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THE KING'S DAUGHTER

by

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The King's Daughter sat in a high place, and she looked down from her tower, with unseeing eyes, upon the wide spreading lands over which her father, the Great King, ruled.

From the Courtyard below, a fresh young voice, fine as a linnet's, broke into chant and praise of Her who saw him not. For the King's daughter was far away in dreams. Scarcely she stirred, nor seemed she even conscious of her little favorite handmaiden, pressed against her knee, and most earnestly and anxiously searching her face.

"Highness"---timidly the maid plucked at her long sleeve---"the musicians go now to the music arbor and the dancers form upon the first terrace. They turn their faces humbly toward your highness. Pray you, condescend to wave your kerchief in approval".

The King's Daughter neither moved nor spoke. Her chin was sunk in the cup of her hands. She gazed far

off. The maiden pointed, dissembling her fears, and assuming a lightness of tone.

"The flower carts wend now their way through the castle gates. Every flower in the Kingdom has been plucked to lend fragrance and beauty to your marriage fete. All of the castle will be carpetted with flowers in your high honor. Your feet shall tread upon flowers only. In the City, they build giant arches, and these are studded with human flowers, that stand like radiant jewels, holding the royal torches that shall light the way for your marriage train this night".

Said the King's daughter, wrenching her slim hands:

"Speak not to me of marriage trains. Tonight, I keep a tryst with one who comes from afar".

"There lives no knight so bold" declared the hand maiden, "that he dares defy the edict of the great King".

The shadows deepened. The skies were a sea of Mother of Pearl. In a deep, brooding silence the end of day closed in about them.

The King's daughter leaned farther over the parapet, as though she sought to pierce beyond the deepening veil of twilight. Her eyes were dark mysterious pools.

"Oh my beloved mistress" said the handmaiden, "But last night I myself heard the words of the Great King. He has sworn a mighty oath, that should the stranger

knight return to our land, he shall be put to the torture and most surely die!"

Said the King's daughter:

"I too heard the oath of the King, my father. His words affright me not. My love and I fear not mere death. In life we stand on separate hills, A bottomless gulch between us. Death comes as a friendly, merciful Liberator, that places our hands in each other, and seals us in a marriage that has no ending".

"Highness, speak not of dark things. Death is horrible, old as time itself. Life is bright and young--an animated bubble that the Master Lord has tossed to us to play with for our little span of years. We do well to hold it close, for soon it must escape us, and no man knows whether ever again it shall be lighted for our desire".

"Maiden, I bid you go before me. Say in the Hall that presently I shall come. Say that I would meditated for the short hours were my maidenhood shall cease. Greet with cheer and guile those you meet. Dissemble and play upon their credulity. Seem not to hurry, yet go with flying feet. Stay not for any excuse, but hasten before me to greet my Lord, and escort him to our trysting place".

"Oh my beloved mistress. The great King, thy father----"

"Serve you me only. Fail me now, and never again shall you enter my presence".

The handmaiden of the King's Daughter has pressed her face to the hem of her mistress's robe. She has humbly kissed the hand of the King's Daughter, and with its aid, she is on her feet. From her eyes she has dashed the bright tears. Like a youth, humming a gay song, she goes forth, down the thirty three steps of the tower, and with laughter upon her lips, she bursts into the great hall. Jauntily she delivers the message of the King's Daughter.

She has slipped from the retaining hands of the Maids of Honor. She has evaded the severe questioning of the royal chaperone. Now she is flirting and playing tricks on the elder pages. With the tip of her long feather fan, which is made of the wings of a tropic wild bird, she has tickled a gaunt man of war behind the ear and he has grudgingly given her passage that lies free now to the corridor. Side glances of mischief and coquetry she darts at the guard, drawn ~~away~~ ^{stiff} like bronze statues along the stone wall. A knight comes swiftly upon her steps. She turns a shoulder, tosses her head, which is crowned with curls gold as the sun of day.

"Lady Jasmine, whither do you go? Permit me to attend you".

"No--I would go alone. I seek my little dog, who hides upon the terraces. Strange faces affright him. I would go alone".

On the first enciente of the castle three guards patrol. Their eyes gleam. How fair the

little handmaiden of the King's Daughter appears, as she puts her finger saucily to her lips, as though she would include them in some pretty, trifling secret.

Now her feet press the greensward. She waves her hand, the fingers twinkling, to the deeply bowing musicians and the sloe eyed supple bodied dancers, who watch her worshipfully. To the Premiere dancer she speaks a few gracious charming words:

"My mistress, the King's daughter, delights in your most lovely music and she has pleasure in your dance. Grace itself is not more charming than you, Oh beautiful Columbine!"

Flattered and deeply moved by the honied words, the premiere dancer smiles and lowly curtsseys; for the handmaiden of the King's daughter is herself a great lady and daughter of the King's Chamberlain.

Now she wanders lightly across the moss green lawn, calling softly to her little dog. There are eighteen terraces. All of these she must traverse. There is another space of wide open lawn.

The night falls unawares, but its dusky veil is gilded by the shimmering gleams of a golden moon. Under dense, arching boughs, the broad road slopes into the depths of the forest. It is a warm, velvety night. The maiden checks her headlong rush and stands, tensely waiting, as the Knight rides steadily toward her. Now the handmaiden of the King's daughter stands at his stirrup. The moonlight on her uplifted face, reveals its white terror

and despair. Her message is whispered through quivering lips.

It is dark in the secret, sunken gardens of the King's Daughter. On all side high and ancient box shrubs are banked against a thicker growth of camphor and pine trees. Here in this cool retreat, flowers that love shady glens thrive and grow with a brightness and luster as dazzling as those which turn their faces to the sun. Here are ~~za~~quilegia, pansies, purple, yellow and white violets, bleeding hearts, irises, wistaria, ferns, the lotus and the lily.

On the moss covered rim of the lotus pool sit the lovers and seek in the shadowed garden to see each others faces. The air is fresh and permeated with fragrance; it is full of the essence of life.

Time runs like a hare; but they know it not. They know not that half the night has already passed into eternity. For them the world is blotted out.

From out the mountains come the booming of the seven monster bells of the Royal monastery. One by one the temples in the neighboring hills answer the challenge of the royal bells. Music pours forth from far and near, awakening a thousand melodious echoes, and with the music of the swinging bells comes presently the strains of the Royal wedding chant and the national anthem of the Kingdom.

A thousand lights flash out in unison upon the

sounding of the saluting royal guns. High up in the air burst the jubilant fire works, while strung from one end of the Kingdom to the other, the lighted torches blaze forth their flame of joy. As far as the eye can see, even to the top of the highest mountain show the ruddy fires lighted by the peasantry in honor of the marriage of the great King's Daughter.

Streamers of beautiful maidens, bearing ropes and garlands of flowers encircle the walls of the ancient stronghold.

The great hall of the castle is filled to overflowing. On either side of the winding stairs, that leads to the King's own tower, his special guard stand at salute, while down the stairs, preceded, followed and flanked by the royal pages, in gala array, comes the great King himself.

From the Court without resounds the tramp of the oncoming bridegroom's train. The doors are thrown wide open. They enter to the clarion notes of the pipers. With pride and bold gallantry first of all comes the Proxy of the bridegroom Lord. He moves toward the great King, with all the assurance and gaiety of the conquering prince himself.

Halfway across the hall the two advancing trains meet. The pages and the courtiers fall back, and the King looks with a proud smile at the deeply bowing Proxy of the bridegroom, who has swept from his head the white hat with its long plume.

The King wears a purple velvet cape, padded with scarlet silk, piped all of the train and pointed hood, with ermine. It is a costume of ancient days, donned upon state and ceremonial occasions. The Proxy of the bridegroom Prince, wears his Master's robes. White as ~~thex~~ new fallen snow are the cape and plumed hat of the Proxy of the Prince who comes to wed the daughter of the great King.

As the King advances, his face becomes wreathed in gracious smiles. One hand he waves in greeting to his guest--the other he extends backward, and as he proceeds this hand is shaken impatiently as though the King awaited its immediate taking by his daughter.

A hush has fallen upon the glittering assembly. The king's outstretched hand clinched. The smiles fade from his face, and amazement and wrath encroach. Slowly he turns; his eye sweeps the circle of trembling maids of honor.

A grey faced dame, guardian and mentor of the handmaidens of the King's daughter, despatches one of her trembling charges to the tower of the King's Daughter. In tense silence, they await her return. But she comes not back. Empty, she has found the chamber of the King's daughter, and fearing the wrath of the great King, she has thrown herself from the gallery that encircles the tower.

Another maiden follows upon her steps. With chattering teeth and terror stricken eyes, she seeks some

hiding place within the tower.

Another and still another maiden ascends.

They return with lagging feet and eyes that glance in all directions save that of the King's enraged face.

Now the high voice of a herald page intones aloud the greetings of His Royal Master, as bowing profoundly he makes way for the affably smiling equery and proxy of the Royal Bridegroom. The latter moistens his lips, casts a glance about the splendid assemblage, and ~~add~~ addresses the great King:

"My master, the noble Prince of the South Moonlands sends me before him to greet you in his name, and to beg ~~you~~ your graciousness to accept the nuptial gifts tendered to the exquisite Princess Eglantine. They are too humble things to express the honor and admiration of my master; yet he prays you to accept them, as the respectful homage of one whose most ardent wish is to win favor in the eyes of your greatness and in those of his bride to be, the peerlessly lovely Eglantine".

There is a long and pleasant pause. Way is made for the gift bearers. The first of the wedding gifts rests upon a velvet cushion and is so fine and small that it seems a single spark of livid fire, ~~gleaming~~ gleaming greenly. Like a living eye it ~~seems to~~ glistens ~~into~~ the face of the bewildered and enraged King.

Brusquely he turns from the astonished visitors. Down the line of now kneeling handmaidens the King passes.

At the far end of the line, one seeks to slip through the guard that at the King's command has closed about that tragic circle. The lady Jasmine, favorite handmaid of the King's Daughter. Rough hands seize her, thrust her forward. They have bound her fragile little wrists, and forced her to her knees. Pale as death she meets the questioning glare of the great King.

One whispers in his ear of that late sojourn in Castle grounds. Another notes the dew and grass stains upon her silken skirts. Another retails the story of her passage through the hall.

In thundering tones, the King has commanded her to speak. Mutely her head shakes, the gilded curls trembling. A deathless fire finds its birth in the depths of her dark eyes. Her glance quails not. She speaks no word.

The King has summoned him of whom all of the Kingdom have most dread and loathing. The giant black torturer of the great King, looms now above the kneeling handmaid.

The King will strike three times upon the stone floor with his staff. At the third stroke, if she has spoken not, that little tongue that keeps so mute and still behind those child-like lips, shall be torn with iron pinchers from her throat.

The evil instrument is swung before her. The first thud of the King's staff resounds upon the stone.

Strange dreams, warm memories, besiege her mind in flood. The little events of her short life! They run like dancing quicksilver before her. Life is so sweet----"An animated bubble that the Master Lord has tossed to us for our little span of years". Thus she had wisely spoken to the King's Daughter. She wanted not to lose even the fraction of a moment of this so precious thing called Life.

But now the second thud of the King's staff resounds upon the stone.

Quite suddenly a strange new feeling flows over her. A psychic sense, as though one she loved intervened bodily there between her and the great King. She feels the soft pressure of a hand upon her head, and lifts her face to gaze appealingly up at that one that forms like a spirit's before her vision. Her hair is the color of the warm earth. Her face is pale, but the lips are red as the rose berry. Her heavily lidded eyes are dark pools in which mysterious and lovely things are mirrored. The whisper of her voice is as the music of an unknown land.

"Death comes as a Liberator!" says the King's Daughter.

The last thud of the King's staff resounds upon the stone.

The great hall is empty. The castle is in darkness. The drums and the bells and the saluting guns are silent. The dancers have disappeared, scattering like a

swarm of startled butterflies---away--away--from the grim castle.

Dumbstruck as the now tongueless favorite of the King's Daughter, her handmaidens ~~now~~ hide in their chambers, or grouped together cling and huddle closely, daring not to even murmur or voice their dreadful fears.

The King tramps up and down his chamber. He mutters or he shouts, raising his clinched hands above his head in his uncurbed wrath. At intervals come his minions, with catlike tread to whisper their spies tale.

Now the tortured handmaiden has returned to consciousness..... Now she leaves her couch..... She seeks a place of egress from her prison.?.... She is wrenching the iron bars, purposely loosened for this. She has climbed to the little gallery outside the window. She has found the rope that cunningly appears to hold the ancient vine. She is slipping down the rope..... She creeps along the rampart.....the guards feign sleep. Like a wild hare, she is fleeing across the lawn and down the eighteen terraces.

The great King has solicited the presence of the Proxy of the Royal Bridgroom. In atonement for seeming slight, he begs him to accompany the King. The Proxy of the bridegroom is thorny mannered and outraged. In his master's name, he likes not the manner of His reception. His eyes have rested not yet upon the prospective

bride of his superior lord. Vested with all of the royal authority and prerogative of the Prince himself, the Proxy assumes the right also to resent affront. As the King serves him, so shall his Master serve the King. Ungraciously, with ruffled demeanor, presently he agrees to accompany the King.

The fluttering sleeves of the fleeing hand maiden of the King's Daughter, gleam in the moonlight like the wings of a living bird. She looks not back, for she is intent upon reaching the secret trysting place of the lovers and to warn them, as well as her dumb lips may, to flee from the terrible wrath of the great King.

The King holds his robe across his left arm. He grasps his sword with his right. He tramps before his ~~minions~~ train and the sulky frowning Proxy. Now they have reached the opening in the deep hedge, which leads down seven steps and discloses the sunken garden below.

The moonbeams shine like searchlights, making a quivering, lighted path, to where, close clasped in each others arms, oblivious even to the maiden kneeling at their feet, the King now sees the lovers.

He has leaped like an enraged bull over the box hedge that bars his way. With avenging, lightning speed, the King's sword buries itself deep first into that which comes between him and the mark he has sought, and then more deeply into the mark itself.

Nothing now but deep blank silence in the darkened secret gardens of the King's Daughter.

The King stands like one entranced, his hand still rigidly clutching the sword, while over the sword's point his inflamed gaze pins itself upon the white garb of him he has slain. He mutters:

"An accursed stranger, he came to our land! Would report not his name; his race; his kindred! Boldly he dared to woo the King's Daughter!"

The Proxy hears him not. He is staring with distended eyes. An exclamation bursts from his lips. He drops upon his knees and bends above that silent form. Solemnly, reverently, the hat with its long white plume is swept from his head. His stern eyes fasten upon the amazed and anguished face of the great King. The Proxy's voice is husky--full of a most solemn import:

"My master, the noble Prince of the South Moonlands is dead", he says.