

"The Pomegranate Seeds"
from *The Tanglewood Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Part 1

At the opening of our story, Mother Ceres is busy tending to the harvest of wheat, corn, rye, and barley; her daughter, Proserpina, begs to go to the seaside while her mother tends to the crops of the world. Mother Ceres hesitantly agrees but warns Proserpina, "The sea nymphs are good creatures, and will never lead you into any harm. But you must take care not to stray away from them, nor go wandering about the fields by yourself. Young girls, without their mothers to take care of them, are very apt to get into mischief."

After visiting with the sea nymphs, Proserpina does exactly what her mother feared—she wanders into the forest.

Innocently, she looked for and gathered beautiful flowers. One shrub was especially beautiful and seemed to grow new blossoms as Proserpina looked at it, almost as if to tempt her to come closer. It was so wondrous that she almost felt the urge to run away from it. She chided herself for her silliness and decided to pull the shrub and plant it for her mother.

As she pulled the shrub, a hole began to form and kept "spreading wider and wider, and growing deeper and deeper, until it really seemed to have no bottom; and all the while, there came a rumbling noise out of its depths, louder and louder, and nearer and nearer, and sounding like the tramp of horses' hoofs and the rattling of wheels. She soon saw a team of four sable (black) horses, snorting smoke out of their nostrils, and tearing their way out of the earth with a splendid golden chariot whirling at their heels. They leaped out of the bottomless hole, chariot and all; and there they were, tossing their black manes and flourishing their black tails, close by the spot where Proserpina stood."

Part 2

In the chariot, a gloomy but handsome man rubbed his eyes as if he had never seen the sunshine. When he saw Proserpina, he beckoned for her to come to him.

"Do not be afraid," said he, with as cheerful a smile as he knew how to put on. "Come! Will you not like to ride a little way with me, in my beautiful chariot?"

Proserpina's first thought was to call for her mother, but her voice was too quiet to be heard by anyone other than the richly dressed man in the chariot.

"Indeed, it is most likely that Ceres was then a thousand miles off, making the corn grow in some far distant country. Nor could it have helped her poor daughter for the stranger leaped to the ground, caught the child in his arms, and again mounted the chariot, shook the reins, and shouted to the four black horses to set off."

As they rode on, the stranger did his best to comfort her.

"I promise not to do you any harm. What! you have been gathering flowers? Wait till we come to my palace, and I will give you a garden full of prettier flowers than those, all made of pearls, and diamonds, and rubies. Can you guess who I am? They call my name Pluto; and I am the king of diamonds and all other precious stones. The one thing which my palace needs is a merry little maid, to run upstairs and down, and cheer up the rooms with her smile. And this is what you must do for King Pluto."

It is my opinion that even King Pluto had never been happy in his palace, and that this was the true reason why he had stolen away Proserpina, in order that he might have something to love, some sunshine in his dark world.

They were now on a dark and gloomy road, beyond the reach of sunshine.

"We are just entering my dominions . Do you see that tall gateway before us? When we pass those gates, we are at home. And there lies my faithful mastiff at the threshold . Cerberus! Cerberus! Come hither, my good dog!"

"Will the dog bite me?" asked Proserpina, fearing the three-headed dog. "What an ugly creature he is!"

"O, never fear," answered her companion. "He never harms people, unless they try to enter my dominions without being sent for, or to get away when I wish to keep them here. Down, Cerberus! Now, my pretty Proserpina, we will drive on."

Next they crossed over the River Lethe, a magical stream that makes people forget every care and sorrow. Pluto offered Proserpina a sip, which she refused.

"I had a thousand times rather be miserable with remembering my mother, than be happy in forgetting her. That dear, dear mother! I never, never will forget her. I will neither drink that nor anything else. Nor will I taste a morsel of food, even if you keep me forever in your palace."

To tempt Proserpina to eat a morsel and thereby trap her into staying forever, King Pluto sent for his cook who came up with a menu of sweets, seasoned meats, and rich pastries.

Part 3

"But my story must now clamber out of King Pluto' dominions, and see what Mother Ceres had been about, since she was without her daughter. We had a glimpse of her, as you remember, half hidden among the waving grain, while the four black steeds were swiftly whirling along the chariot, in which her beloved Proserpina was so unwillingly taken away. You recollect, too, the loud scream which Proserpina gave, just when the chariot was out of sight."

Mother Ceres raced to their home and throughout the countryside, carrying a torch day and night, looking for her precious Proserpina. Her torch burned bright with hope and flickered with grief, but she never stopped to rest. She became so distraught that she began to neglect her job of watching over the crops, and slowly the land began to die.

"At length, in her despair, she came to the dreadful resolution that not a stalk of grain, nor a blade of grass, not a potato, nor a turnip, nor any other vegetable that was good for man or beast to eat, should be suffered to grow until her daughter were restored. She even forbade the flowers to bloom, lest somebody's heart should be cheered by their beauty.

It was really pitiful to see the poor, starving cattle and sheep, how they followed behind Ceres, lowing and bleating, as if their instinct taught them to expect help from her; and everybody that was acquainted with her power begged her to have mercy on the human race, and, at all events,

to let the grass grow. But Mother Ceres, though naturally of an affectionate disposition, was now inexorable ."

"Never," said she. "If the earth is ever again to see any vegetation, it must first grow along the path which my daughter will tread in coming back to me."

Part 4

Everyone became so desperate that they petitioned the gods to intervene. Quicksilver , known for his speed, his short cloak, and his winged cap and shoes, and his snaky staff, was sent to King Pluto, in hopes that he might persuade him to return Proserpina to her mother.

Upon entering the dark dominion of the underworld, Quicksilver observed that "little Proserpina beheld this great king standing in his splendid hall, and looking so grand, and so melancholy (sad), and so lonesome, was overcome with a kind of pity. She ran back to him, and, for the first time in all her life, put her small, soft hand in his."

"I love you a little," whispered she, looking up in his face.

"Well, I have not deserved it of you, after keeping you a prisoner for so many months, and starving you besides. Are you not terribly hungry? Is there nothing which I can get you to eat?"

"In asking this question, the king of the mines had a very cunning purpose; for, you will recollect, if Proserpina tasted a morsel of food in his dominions, she would never afterwards be at liberty to quit them."

"No indeed," said Proserpina. "I have no appetite for anything in the world, unless it were a slice of bread, of my mother's own baking, or a little fruit out of her garden."

Pluto had his servants search the whole earth for fruit for Proserpina, but all they could find was one withered pomegranate. When they presented her with the fruit, Proserpina refused it at first, but could not resist and decided just to smell it.

"Dear me! What an everlasting pity!" Before Proserpina knew what she was about, her teeth had actually bitten it, of their own accord. Just as this fatal deed was done, the door of the apartment opened, and in came King Pluto, followed by Quicksilver, who had been urging him to let his little prisoner go.

Pluto spoke to his little ray of sunshine, "I can see plainly enough, that you think my palace a dusky prison, and me the iron-hearted keeper of it. And an iron heart I should surely have, if I could detain you here any longer, my poor child, when it is now six months since you tasted food. I give you your liberty. Go with Quicksilver. Hurry home to your dear mother."

Part 5

In a very short time, they emerged upon the surface of the earth. It was delightful to behold, wherever she set her blessed foot, there was at once a dewy flower. The violets gushed up along the wayside. The grass and the grain began to sprout with vigor and luxuriance, to make up for

the dreary months that had been wasted in barrenness. The starved cattle immediately set to work grazing, after their long fast, and ate enormously, all day, and got up at midnight to eat more. All the birds in the whole world hopped about upon the newly-blossoming trees, and sang together, in a prodigious ecstasy of joy.

Mother Ceres had returned to her deserted home, and was sitting hopelessly on the doorstep, with her torch burning in her hand when Proserpina came running, and flung herself upon her mother's bosom. The grief of their separation had caused both of them to shed a great many tears; and now they shed a great many more, because their joy could not so well express itself in any other way.

When their hearts had grown a little more quiet, Mother Ceres looked anxiously at Proserpina. "My child," said she, "did you taste any food while you were in King Pluto's palace?"

"Dearest mother," exclaimed Proserpina, "I will tell you the whole truth. Until this very morning, not a morsel of food had passed my lips. But today, they brought me a pomegranate and having seen no fruit for so long a time, and being faint with hunger, I was tempted just to bite it. The instant I tasted it, King Pluto and Quicksilver came into the room. I had not swallowed a morsel; but—dear mother, I hope it was no harm—but six of the pomegranate seeds, I am afraid, remained in my mouth."

"Ah, unfortunate child, and miserable me!" exclaimed Ceres. "For each of those six pomegranate seeds you must spend one month of every year in King Pluto's palace. You are but half restored to your mother. Only six months with me, and six with that good-for-nothing King of Darkness!"