

The Princess Pandora: A FIRELIGHT STORY

By VIRNA SHEARD

THE Princess Pandora sat in the garden one midsummer day, and watched the head gardener cut roses to fill the great rose jars in the palace halls.

She sat very still on one of the white marble seats that were scattered rather like tombstones here and there under the trees, and her attendant ladies strolled about, watching her furtively, the better to keep in touch with her passing moods, and yawning daintily now and then behind their lace handkerchiefs, because the afternoon was exceedingly warm, and they were having a dull time.

An ebony-hued, hideous dwarf in brightly embroidered tunic stood behind the princess and lazily waved a huge feather fan, and the court jester, who was slight and handsome, turned a series of hand-springs across the grass before her, in the faint hope that he would thereby bring a smile to her lovely, but weary and unutterably bored, little face.

His bells tinkled in pleasant chime, and his performance appeared to delight him personally to such an extent that he occasionally laughed aloud, or drew his scarlet lips into merry curves and twists. Then across the lawn he rolled in a red and yellow hoop, and finally came to pause before the princess, with his variegated heels in air, and all the belled points of his motley suit turned upside down.

"Thank you, Beppo," she said, gently, "that was very nice—very clever—but you need not do it any more."

The jester suddenly righted himself, and sat down cross-legged on the green.

"It used to amuse you, Your Highness," he said, wagging his head, a look of chagrin shadowing his face.

"That is quite true, Beppo. Indeed it used to. I remember when I thought it very funny, and even laughed, but I am tired of it, you see."

"Yes," said the jester, nodding slowly and breathing deeply, by reason of his recent exertions. "Oh, yes—I see."

The dwarf waved the fan indolently. From the expression on his shining black face he was neither asleep nor awake, but in the delectable borderland midway between.

"I see," remarked the jester again, thoughtfully. Then a sudden smile lit up his eyes, and he gave a soft whistle as of one overtaken by a happy thought.

"Let us go and look at the peacocks!" he exclaimed. "They are spreading their tails most beautifully to-day."

"The peacocks!" said the little maid, with a sigh. "O Beppo! I thought you were going to say something quite different—that you had a really new idea. I am tired to death of the peacocks."

"We might feed the swans?" he suggested, his head on one side. "It is always jolly good fun to feed the swans, don't you know?"

"I suppose it might be, if they were ever hungry," she said, "but the swan-keeper feeds them so much, they never are hungry, and they always seem so condescending and patronizing when I offer them biscuits. They are so very grand about nothing at all, and they only swim round, and round, and round—"

"And round, and round, and round," continued the jester. "Quite so, I follow you. You mean something like this," waving his arm in slow circles.

"Yes," she nodded, "that's the way! I am exceedingly tired of the swans, Beppo."

The ladies-in-waiting trailed their satin gowns over the lawn, and yawned still more frequently. The old head gardener went on snipping off red and white roses, the black dwarf waved his fan. Over the purple flowers of a trumpet vine close by many bumble-bees hummed their soft bass solos.

"Would you enjoy a game of tic-tac-toe?" asked the jester, after a while.

The Princess Pandora glanced at him. "I am no child," she said, in a little, cold tone. "You seem to forget I am almost seventeen."

"Pardon!" he cried, with mock humility. "But let me see, now, any one of any age could play battledoor and shuttle—"

"No, no," she interrupted him. "I have no desire to play that either. It is duller than croquet, and croquet is duller than tennis, and tennis is worse than nine-pins, and nine-pins is so desperately tedious, that you remember I told you to give all the pins away."

"Really, Your Highness, I had forgotten," he said, ruefully. Then, as one at his wits end: "But there was a time when you liked those games—and the games are the same."

"Yes," she returned, "there was a time. . . . I am just tired of them, that is all. They don't seem worth while; one does not live to play games—or be amused, Beppo."

"Doesn't one?" he mused, glancing down at his motley. . . . Silence fell between them for a little, and the shadow crept around the sun-dial. A locust in one of the trees suddenly started his queer song, and as suddenly stopped.

The jester leaned forward, his chin on his hand. "I could tell you a story," he said, his face brightening. "a perfectly good story."

"A new one, Beppo?" questioned the little princess, almost eagerly. "A new one? Without kings, or queens, or princesses in it—and without princes or prancing steeds, or lovers riding through enchanted forests, or giants, or robbers, or robbers' caves and hidden treasure. A story without a single fairy—godmother, or horrible ogre, or beggar-maid who turned out to be a princess—or fiery dragon, or sleeping beauty, or—"

The jester clapped his hands to his ears, and his face grew frankly miserable.

"Nobody on earth could tell a story and leave all those things out!" he exclaimed.

"Unless they can," she returned, a faint smile

"I suppose we could," answered the princess, "but what for?"

"Is that a riddle, Your Highness?"

"If you care to call it one, Beppo."

"Well—just for fun' is the answer," he returned, his smiles back again.

The little princess shook her head.

"It wouldn't be," she said. "You would not run your fastest, and none of the court ladies would run their fastest, and you would all let me win, I know. That kind of a race does not amuse me any more; and anyway I am too grown up for it."

"O!" he said, uncrossing his legs again, "if you look at it that way, of course. But, do you know," glancing up at her, keenly, "it seems to me, Your Highness, that you are the victim of an attack—a very small one, of course—but still an attack of 'Ennui'."

"What is 'Ennui,' Beppo?" questioned the princess, with some interest. "That is the word my god-mother cut out of my French dictionary, I believe. I have always wanted to know what word it was—at least, I used rather to want to know."

"Well, you do know, Your Highness. You have it," said Beppo, winking an eye.

"That is nonsense," she answered. "Kindly tell me what it means."

"Then let me see," he hesitated, casting about in his mind. "It means—it means—travelling on a long, grey road under a grey sky, with grey sodden fields on either side, and not travelling to get anywhere in particular—and having no company."

The princess threw up her small hands. "That is the silliest explanation I ever heard!" she exclaimed. "I have the palace gardens, and the court ladies, and many games, and you, and, oh, a thousand things."

"It was silly," he said, in a crestfallen way. "I'll have another try at it. It means that you have everything you want."

"That's entirely different from the other explanation, anyway—only—perhaps it means that I have everything. I haven't wanted anything for quite a long time."

"That's nearer it," he nodded, "that's about what it means—and the cure—"

"Yes, the cure?" broke in the little maid.

"The cure is just to want something, or to want to want something tremendously."

"Do you, Beppo?" she asked.

A swift smile crossed the jester's face.

"Rather!" he said, making a sudden pass at a heavy-winged bumble-bee.

"And do the maids of honour?" she asked again, slowly.

"They do, indeed, Your Highness. They are keen for new gowns, and finer jewels, and more balls, and richer lovers and more of them. They never have enough of any of those things."

"And I—I have far more than I want," she returned, with a sigh.

"Even more lovers?" he questioned, leaning towards her.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "There were three came to ask the King for my hand in marriage only last week."

"I believe I saw them," said the jester, with a droll wink—"one was short and broad—oh, very broad—and he glittered in green and gold; and one was tall and spare—most exceedingly spare—and he glittered in rose and silver; and one was thickset and fierce-eyed, and black-bearded like a pirate, and he glittered even more than the others, in armour that seemed made of jet. It is quite true you have plenty of lovers, Your Highness."

After a moment he looked up at the princess sidewise.

"The poor never suffer from 'Ennui,'" he said; "they have always something to interest them, something to want, something to strive for. I myself was hungry once—extremely hungry. You can have no idea what an interesting experience it was! I assure you the poor get a good deal out of life; they really live it."

"I have never seen any poor," said the princess.

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"One by one they went and the princess watched their flight with soft exclamations of admiration."

fitting across her little, pale face; "unless they can. I don't want to hear a story, Beppo."

The jester uncrossed his legs, and crossed them the other way. Then he tinkled the bells on the long pointed toes of his red and yellow shoes.

"How would Your Highness like a taffy-pull?" he ventured, after a pause. "There are worse things than a taffy-pull. Or—or we might pop corn, and roast chestnuts, and make a pumpkin-head with a candle inside?"

"Oh, dear, Beppo!" she answered, gently, "whatever would be left to do on Hallowe'en? Is that all you can think of?"

"We could run races; tag—you know," he said, doubtfully.

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