

## A DWARF WIVES' TALE

by

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### PART I

Once upon a time there were three Dwarf maidens, and their names were Danna, Stanna and Anna. They were different from other Dwarf women in many ways. To begin with, they were triplets, a most unusual thing among dwarves. As we know, dwarves do not have many children, and if a couple had one child it was usually enough; but to have three and daughters at that, was downright unnecessary. Many of the dwarves thought they ought to be made away with quietly - one who did was tough old Grakk, and he said so - but their King Thror (the third of that name) would have none of such cruelty. He did his best all through his reign, to soften the grim hearts of his people, and he partly succeeded. (This was in the days of their prosperity in the Lonely Mountain, long before the coming of the Dragon). In any case, the mother of the girls was Banni, a very strong minded lady, who had no intention of letting any harm come to her daughters; and their father, Klimmo, was a very respected and important craftsman, and held certain valuable secrets about the working of mithril. So the dwarves, after all, left the three girls alone.

And very soon, as they grew up, they began to show other differences. Dwarf women, even the young ones, have hard features, squashed noses, beetling and bristling brows, scanty colourless hair, or sometimes sooty black and rough skin which becomes a pasty colour from long seclusion from the light. (But their eyes, when you can see them, are often blue and kind). When they are of mature age, they usually grow beards, but when young, if they have occasion to go abroad, they are compelled by custom to wear artificial beards like she-Pharaohs. Not very attractive - but dwarves on the whole, care nothing for female attraction.

But Danna, Stanna and Anna had smoother skin than the others, a softer line of brow and chin and their hair had a tendency to be finer, curlier and even a little golden. Especially Anna. The other dwarf women (there were not many) tut-tutted and covered the girls' heads with starched white caps or sometimes red handkerchiefs. Not that the girls ever saw themselves, for they never saw a mirror. It is true that the dwarves made mirrors - very beautiful ones, gleaming and meticulously bevelled, framed in silver and gold, for noble ladies and princesses in their castles; but these were made in a locked room, that none of their womenfolk were ever allowed to enter. Pictures sometimes came from the world outside, of lovely ladies with smooth round faces and streaming hair and willowy forms - carved and painted, to be framed or set in locket, or copied in ivory inlay or in mother-of-pearl, or to be worked in embroidery, for some of the Dwarf wives were embroideresses. But the Dwarf wives looked on such things as on any other rare and beautiful thing as upon jewels or rare metalwork, or shells, or flowers of lovely shape, as beauty to be admired in its own right and in no way relating to themselves. They loved beauty, both the dwarves and their women, with a deep and sensitive love, but never looked for it in themselves or in each other. Richness, yes, the men would plait their hair and beards with gold bands and adorn their belts and the hems of their tunics with borders of gems and a handsbreadth wide; but the women did not care for this and rather laughed at the men for their vanity. They themselves wore sober stuff gowns and coifs, and put all their love of beauty into the glorious jewels they made for other women to wear.

Like all good folk of Middle Earth, the dwarves always rested one day in seven, the day they called Highday. That day they ate a rather special meal, and mostly go to sleep after it. So one rest day, in the afternoon, the three Dwarf maidens found themselves by the door of the secret room the one they were never allowed to go in, and the door was open and there was nobody on guard. So of course they went in.

They stood aghast, for it seemed as if they had stepped into a crowd of people, but a silent crowd. Not still, though, as the girls drew back, all those people drew back too. Emboldened, they stepped forward, and all the crowd stepped forward. Then Anna, bolder than the others, tiptoed up, stretched out her hand as the girl confronting her was doing, and touched - glass. Then they understood.

"Oh, look, Danna and Stanna!" she cried. "These must be mirrors, oh, lots of mirrors - mirrors everywhere".

They crowded in to look. The mirror images, angled and cornered on each other, multiplied bewilderingly, mocking their gestures.

"Yes, these must be mirrors" said Stanna, in an awed whisper.

"And those, those people are ourselves?" said Danna.

But Anna cried "Oh, but how ugly we are! How ugly! Oh, how ugly!"

And she turned and fled from the room and out of the great cave under the Mountain.

She stood at the door, the great entrance where the river runs out and downwards towards the town of Dale and the Long Lake where Esgaroth is, and it was an hour before sunset, when the low light of the sun makes all colours richer. And down the road there passed an Elf.

His name was Tintallion, and he was as beautiful as all Elves, and rode upon a fine white horse; and when Anna saw him she fell in love with him. He passed by the cavern door, and waved to her in common courtesy, but never looked back; and when he was out of sight, she went back into the cave weeping.

So Anna and her sisters went back to the women's quarters, and about their work, sad and thoughtful.

The next day they were in the Dwarf wives workshop, which was a pleasant spacious room, high up in the hill and well lighted. Here they wove and span and embroidered, and worked at jewellery and fine carving and all sorts of delicate crafts. There were not many of them, compared to the great company of Dwarf men who worked in the hollow chambers all through the inside of the Lonely Mountain.

"Tell us, Aunt Minga" said Danna.

"Yes, my child"? said Minga. She was their father's sister, a very serious and much respected Dwarf wife.

"Why are we not pretty"?

"Pretty!" Aunt Minga snorted and stamped her foot. "What an idea! Pretty indeed! What put that into your head? What has a Dwarf wife to do with being pretty? Child, we are the Dwarf wives and we have our pride. We are as we are, and our lords the Dwarf men would not have us otherwise. Put all such notions out of your head. Learn to be a good craftswoman, and one day you may be given in marriage to a worthy Dwarf. But not if you take fancies into your head.

"For my part," said another Dwarf wife, "I've never seen my own face, nor do I want to. Why should I care to adorn a thing I shall never see".

"Do not forget" said another, with a gentler voice "that we are the makers of beauty. Out beauty is in our work and how could we do it if we spent time and trouble adorning ourselves? Let our beauty flow from our fingers". And she bent over the work she was doing, which was an exquisite carving of a naked child in rosy coral.

"So let's hear no more of this" said Aunt Minga.

"Yes, Aunt" they all three said, and bowed their heads; but Anna dropped two tears on the lovely wild rose she was embroidering on a silk scarf for a Queen.

Next day, they were at the door of the cavern in time to see their old friend Gandalf arrive. (For Gandalf, who lives beyond time, was about Middle Earth even then). They ran out to meet him and hung on his arms. He smiled at them, and patted their heads and pinched their cheeks.

"Oh, Gandalf!" they cried. "Make us beautiful! Gandalf, we pray you, we beg you, make us beautiful!"

He considered them with a twinkle in his eye. "So? You want to be made beautiful. Well now, you don't know what may come of it".

"Oh, but we don't care what may come of it! Dear, dear Uncle Gandalf, we beseech you, make us beautiful!"

"Oh, well then" he said, and he passed his hands over the face of each one.

Instantly they were changed. Their noses became neat and little rosebud noses, their chins and mouths were rounded and pretty, their brows were smooth like the brows of kittens above their big blue eyes. Their hair became more golden still, and curly; their figures were still plump and stocky, but more in the manner of plump little dolls, little chubby armfuls for any man, and their colouring was as pink and white as little dolls also. They saw the change in each other and needed no mirrors. The overwhelmed Gandalf with thanks and kisses, and knocking the tall hat off his head, and fled inside the cavern, laughing and delighted. There they ran to the embroiderers' store, deserted now, for it was late afternoon, and pulled out rolls of rich silks and girt and draped them round themselves, and over their sober dresses, to make themselves dainty gowns, and they snatched up chaplets of jewels to adorn their golden curls, and so accoutred, they went down the long stairs into the great hall, where the dwarves were assembled, with Thrór the King, for their evening meal. And as they entered, silence fell for a second, and then every dwarf gasped and clapped his hand over his mouth, but from the Dwarf women came a long hissing as of angry snakes.

Thrór beckoned them up to the dais, and they came timidly; then he turned to Gandalf beside him and said "Did you do this?"

"Yes, my lord king" said Gandalf uneasily. "They cajoled me"

"Then it must be undone again".

"Very well" said Gandalf, and he passed his hands over Stanna's face. Instantly she was before, knobby brow, piggy nose, pasty complexion and all, except that her hair still remained a little more golden and curly than it had been. Then he did the same to Danna. But when he looked round for Anna, she was gone.

Anna had no intention of losing her new beauty. She had turned and slipped out of the hall and down through the passages, throwing off her silks and jewels as she went. She ran and ran, through the great gateway where the river flowed, and out to the road onto the world, still running as fast as she could go.



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