

## The Princess Pandora

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"There are none in the kingdom. The King has had them all banished, I believe."

"That is quite true," the jester returned. Then suddenly he sprang to his feet, all his bells a-jingle.

"The box of blue butterflies!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten all about it! The hunters have had it sent, as the King ordered, and the butterflies are to be set free at once in the garden."

"I would like to see the butterfly hunters, and hear from themselves the story of where they searched, and how they captured them," said Pandora. "Send the butterfly hunters to me here."

Beppo's face lengthened.

"The hunters did not return. Your Highness," he said slowly. "Only the box was shipped from a far port. . . . In the damp, hot country where these butterflies were caught men often fall ill of a strange fever. This evil befell the men who followed the King's orders. They did not return."

The princess gave a slight shiver in the warm sunshine. Her jewelled hands moved restlessly for a moment, then were still.

"Tell the servants to bring the box of butterflies," she commanded.

The jester obeyed, and shortly returned with two servants, who carried between them a great glass box, open, but lightly screened at the top with silver wire.

Through the glass gleamed the wonderful wings of many dazzling blue butterflies. The princess caught her breath at the sight! They were of every shade of blue, and were iridescent. Their wings sparkled and glittered, and caught the light like blue flame.

"Unfasten the screen, and set them free!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Let them fly through the sun. Oh Beppo! Did you ever see such beautiful things?"

Beppo never had, apparently, by the way he watched them. But his wise young face looked white and sad for the moment, and he said little in answer.

"Do you not like them, Beppo?" exclaimed the princess, half impatiently. "Do you not wonder at them? Why don't you say something?"

"I was thinking; pardon me, Your Highness—just thinking."

"Of what?" she demanded imperiously. "Of the deep swamp-land where these pretty things come from, and of the hot fever mists that rise there at night; of the loneliness of the jungles, and the darkness of them on nights when there is no moon," he returned gently.

The princess gave a little shrug. "Don't spoil it all," she said, "and just as I am getting interested."

The jester laid one hand on his heart, and bowed low. The merry curves came swiftly back to his mouth.

"What is your royal pleasure?" he enquired.

"Unfasten the screen, as I said before," said the princess.

Beppo turned the screws and lifted the wire cover from the glass box. The butterflies seemed to realize that their imprisonment was over, for one by one they rose, unfurled their exquisite wings, and fluttered up into the rose-scented air.

One by one they went, and the princess watched their flight with soft exclamations of admiration. Then after a while she watched them in silence, and with less intentness, and when the very last of the blue wings had flown up from the box, she sat down rather wearily on the marble seat again.

"There are so many of them, Beppo," she said, "and after all—they are only butterflies, and all alike."

"O hardly!" he replied laughingly, "they are of a thousand different shades!"

"But all blue," she insisted, "and they flutter just like common butterflies. Tell them to take the box away."

The jester glanced into the empty glass cage before replacing the cover.

"Why, Your Highness!" he exclaimed. "There is still another butterfly at the bottom! His wings are folded together, and are like dead leaves! I will stir him a little with a blade of grass, to make him fly out also."

The princess went over to the box, and looked in also.

"He is very ugly and big," she said, "and his wings are just like faded autumn leaves, as you say. He seems asleep. Yes, stir him up and make him fly away."

The jester took a long blade of grass, and touched the quiet butterfly. Two—three times he touched him, and then the dull-coloured wings fell slowly open. Marvel of marvels! On the upper side they shone with all the colours of the rainbow.

The blue butterflies appeared to have found their paradise in the rose garden, but this one flew high and straight toward the garden walls. His wings might have been set with cut jewels, they so blazed with the reflected light, and he was of all the colours that we of this world know.

"Follow him! Follow him, Beppo!" cried Pandora, gathering up her long gown, and starting in pursuit of the butterfly. "Don't let him escape from the garden. See, he is over the wall!"

The jester caught the princess by the hand, and off they ran wildly.

On and on, and on they went, their young feet skimming the ground.

The old gatekeeper gazed after them with staring eyes, and mouth ajar as they passed him!

The red-coated sentinels on duty almost dropped their rifles. The maids of honour, who had followed in half-hearted fashion as far as the gates, thinking Beppo and the princess were trying some new and extraordinary game, gave up the chase as they grew overheated, and returned aimlessly to the lawn.

Down the King's Highway flew the strange butterfly, and swiftly after him came the princess and the jester, with his bells jingling and jangling, and his long-toed shoes raising puffs of white dust on the road.

All the pins slipped out of the princess's hair, and the wind caught it, and blew it out in a golden cloud; still her little jewelled feet kept pace beside Beppo's red and yellow ones, and neither she nor the jester thought of giving up the chase. Neither felt tired or hot, or discouraged, though the butterfly was far in the lead.

One idea possessed them; to overtake it, capture it, and bring it back to the King's garden.

Sometimes it would alight for a moment, and then the two, with much soft creeping, tried to gain on it a little; but it was off and away always long before they reached it. However, these pauses gave them rest and new strength. And now the country changed as they ran on. There were fewer castles—fewer great gardens of the rich. Here and there was a farmer's house, a blacksmith's forge, a humble church, a shepherd's hut.

On the highway, now and again one would pass them whose clothing was not the gay clothing of a courtier. A blind beggar even stopped them to ask for alms.

Yet on flew the butterfly, and the little princess and Beppo ran after it in mad pursuit. They had no breath now to spare for talking, and anyway, the matter did not seem to need talking about.

Longer grew the shadows. They fell across their path from tall wayside trees in black bars. And now the sun slipped behind the hills. By and by the last rosy gleam died out of the west, and twilight came.

Still they caught the glint of the strange be-jewelled wings, and still they followed in their wake.

But at last, when they were almost spent, the butterfly settled on the branch of a tree, closed his wings together like dead oak leaves, and became as lost to sight among the other leaves, as though he had donned a fairy's invisible cloak!

The princess sank down by the roadside, and tears filled her eyes.

"He is lost! Lost!" she cried, panting for breath; "we will never catch him now!"

"Oh, yes, we will," replied the jester, his heart beating hard, "to-morrow. I will watch for him at earliest dawn. Now, though, I must take you home."

"But I will not go home without the butterfly," she declared determinedly. "Thank you just the same, Beppo."

"Do you mean you will stop here all

night?" exclaimed the jester.

"Of course," she answered calmly. Beppo shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Well, if you will stay, there's a shepherd's hut yonder," he suggested. "Could you sleep there, do you think?"

"Certainly, I can sleep there," she said, "why not? And certainly the shepherd can give us some supper, and then in the morning we will be ready to catch the butterfly—but," eagerly—"do you really think we will catch him?"

"I think we will," he answered. "People usually do get what they go after, when they go after it as—as hard as we've been going for some miles. Come; it grows darker; we will go."

They found indeed the hut had belonged to a shepherd. His crook hung on the wall, and a pile of sheepskins had been his bed; but no shepherd was within, neither was there a candle in the place, nor any food.

"Are you hungry, Princess?" asked the jester anxiously.

"Yes, Beppo, I am," she replied, sitting down on the shepherd's bed.

"It is a most interesting feeling, Beppo."

He smiled in the dark. "And you want the butterfly?" he said. "That also, I should think, was another fascinating sensation. Now, if Your Highness will rest, I will go and try to find our supper."

Pandora lay back on the woolly skins and closed her eyes, though she had no intention of going to sleep. She knew she was so hungry, she could not possibly do anything of the sort. Nevertheless, presently she was dreaming that she and Beppo still followed the radiant butterfly down a long and unknown road.

When she opened her eyes it was high morning, and the sun streamed into the rough hut. Beppo was looking in at the window, and he had a jug of milk in one hand, and a loaf of black bread in the other.

"The butterfly?" questioned the princess, rising quickly. "Oh! the butterfly, Beppo?"

He shook his handsome head, and his half-merry, half-sad face looked down at her.

"The butterfly—" he hesitated, then went on, "the butterfly has gone. There is no trace of it. I have looked far and wide. Perhaps it flew away in the night."

She gave a little disappointed cry. "I wanted it so!" she said bitterly. "Oh! I wanted it!"

"It is very entertaining," answered the jester softly, "to want anything that much, little princess. It is better than not wanting anything—much better."

"You are unkind," she answered, with a catch of her breath. "Now that I've lost the butterfly, you know that I will want it always; and who can tell where it has gone?"

He smiled at her. "But it is somewhere—and you may have the hope of finding it, just any time. That, too, adds zest to life, my princess."

Pandora was busy eating a large piece of the coarse black bread. She waited till it was quite finished, and she had taken a long drink of milk. Then she answered.

"Perhaps that is true," she admitted, "but I hardly think you understand how much I wanted that butterfly, Beppo. No man could quite understand. He was so beautiful! So beautiful! I don't believe you ever wanted anything so much as I wanted that butterfly."

"Don't you?" he answered, swinging his bauble in the air, his whimsical smile coming and going, "really, don't you, Your Highness?"

The princess flicked the crumbs of black bread out of the window to some common little sparrows, who fell upon them greedily.

"No," she reiterated, "I don't believe you ever wanted anything so much as that."

There was a pause, while the sparrows chattered. "But—but, did you, Beppo?" she ended.

The jester tossed the bauble high and caught it.

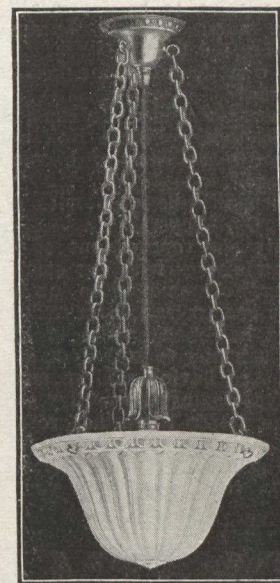
"Yes," he answered. "Oh, yes!"

"Well, what did you want, then?" she questioned, her eyes round with curiosity. "I would really like to know."

"I wanted to be a prince," he said, "since you command me to tell you."

"A prince!" she exclaimed. "But

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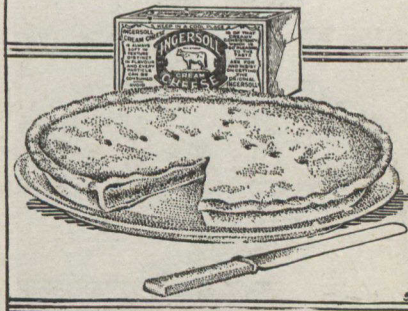
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