their invitations were, Stoneowl did not even notice and moved on.

It was in Butera and in Mazzarino where the orchards are full of cucumbers sold in the city, in Villarosa and in Barrafranca where the girls are all plump; in Terranova and in San Cataldo, in Calascibetta and Castrogiovanni where the girls have mauve eyes and flesh the color of milk and honey, but he never met Fortune and nobody could explain why that was.

"Handsome young shepherd," finally said a farmer wearing a hood made of flannel. "If you're looking for Fortune go to the city and you will find her."

Stoneowl turned his sheep around and started to go toward Caltanissetta and, walking through mountains, plains and valleys, he came to the gates of the city, but the customs guards, on seeing the endless herd and the tired and fierce dogs did not let him in and threatened to put him in jail as a vagabond and they called for the Captain at Arms to remove him from there.

The Captain at Arms who was lanky and thin with moustaches, wearing spurs on his feet and feathers in his hat, made him advance and expecting to frighten him with his mean looks, asked him with an arrogant tone where he was going and what he was looking for.

"I am looking for Fortune who is waiting for me," Stoneowl answered looking at him with no fear in his eyes that were violet like the mountains at dusk and the Salso at Capodarso.

The Captain at Arms took pity on him and laughed heartily and set him free to go where he pleased, but calling him back in a hurry he ordered him not to bewitch the girls.

So Stoneowl continued to walk as was his destiny with his little sheep before him and the dogs behind, and everybody ran to see him and to ask him where he was going.

"To look for Fortune," he would answer and go on his way.

As he went round and round there was not a single woman who was not sighing after him and the She-Captain, who was pretty as a quail, was suffering the pains of love on account of the handsome young shepherd. One night as she heard him pass by below her windows, she climbed down to meet him and, embracing him with passion, under the veil of night, she whispered on his mouth. "Come with me, Stoneowl, I am the Fortune you are seeking."

But although her kisses were sweeter than wine and her breasts softer than a silken pillow, Stoneowl found no relief for his torment and the beautiful woman went mad and died of heartbreak.

But Stoneowl did not lose courage and his heart was full of hope. One night finally, passing through the Monastery of the Capuchins, Fortune went to meet them. Light as a leaf and straight as a moonbeam, she passed among the little sheep and asked Stoneowl:

“Where are you going, young shepherd more handsome than a king?”

And he admiringly replied:

“I am seeking Fortune.”

She surrounded his neck with one arm and kissing him right on his mouth, she whispered:

“I am Fortune.”

At that kiss and those words, Stoneowl was immediately transformed into gold: his curly hair, his violet eyes like the Salso and the little sack on his shoulder which had the bread still intact and with the little sheep that were bleating and the dogs that were barking in happiness. They all remained standing still and shining in the moonlight and suddenly they disappeared as a breath of wind.

Where Fortune took them nobody knows, but on nights when silence is deep, she awakens the young shepherd from his fortunate dream of gold with a kiss on his forehead, and takes delight in him: a joy without end.

(Storia di Pietracucca, Racconti postumi del Fondo Vittorio Lanza)