

# H. R. H. LIBBY-ANN

By Nina Wilcox Putnam

### Out of the Swirl of Snow and Blackness of Night Her "Prince Charming" Came, and on Christmas Eve, Too, With Jingling Bells to Find the Princess Waiting for Him

"And so at last the prince came in his state carriage of gold, and the ogre, seeing his strength, did not dare to keep the princess." "Libby-Ann read it slowly, savoring each romantic sentence. To-night there was no one to laugh at her for taking pleasure in so childish a book; and that fact was the one comfort of the situation. For the solitude was dreadful, and the snow had even crept in under the door; Libby-Ann could see it from her crouched position on the hearth. It had filtered through the chinks of the east window, too, cutting the blackness of the night beyond into fresh silhouettes at every new drive of the jeering gale. The house was full of strange, untoward noises; of cracklings and creakings, as of ghostly footsteps, or—worse yet!—of trespassing human feet.

"Did not dare to keep the princess." "A shutter banged distantly, and Libby-Ann started from her seat, trembling. Then she pulled herself together. "Of course it's nothing!" she said aloud. "I know it's nothing. None of the noises are anything but noises! Still \* \* \*

She glanced apprehensively over her shoulder at the lonely little building trembled from attic to cellar. It seemed the very heart of a maelstrom, whose malignity was centered upon herself. Libby-Ann defied it with a laugh that had a sob of sheer loneliness and terror perilously close behind it. Then, crossing to where the supper lay spread upon the red-and-white checked cloth, she turned the dull flame of the swinging lamp above it a trifle higher, glanced at the clock, whose solemn face told that the hour was well past 10, and then gazed mournfully at the untouched food.

"He won't be home to-night!" she said. "Tisn't possible now. Something must have happened! Oh, isn't it just awful to have such a Christmas Eve!"

A log fell in the grate, and Libby-Ann jumped. Eat? Impossible! As well put the things away and be done with the pretense! Picking up the butter-dish and the cake, she started boldly for the kitchen. It seemed a mile away, a mile terrifyingly full of treacherous shadows. But she kept bravely on until, just as she reached the door sill, there came a lull in the wind, and over vague distances of snow-muffled, silent lands a faint glow. Doubtful of her overstrung nerves, she stood still, rigid with silence. Then it came between the low moanings of the wind; a faint tinkle of little bells, distant as yet, and hardly perceptible except to anxiously straining ears, but of blessedly human significance.

Libby-Ann set back the cake and the butter hurriedly, and took down the lamp. "Father!" she exclaimed in a tone of relief that was a confession of all the agony of nervousness which, for hours past, she had been denying to herself. "Father! He's managed to get back after all!"

And then she shuddered involuntarily, the grim atmosphere of her difficult parent seeming to move into the house ahead of him; at the mere mention of his approach. Yet it was better, far better, than this being alone with the terrifying nothings which women find in a house at night.

She placed the lamp at the unshaded east window, tapping away some of the snow that he might see the light the better, and then went about straightening the things on the table, listening—but vainly, now. "He must have been in the hollow when I heard him," she murmured. "I'll just put the coffee back on the hob \* \* \*

As she did so, the book of fairy-tales lying open on the hearth-rug caught her eye. With a swift gesture she gathered it up, listening again and holding on to the book as to a friendly hand that soon must be relinquished. Again the bells! Nearer now. They were coming up the hill-road, they were turning in at the lower gate. In another instant he would be there!

What ho! The castle!" Libby-Ann looked cautiously around the edge of the door, her heart beating furiously with a terrible (yet lovingly) sense of something tremendous about to happen. And there in the stable-yard was an incredible sight. The prince had arrived in his golden carriage of state! At any rate, it was a golden carriage. Of that there could be no vestige of doubt. It was about the size of a small house, and square, and its sides, even under their heavy burden of snow, glittered with gold. A pair of huge, white horses, caparisoned in crimson and little silver bells, drew the coach, the reins by which they were guided passing through an aperture in the front to the warmly lighted interior, in which sat a wonderful young man. He smiled at her, showing a gleam of very white teeth. It was a splendid smile, and it set her heart beating anew, in a strange, expectant sort of way.

Behind him, and around him in the interior of the car, or whatever it was, were innumerable objects, forming a sort of decorative background; little shelves, boxes, glass cases, on which the light of the lantern that swung from the ceiling shone glitteringly. Indeed, the whole thing glittered and swam before her eyes, as she stood rooted to the spot, un mindful of the cold and the snow that eddied in about her feet. "Snow princess, is the barn-door open?" shouted the young man. Libby-Ann could only nod, speechless.

"All right, then!" the young man cried, gathering up the reins with a beautiful, sure gesture. "I'll put 'em up, and be right in. Come on now, Pegasus; come on, Phoenix! Oh, my brave steeds—one more pull, and then a feast and blessed sleep!" The horses, who had stood like stately figures of fatigue, pricked up their ears at the command of his silver voice, and the whole gorgeous affair lunged forward through the encumbering snow. As it vanished around the corner of the house, Libby-Ann caught a fleeting glimpse of an illuminated sign which said something about popcorn; but it was meaningless to her dazed eyes.

Then through cones of magical time she waited, dumb and motionless, once the door was mechanically closed. Finally the sound of his approach, stamping on the porch, electrified her into action, and, flying to the mirror above the mantel, she snatched one fleeting, despairing glance at her white little face and smooth hair, so tightly brushed back. It was dreadful! dreadful! The prince had come at last—and caught her in calico! If only she were not so plain, so unornamental, so hopelessly unattractive! Of course no one ever noticed her—but perhaps, if only she had thought to rush upstairs and put on her lilac silk with the sprigged pattern \* \* \*

Well, it was too late for that now! He flung the door wide, brushing off the snow from sleeve and breast, shaking his woe-laden curls, and baring his yellow head on which the curls grew rough and vigorous. Then he came in and closed the wild night out, shooting the bolts with care. Somehow the sight of it sent thrills of delightful terror up and down her spine. Then he made her a grave bow of salutation, his twinkling blue eyes taking her into his confidence and challenging her imagination, her sense of play, her capacity for finding life a great, wonderful, joyous game.

"Dear princess of this lonely stronghold," said he, "is the lord of the castle at home?" "He—he is not!" she stammered, smiling and blushing. "The storm—he must have stayed in Middletown for the night."

The stranger gave a low whistle. "Middletown!" said he. "That's where I was bound for when I lost my way in the snow—and, incidentally, the trade I might have had at the shopping-centre to-night, along with it."

"It's twelve miles over the mountain," said Libby-Ann. "Then it's plain I can't get there to-night!" he exclaimed, making a wry face. "Great Scott! And tomorrow is Christmas! I promised my mother, too, that I'd be home for sure. But the horses are dead beat, and so

an I: the Ark is pretty heavy \* \* \* lovely princess, is your royal mother visible?" Libby-Ann shook her head. "My mother is dead," she said simply. "There is no one here but me."

Instantly his manner changed. "Forgive me!" he said, gravely and sweetly. "Here I come rushing in with my fooling and nonsense, never dreaming that you were alone. Please forgive me—I only talk that way to keep the world as beautiful and gay as I'd like to have it. I'm not crazy, really. I—I apologize!" "Oh, don't!" said Libby-Ann, suddenly, breathlessly. "Go on that way, please! I understand!"

"You do?" he exclaimed, coming a step nearer. "You don't say! Good! But now about my staying \* \* \* Maybe the horses can go \* \* \* why, I never thought of there being only a lone girl \* \* \*

"Of course you'll stay," she replied, her hands twisting nervously under her apron in fear lest he vanish into the night as mysteriously as he had come. The stranger seemed to hesitate, advancing doubtfully from the door toward which he had instinctively taken a few steps.

"Well, if you really don't mind," he began, smiling again. "A Wilton never turned away a guest yet!" she assured him, proudly, innocently. "Of course you can have the best chamber. And—and you must be hungry, too. There's supper, and coffee all hot," she added timidly.

"He laughed his silver laugh that was like Christmas bells for gladness. "You're a royal princess, for sure!" he cried, slipping out of his great coat. "I knew it at first sight—in deed, as soon as I saw your castle on the hill, with the light beckoning in the window! Coffee? With pleasure, your highness!"

He drew up the chair which she indicated, making a delightful grimace over the food like a pleased boy, as she uncovered it. He seemed perfectly at home and at his ease once more, the slight shadow of his hesitation wholly vanished.

"I'm fiercely hungry," he confessed, "but not so hungry that I'm going to turn cannibal and begin on you, so you needn't look so scared, child! Cheer up, and smile at a poor wanderer. Honest, I'm a perfectly desirable citizen; a good, respectable merchant, though not exactly what you might call steady, seeing that I move about a good bit, shop and all. But otherwise in good standing. I can tell you truly. So don't be afraid, princess—smile a little!"

She brought him the coffee from the hob, holding the hot handle with her apron, her gray eyes wide, her timidity melting. For he was irresistible as the west wind in summer, so full of romance and gentle sport. "Feast well, O princess!" she said shyly, half-shamefacedly, scarce knowing herself. "Feast well; the ogre will not be home to-night!"

He dropped his fork in surprise, and his laugh rang out again, full of delight and encouragement. "Well! I'm blessed if you don't really understand!" he cried, springing up to help her. "Here! Let me pour that! Aren't you going to eat, your highness?"

"I—I guess maybe I will," she answered. "I wasn't hungry before, because the house is so—so alone, with father not getting back, and all, but now \* \* \*

"I know!" he nodded. "House all creaks and groans, and your heart jumping up and down!" He arranged a chair for her. "Now you sit here, and let me do the waiting."

"But that's the woman's work!" she protested, though feebly. He had such a queer yet charming way of sweeping matters along, and making the oddest things seem all right. "Not in my world, it isn't!" he said firmly. "In my world the prince serves his lady, always, and the meanest task is an honor when it is performed for her!"

"How lovely!" sighed Libby-Ann. "But—but \* \* \*

She nodded. "Partly," she said. "And what was the rest of the reason?" he wondered, very frankly, with simple curiosity. "Please tell me!" She could deny him nothing. If he had asked for the sun, she would have gone after it. Slowly she got up and went to the cupboard, from beneath which she drew the red-bound fairy book. Somehow she could not help doing it. She did not exactly want to, and yet she felt so sure that he would understand! Opening it at her marker, she placed it before him on the table.

"And so at last the prince came in his state carriage of gold," he read aloud; and the ogre, seeing his strength, did not dare to keep the princess. \* \* \*

"With a sudden blush she snatched the book back, holding it tightly to her breast, as the crimson mounted her burning cheeks. "Hello!" said he, as though all at once he beheld her through new eyes. With the color in her face she was as nearly pretty as her tightly bound hair permitted.

"I was reading it when you called," she stammered. "I see!" he nodded, that new consciousness still burning in his eyes. She was perfectly well aware that he was really seeing her for the first time, and vaguely wondered why. He held out his hand for the book. "Let's have it back," he begged. "It looks like a pretty story; I'd like to know how it ends."

"Oh, no!" cried Libby-Ann, hastily. "That is, the end is no matter. I was just trying to show you how I came to wonder if you could be real, and how it was that I could understand—the 'game!'"

"Because you live just in fairy-tales!" he said, softly. "Poor little girl!" "You have to live that way up here on the farm," she murmured.

"Yes, I suppose so," said he. "But then, you have to anywhere? Life is a little dull, you know, unless you make it interesting!" "Dull?" cried Libby-Ann, dropping the last vestige of her self-consciousness. "Not your life!—wandering about from place to place. Why, it must be wonderful, seeing the gay towns and the happy people, and the theatres, and everything! I'm sure it must be different from anything here!"

"I'm not so certain," said he, slowly. "I've seen a lot of places, that's a fact; and I haven't seen your nearest village. But I'd like to bet that it's no different from the rest."

"Oh, but it is!" she assured him. "Middletown Corners, five miles on—that's the nearest place—is awful! The people are so—so prim and disapproving, and never have a good time. It's an awfully mean little town. Nobody could be really happy with only Middletown Corners!"

He pushed back his chair from the ravished supper-table, a light shadow of seriousness over his fine eyes. "Just the same, it's probably very little different from the rest of the town!" he declared. "For the people in them are much the same the world over. It's only that there are fewer of each sort of people in the small places. And people like you and me are in the minority everywhere; there are only a few of us, and never enough, even in the big cities, to make us feel the strength of a majority. We're always the odd lot, and in a way, we're bound to feel it. But that doesn't matter. Believe me when I tell you this: it isn't the place you live in that makes for happiness—it's the way you live! The town doesn't matter. Think! Why, if you were to move away from here to-morrow, you'd take yourself along. And your inside life would still be your real life! What folks really mean when they say they want to leave a place where they couldn't succeed in living happily is that they want to run away from themselves. They want to leave themselves behind, and it can't be done!"

"I expect that's true," said Libby-Ann. She looked across at him as though in a dream, and somehow in

that instant her fear of his father, of her lonely life, of that dreary round of housework, melted into nothingness, and a new, brave feeling flooded her veins like wine. "I, too, used to have the idea that roving would help," he went on after a little pause; "that if I went away things would be better with me. I had a good start in life; the opportunity for a college education. And I made a bad mistake. I didn't make good, as I should have done after all the sacrifices mother made to give me my chance. I was always dreaming, loafing, and I couldn't study. Somehow the idea of the university and a profession didn't interest me. And when the time came, I couldn't pass the examinations, and there was no more money for tutoring \* \* \*

and later, when I saw how disappointed mother was in me, and how the friends and neighbors talked, I thought I'd get away, that the town was no place for me, and that I'd have to go to some better place to make a decently happy life for myself. Well, I've succeeded pretty fairly. I made a good living, too, and can take care of mother now. But it wasn't because I took my body away from home that I succeeded. It was because I learned to live inside my body. And by doing that the very best I could—I got along."

He finished off with a sigh and, rising from the table, went closer to the hearth, piling on new logs. Spell-bound, Libby-Ann followed. And when he found a seat close to the blaze, she took a place opposite him on a cushion. The lamp had flickered and burned out, leaving the room with only the firelight, but neither of them noted the fact. The corners filled with shadows, crouching and mysterious, and across the low ceiling other shadows of a gayer sort danced in company with the flames. The air was sweet with the warm odor of the crackling pine and the smooth smoke of dry applewood. The glow of the fire was reflected on Libby-Ann's cheeks, and her gray eyes were very wide. Some mystic and tender spirit had crept into the room, enclosing the two of them as though in a mist. Her heart beat so that it almost pained, and yet she would not have had it otherwise! Presently he spoke again:

"I'd like you to know my mother," he said dreamily. And the words seemed to increase immeasurably their intimacy. "She is so dear, so wonderful and patient. She is like one of the wise women of the Bible—'She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.' Often I see her in my imagination, when I'm driving my shop over the quiet roads, and there is no sound but the birds, and the rustle of hidden creatures in the woods, and the tinkle of my horse's little silver bells as they pull me along in my 'state carriage of gold.' (And there she is, waiting for my return, always so glad to greet me with her quiet 'well, son!' \* \* \*

I'd like you to know her!" Libby-Ann said nothing, but leaned a little closer to the fire, a queer, tight feeling in her throat. A strand of her hair came unfastened and, falling over her shoulder, curled along the curve of her flushed cheek. With a quick gesture she tried to replace it; but instantly his hand was on hers. "Don't!" he begged, in a husky voice. "It is beautiful like that. You are beautiful!"

"No, no!" said Libby-Ann, faintly. Then the rest of her hair followed the first strand, so that her face was enveloped in a surprising cascade of little curls. And Libby-Ann, looking into his eyes, saw that she was a woman. That strange, intoxicating mist was enveloping them closer now. He bent near, taking both her hands in his, his face very grave, his silver voice low and vibrant.

"Oh, lovely little imprisoned princess!" said he. "How strange that I should have traveled so many roads, and never found true happiness before! I thought that I was looking for success, for peace, for a thousand different things, while all the time I was really searching for—you!"

She felt herself being drawn toward him, very slowly, nearer and nearer into those great, strong arms. And then, sudden and terribly beautiful as a lightning bolt, their lips had met.

For an incalculable period the world spun under her, and the raging storm without seemed a puny thing to the storm within her. At last he put her away, almost roughly, and arose. Trembling, she watched him, feeling transformed, glorified. With a heavy movement he passed a hand over his eyes. "No!" he muttered, placing the table between them, as if he feared to touch her. Then he spoke to her. The room was almost in darkness now, the red coals on the hearth serving more to shadow than to reveal his face. "It is late," said he sharply. "You must go to bed."

She was stunned, jolted heavily back to earth. But bravely, though wonderingly, she faced this sudden change. "But your room—I must make up the bed \* \* \*

"Never mind me—I will sleep here!" he replied briefly. "But please, will you go now, at once—I please!" "Very well," said Libby-Ann, deeply wounded and terribly confused.

She lit a candle, and went to the door with leaden steps. He followed, opening the door for her. Then he stopped her with a gesture, and by the candle's light she saw that though his lips were set, his eyes were miraculously tender still. "Little princess!" said he. "What is your name?" "Libby-Ann," she told him; the homely sound of it seemed to typify all her drab existence.

"Elizabeth-Ann!" said he, smiling now. "Two of England's queens!" "And what is your name?" she asked. "My name is Freedom Day," said he.

Then he kissed her hand, just in the manner of the courtly prince he looked, and shut the door behind her softly. \* \* \*

The Christmas dawn was clear and cold as Libby-Ann, her curls caught up negligently in a snood of blue ribbon, crept quietly down the stairs. Far off in the East the crimson sun was sending advance rays over the glistening fields of snow, tinting the rose-hued branches of the trees with heavy hues, gleaming on icicle caves and frosted hedgerows. The world was intensely still, intensely glad, as though the whole universe laughed for holy joy.

Very softly Libby-Ann entered the kitchen, bending swiftly and silently over the soon cheerily crackling stove and the preparations for breakfast. Then, when all was ready, she tapped upon the door of the living-room, smiling to herself the while. There was no response. With apprehension creeping over her like an icy cloud, she waited a breathless moment, and knocked again, louder. Still the intense quiet, broken only by the snapping of the kitchen fire. Then, with a desperate movement, she opened the door.

The living-room was empty! Despair swept over her like a storm. Gone! He was gone! Impossible! After last night, after the beginning of life for her! With stumbling feet she managed to reach the east window, and looked out. There on the smooth new snow lay the evidence, damning, irrefutable—a heavy wagon-track, and the mark of horses' hoofs, breaking the sparkling surface, leading away—away over the brow of the hill, clean-cut and clear, into the distance, into the shining, unknown world. With a heavy sob she buried her face in her arms, and kneeling there by the frosted glass, the cold light shining full upon her, she wept as though her heart would break. Time passed, unreckoned, hideous. She could not live, she could not! But at length she gathered her miserable little body from the floor and turned to the mirror above the cold hearth. From it her tear-stained face stared back at her out of a tangled mass of curls.

"No use for them now!" she murmured, gathering them up and unmercifully twisting them into their accustomed sleekness. Resolutely she turned away and, choking back a sob, set about clearing the disordered table. The dreary monotony of her life had begun again. There was the butter and the cake, there was the plate of cold meat, there was \* \* \*

Amazed, she picked it up; a huge round box with a pattern of holly on it and tied with a great crimson satin ribbon which held in place a pair of little gilt tongs. Candy! A box of candy of a size and beauty beyond belief. And, better still, a little note. With shaking fingers she opened it and read.

"Dear! I have gone off early so as surely not to disappoint my mother. Merry Christmas, and my best box of candy to you. I will be back on New Year's Day, to face the ogre and to finish the fairy-story. I love you. FREEDOM.

After a moment the world began going around again. Suddenly the sun came over the hill, and laughed in at the window. Marveling, Libby-Ann lifted the gorgeous box to her breast, crushing the lovely crimson ribbon all unheeding. And there beneath it lay the book of fairy-tales, open at her story, the end of which had been lightly underscored with pencil.



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