



The Plain Princess

Once upon a time there lived a plain princess. Since she had no obvious graces – like a pretty face, a pleasing voice, or a regal bearing – no prince had ever wanted to marry her. For many years her kingdom had been at war with a neighboring one over a woodland between them, but her father decided the violence had to end. To secure the peace, he would have his daughter marry the son of his enemy, that is, if the young prince was willing.

So the queen ordered a fancy dress made for her daughter in a size so small it made her waist look tiny, though the princess could hardly breathe in it. It was trimmed with priceless jewels and lace because the queen thought if the dress was fancy enough, maybe the prince wouldn't notice how plain her daughter was. Then she ordered dainty shoes made for her, so small the princess could barely force her large feet into them.

At her mother's insistence, the princess practiced dancing two hours a day, though the shoes were so tight she couldn't balance very well and they turned

her feet black and blue. "Patience and persistence," her mother reminded her whenever she wanted to quit, though the queen didn't have any patience herself. "Why must you be so clumsy?" she exclaimed every now and then, unable to conceal her annoyance. Despite her mother's criticism, the plain princess kept trying, not wanting to disgrace herself at the ball, where she would be introduced to the prince.

"But what if I don't like him?" she asked her mother once.

"You will marry him anyway," said the queen. "It's a sacrifice you must make for the peace of our two kingdoms." Under other circumstances, the queen might not have been so harsh, but...

On the day of the ball the princess ran away into the forest, feeling she couldn't face what lay ahead. She dressed in a servant's cloak with a hood so no one would recognize her. When she found a place far from any road or path, she sat down and cried her heart out in the silence of the woods. What would be the consequences, she asked herself, if she didn't go back? Would there *never* be peace between the two kingdoms? It seemed to her that there was no justice in the world if she had to marry the son of her father's enemy, but what other choice did she have? She'd already convinced herself that she wasn't going to like him, that he was bound to be cold and conceited, perhaps even cruel.

She'd just made up her mind to return home before anyone noticed her absence when she felt a warm breath on the back of her neck. Glancing around, she saw a magnificent horse with a fine saddle. "Where is your master?" she

asked with concern. "Has he had an accident?" The horse began to pace, then prance around her in a circle, whinnying as though answering "yes." Well, maybe the plain princess couldn't dance, but one thing she certainly *could* do was ride.

The horse let her mount, and, as soon as she was in the saddle, it bolted. Through the forest it raced until it came to a meadow; then it galloped over the tall grass, jumping every fence in its path, no matter how high. Never before had the princess had such an exciting ride. Up one hill and down another they sped. From the third hill, the princess spotted, in the distance, someone standing by a road. As they came nearer, she saw it was a young man dressed in fancy clothes.

"Thank you for bringing my horse back," the stranger said when they reached him. "I don't know what possessed him. I just dismounted to stretch my legs, and he raced off."

"So you're not hurt?" the princess asked.

"Not at all," he answered, staring at her.

And he was staring at her because he thought she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, to say nothing of the most graceful rider – the way she had jumped those fences, sailing over them as though she were part of the horse! She didn't seem a bit plain to him, with her wind-blown hair, her flushed cheeks, her dancing eyes. What he saw was a girl with an inner radiance.

The princess guessed the truth at once – that the stranger was the prince. But when he offered to take her home, she lied and told him she was a servant in

the palace of the king. Though she felt a little guilty about her deception, this was her chance to find out what he was really like. At the same time she couldn't help wondering – was it a coincidence that the prince's horse had found her in the forest, or had it somehow known she was there and brought them together on purpose?

The two of them talked the whole way back to the palace, and by the time they arrived she was already a little in love with the prince – he seemed so kind and sincere. For the first time she understood what prejudice was, because she had prejudged *him*. “Even if he decides he doesn't want to marry me,” she thought, “I'll always treasure the memory of this experience.”

When she asked the prince to drop her off at the servants' entrance, she noticed that he looked rather sad as he said goodbye. Then she went straight to her father and told him she wouldn't wear the fancy gown and dainty shoes to the ball that night – they were too uncomfortable – nor would she try to dance. Her defiance made the king angry at first, but after he had a chance to think about it, he realized she was right. Why should she pretend to be something she wasn't?

That night at the reception for the prince, the princess found herself trembling with anticipation. When he was announced, she braced herself for the worst. What would he decide? She needn't have worried, though. His eyes lit up when he recognized her, and a smile spread across his face. Even now he didn't see a plain princess, but the same girl he'd met on the road, with the wind-blown

hair, flushed cheeks, and dancing eyes...the girl with an inner radiance.

The ball turned out to be an evening of celebration, for the two announced their engagement. Yes, they married and lived happily ever after, and their kingdoms have remained at peace right up to the present day.