

Love And The Princess.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess, who lived in a great castle and had, it seemed, all that heart could desire. Yet one thing she lacked, and was ever seeking. For she had heard of a strange thing called "love" and much she wondered what this might be. Many a one she asked concerning it, and each told her differently.

"Love," said the wise man, "is a certain disease of the brain, causing its victims to do strange and unreasonable things."

"Love," answered her maidens, "means men, and men, a host of devoted slaves."

"Love is a star," cried the young knights of the court, "ever beckoning men upward from this dark world!"

"Love is a game," said the courtiers, "a pleasant pastime for idle days."

"Love?" muttered a wrinkled dame, with trembling wistfulness. "Ay, once I knew what love was. It is a beautiful bubble, a dream of youth, that fades with the fading summer."

So even the princess sought in vain, nor wiser grew with her seeking.

Now it chanced on a certain day that as the princess rode alone in the forest, she met a young peasant maid, loitering down the woodland path, and singing as she came.

"Good-day, little maid!" said the princess, smiling. (And who could resist her smile?) "Methinks thou seemest happy, alone in the wood today."

"And why should I not be?" was the simple answer. "For I love Karl, the miller's son, and he loves me; and in the autumn we will be wed."

The princess gazed at her questioningly.

"Thou too!" she exclaimed. "Many a one have I heard speak that word lightly; of many a one have I sought its meaning, and none there be to tell me. Yet, perchance, thou mayest know, though but a peasant lass. What is this love, whose name is on all men's lips?"

For some time the young peasant stood silent, gazing into the wood with unseeing eyes.

"I know," she said at last, "but I know not if I can make thee understand. Didst ever know a man whose every thought answered thine—with whom thou couldst spend the hours in gladness and content?"

"Of a truth I have," replied the princess, readily. "Such an one is my brother, Prince Rudolph. He is tall and strong, and wise, yet always kind to me. Often we hunt together—"

"No, no!" interrupted the girl. "Not thus do I mean. Didst ever know a man whom thou couldst reverence and almost worship—whom thou couldst obey scarce knowing the reason why?"

"No, never," returned the princess, "unless mayhap my father," she added more gently. "Him will I ever obey and reverence with all affection."

The maid shook her head despairingly, yet tried again.

"Hast ever known one of whom thou hast always been tender—whose hurt cries out to thee for comfort, and whose fault thou canst forget?"

The princess thought a little.

"Yes," she said at last. "There is a lad at the court—his wits are not quite right, and many mock at him and play tricks upon him. But he has ever been faithful to me, and toward him I feel naught but pitiful tenderness."

Tears came into the peasant maid's eyes.

"Oh, I pity thee!" she cried. "I do pity thee so! For thou hast never

known the one great happiness that abides always and makes the whole world the servant of thy joy."

The princess gazed at her, a dawning light in her beautiful face.

"Sayest thou so?" she murmured thoughtfully. "Yet, of a truth, once in the long ago I was happy, with never a thought of sorrow or regret. Would that be a sign?"

"Mayhap," the other answered eagerly. "Was ever a care had power to harm thee? Didst ever look back to the years gone by, or long for the years to come?"

"Nay," answered the princess dreamily. "The present, it sufficed us, and with our happiness we needed no past nor future."

"Was there another, then, who shared thy happiness? Oh, tell me, tell me! Haply—haply thou hast known, after all."

"I am not sure," began the princess, slowly. "It was long years ago, ere yet my father was made king of this fair realm. Often I wandered in the forest near the castle with only my great hound for company. One day, as I strayed among the trees, I came face to face with an armed youth riding upon a black horse. Thereat I cried out and shrank back—for I knew not who he might be, and feared violence—but he sprang from his horse and came to me, bidding me have no fear. Then I saw that he was but a lad of some fourteen summers, scarce older than myself. Somehow, as children will, we made friends, and all the long summer afternoon we played in the wood together. When the deepening shadows warned me to start homeward, I was loth to go.

"Come with me to my castle," I begged. "Didst ever see a castle? Mine is the fairest in all the country round. My father is a great lord and oftentimes stern, but he will be kind to three if thou comest with me."

"He shook his head, smiling. "I too dwell in a castle, northward beyond the great river," he answered, "and I must return ere nightfall."

"As he spoke he mounted his horse, making ready to go. I was but a little maid, and I clung to his bridle with tears, begging him to come again; nor would I loose my hold till he gave me his promise.

"Often after that he came to me in the forest and many happy hours we spent together. Knightly and loyal, and brave and gentle—small wonder that I thought none like to him, and grew to watch for his coming as for that of the sun. Yet there came a day when I watched for him in vain, and that night I sobbed myself to sleep. Never before had he broken tryst with me, and I knew not what to think. And the next day he came not, nor the next, till at last I ceased to look for him. Nay, I know not why he failed me. Perchance he was slain, or fared over seas, or mayhap the fortunes of war made him prisoner.

"It is all so long ago—I had almost forgotten. But he was my true and loyal knight, and if ever—"

A sound startled her and she broke off. Down one of the wooded alleys a knight on a fair great horse came riding from the northward. At sight of the princess and her companion he checked a little, then rode steadily on to where they stood. Dismounting, he knelt on the sward and lifted the hem of the gold brodered robe to kiss it reverently.

"My princess," he whispered. "My playmate."

She gazed down at him, at first with haughty surprise, then with a slow dawn of recognition.

"My knight," she answered at last, glad welcome in her voice. The little peasant drew back with satisfied eyes. "Now, at last," she sighed, "she knows."

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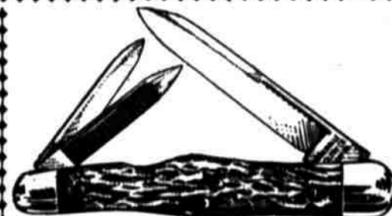


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