

THE PRINCESS AND THE BOY

By
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Glass towers rise out of the forest of concrete.

In one of them, high in the clouds, there lived a boy paler than the pale white sprout of a potato. Atop another there was a girl thin and fragile as the tendril of a vine. But the boy had never glimpsed her, and she knew nothing of him. Yet he'd heard of an Enchanted princess who dwelt on the height of that glass tower. The South Wind had told him of her. The same story was carried by the North Wind. The West Wind swore that the Princess was the prettiest girl he'd ever touched. The East Wind was still off visiting the Icy Hills. As for those vagabond winds flitting roundabout his tower in the evening like great winged birds, they are simply not to be trusted. For their tales are as false as they are gorgeous. The boy was told that the princess' tower was so tall it reached to the very heart of the sky. The birds were afraid of it. The winds fled cowering away. But no one had the key to it. How could he send the Princess word that he too was lonely? How soothe her fears?

Were he on a desert isle, he'd write a letter, stuff it in a bottle, and heave the bottle into the sea. The waves would roll by, the days go flowing after them. The sea would carry the bottle to her island, and the Princess would know that somewhere far off a boy was thinking of her.

Were she on the pinnacle of a terrible mountain, he would send her word by an eagle. Were she on some star, the clouds would find her. The boy who was paler than a potato sprout pressed his forehead to the window.

"Damn!" He was no different from the goldfish in its bowl. He found the biggest jar in the cupboard, filled it with water, and placed the fish in it, saying "Here's some sea for you!" But the fish wouldn't swim; it wouldn't even wiggle its tail; it just hovered, confused, and then dashed wildly about. "Tell me how I can reach my Princess?"

Never a word uttered the fish. And roundabout the tower the wind was still. What now? The boy rested his forehead against his hand. If there were such a tower, and in that tower an Enchanted Princess, then

naturally there would be some way to find her. But who was there to advise him? His parents had gone down into the concrete forest to work for their daily bread. He had neither sister nor brother. If he had a sister, she'd lend him her golden sash and he would climb down from his tower on it. And come to his Princess somehow! How scary that stone forest is! You look down, and its chasm yawns up at you. And there, high up in her glass tower, the Enchanted Princess endures her lonely days.

The boy was perched quietly on the edge of his bed. It was time for his nap. But if he were to lie down and stretch out his arms, would the Princess have room to sit and rest when she came, all tired and hungry? Tired, hungry? Gosh! He struck his head, stood up and went to lay two places on the table. Even his mother could not have made two nicer settings. A dish for the Princess, a fork, a knife, a spoon. Then a dish for him, and a fork, a knife, a spoon. One slice of bread for each. Some vegetables for her. Some for him. A glass of milk at each place. What else? The boy was hungry now, and said, "How pale you are, Princess! Let's eat."

Lo, and behold! Across the table from him, the dish was being emptied. He opened his eyes very wide and saw seated before him a girl as fragile and thin as the tendril of a vine. Putting his hand out, he greeted her, "Hi! Welcome to my house!"

The girl put her hand out to him too, saying, "Have you waited a long time for me?"

"Oh, much too long!"

"I sent you messages with my mirror. But you didn't understand them!"

"But I thought those were just the rays of the sun. One morning they brushed my cheek and woke me up early!"

"It was I who woke you!" smiled the Princess, drinking her milk. The boy marvelled at that: who would ever have thought a Princess drank milk?

"How did you know about me?"

"The winds told me. I used to lean against the windowpane and stare at the street. But that's like looking down into a bottomless valley. You must have been thinking of me for a long time - until I found you."

The Princess leaned across the table towards him and whispered, "It's our secret now."

"Secret?" the boy said, worried. Does she suppose I'm someone else? Maybe she'd get up and go away when she realised he was the wrong one. His heart filled with anxiety the way milk fills a glass to brimming. But the Princess stayed on. How many wonders she knew!

"At least I can beat you at marbles!" he said. But the Princess won all his marbles. Then she started drawing. "Oh, if only I could draw like that!" the boy thought. Beneath the fingers of the Princess, a jungle spread out, with flowers and butterflies of the strangest patterns. And the yellow eyes of a tiger followed them through the dense, tangled lianas.

"Be the Queen of my jungle!" The Tiger knelt at the Princess' feet. "This boy has just one little room - while my kingdom extends from here to the sea!" The tiger wanted the Princess to mount his back; but she thrust him away, laughing, "There's no other place as pleasant as this room!"

The Princess took the boy by the hand and said, "Let's go home!"

Easier said than done. The Tiger King would not hear of it. He roared with his ferocious voice, "Stay you shall! You must stay! My endless kingdom is yours. Here, take my crown!" And he held out his crown of diamonds and rubies. But the Princess tossed it aside in the bushes.

"I have my Prince! What use is your kingdom to me?" She embraced the boy. The Tiger shrugged: no one can be forced to love you, nor can love be won with a bribe.

"Go away!" thundered the Tiger, opening the jungle ahead of the boy and his Princess. There they were again, at his table in the tower. The Princess was drawing: mountains and forests sprang up before them. Were there deer in the forest? Squirrels? The boy didn't dare ask. Maybe the squirrels would have magical powers, and be able to turn him into an oak tree and the Princess into a linden? Or part them, and lock them away in their lonely towers?

The boy glanced sidelong at the Princess, not wanting her to see his fear. Then he took heart and smiled. "Draw me the Valley of the Moon. Draw the ship that will take us there."

Under the fingers of the Princess a ship began to grow. But the boy hesitated to board it: it looked too much like the goldfish in the big jar. It was all golden, and shimmered in the same way. "Get aboard, Captain!" the Princess called. "The ship's setting sail!"

And the boy went on board. The journey was long and tranquil. There would be singing children waiting when they docked. They must

rest, prepare for their landing. The boy made his bed on deck and lay down at its edge. From over his shoulder behind him streamed the airy breath of the Princess.

The sea was full of silence, and the sky full of moonlight.

Had years passed, or had the ship's hands slept but an hour?

A woman and the boy's father stepped into the room, which was pierced by a shaft of moonlight.

"Look", the boy's mother gasped, "someone's been here!"

On the table strewn with breadcrumbs, there stood two empty plates and two empty glasses of milk. And there was the boy, asleep on the very edge of his bed. They tried to move him over to the middle, but in vain: he would not be budged from its side. His mother smiled, puzzled. For of course she could not see that sleeping beside him there was an Enchanted Princess.

Translated by G. G. Champe