Fairy dreams : $b or, Wanderings in Elf-land

Jane G. (Jane Goodwin) Austin

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FAIRY DREAMS.

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OR,

WANDERINGS IN ELF-LAND.

BY JANE G. AUSTIN.

With illustrations, BY HAMMATT BILLINGS.

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PRINCE RUDOLF'S FLOWER

The palace clock with twelve sonorous peals announced the hour of noon; and as the last vibrating echo died away, King Merowald entered the audience-chamber and seated himself upon the throne, looking around upon the nobles and courtiers who stood about him.

"Is there any among you who would ask a boon of the king?" inquired he, in a gracious voice.

A short pause ensued, and then from the lower end of the hall, a handsome, graceful youth approached quickly and knelt upon one knee before the throne.

The aged king bent forward with a movement of surprise; the glittering crowd of courtiers rustled their silken garments for a moment, and each moved a step forward, and then a breathless silence filled that vast chamber; for the graceful youth kneeling so humbly there, his arms crossed, his head bowed low upon his breast,

was Rudolf, the only and well-beloved son of the monarch before whom he knelt.

The silence was broken by the tremulous voice of the old king.

“My son, what seek you?” asked he.

“A boon, my gracious lord and father.”

“And what?” inquired again the king.

“I ask permission, my father, to go out into the world to seek the flower of which I have dreamed, and which alone can make me happy.”

“What is the flower, my son?”

“Alas, dear father, I cannot tell; the dream has fled, and I can neither recall the form, the color, or the name of this exquisite blossom, although if I should find it, I should certainly recognize it, and without it I cannot live.”

“Go first, my son,” said the king, after a long pause, “to Althoso, and ask his advice. If he bid you go, I will not refuse my consent.”

Prince Rudolf rose, and, bowing low, left the audience-chamber. Passing through several long corridors and galleries, he arrived at a low-arched door and knocked loudly.

The door was presently opened by a short, crooked little man, with an enormous hump upon his back, who, twisting his head so as to look up into the prince’s face, croaked out:

“Oh, it’s the handsome prince to-day, is it? Well, well, they all have to come to us.”

Prince Rudolf paid no attention to the ugly dwarf, but mounted rapidly the steep, winding stairs which lay before him, until he arrived at another door similar to that he had just passed. Here again he knocked, but this time softly, and almost timidly.

“Who is there?” asked a deep voice.

“Prince Rudolf,” replied the young man.

The heavy door swung slowly open. “Enter, prince,” replied the voice; and Rudolf obeying, found himself in a small room, crowded with books, drawings, and papers.

At one side glowed a charcoal furnace, over which, in an iron pan, some strange compound was bubbling. Various utensils and preparations were scattered near it, as if the prince’s entrance had interrupted in some important operation the old man who stood in the middle of the little room, his long purple gown wrapped about him, and his dark eyes fixed upon the face of the visitor.

“And what does Prince Rudolf seek of me?” asked he, at length.

“My father has sent me to ask your advice, wise Althoso,” replied the prince. “For seven nights have I dreamed of a lovely flower, which, while I hold it, fills my whole soul with joy; but when I awake, I can no longer remember the name of the flower, nor its form, color, or perfume; yet should I see it, I should at once know it. Can you tell me, O wise Althoso! the name or the home of this blossom, without which I must surely die?”

The old man smiled sadly and shook his head. “Prince,” said he, “if you would value the flower, you must seek it for yourself. Could I give it to you, or tell you where to find it, you would not value it an

hour. Go out into the wide world and seek it, but stop--you may not know your flower among all you will find in the world, although you think so now. Here is a white veil which I prepared for you, knowing that you would come to me, and here is a spear with a diamond point. When you have found a flower which you think may be yours, throw the veil over it; if the veil remains white and whole, leave it there till you have slept, then pluck the flower and bring it home. But should the veil show itself soiled or rent, there is not your flower; seize the veil and fly. Should you be detained by enchantments which you cannot break through, use your diamond pointed spear: before it every charm will fall. Now go, my son, and leave me to my labors."

The old man turned to his furnace as he spoke, and began stirring the mixture in the iron pan, which presently sent up a hot, stinging vapor, which filled the whole room.

Seizing the glistening white veil and the sharp, strong lance which lay upon the table, Rudolf ran down the stairs past the dwarf, who opened the door, and, hastening to his own chamber, packed in a knapsack a few clothes, and the picture of his mother, who had died when he was an infant. Then as the palace clock struck one, the prince entered the apartment of his father, who had soon returned to it from the hall of audience.

Rudolf, kneeling again before him, told him of the words of Althoso; showed him the veil and the spear, and besought his father's blessing and permission to set out.

These the old king bestowed upon him, not without tears; and, wiping his own eyes, Rudolf kissed his father's hand, and descended to the stables, where he called for his own horse, Sunbeam, and springing

upon his back, rode bravely out into the world.

Many days prince Rudolf travelled, and many lovely flowers did he see, both wild by the roadside, and carefully sheltered in gardens; but none of these for a moment made him think of the flower of his dream, and he was growing very sad and discouraged, when, one sultry summer noon, he found himself in a large forest, through which wound a smooth, pleasant road, along which Sunbeam trotted gayly, his little hoofs making no sound upon the thick, soft turf.

All at once through the dusky shadows, which even in the brightest day brooded among those giant trees, the prince caught a glimpse of something shining dimly, which reminded him of the bright gardens which he had passed through on previous days.

Dismounting, and tying Sunbeam to a tree, so that he could reach the sweet grass which grew all about, prince Rudolf, taking his spear in his hand, pushed aside the underwood which barred his progress, and made his way toward the dimly seen object which had attracted him.

For a short distance, the forest was almost impenetrable. High, stiff shrubs, growing closely together, impeded him on every side; and at the end of half an hour, prince Rudolf paused, hot and weary, and half resolved to give up the attempt. Just then, however, he perceived a narrow but well-defined path opening at his feet, and leading in the direction of these glowing flowers. Following this eagerly, the prince in a few moments found himself before an arched gateway, surmounted by a gorgeous wreath of tulips of every possible color, and fresh as if just placed there. The entrance was barred by the thick, sword-like leaves of the plant, which were thickly interlaced across the opening, while the woody stalks, growing to an immense size and

height, formed the framework of the portal.

The prince stood for a moment looking at this singular and beautiful gate, and longing to enter, when, to his great surprise, the sword leaves bent gracefully to the ground, and seemed to invite him to pass through the portal thus opened.

The gay young prince entered with a beating heart, and the leaves closed immediately behind him.

Before him lay a path strewn thickly with gold, and glittering and flashing in the sun, while on each side extended a large and beautiful garden, divided by golden paths like that which he was treading. Every bed was thickly set with gorgeous blossoms, but the prince observed with astonishment that there were no flowers but tulips; double and single, small and large, of every tint and variety, but still all tulips. Standing quite still in the midst of this collection, prince Rudolf looked about him for a gardener, of whom he could make some inquiries. No one was to be seen: on the borders of the immense garden rose the gloomy and impenetrable forest, looking more sullen and forbidding from its contrast with the flashing, gorgeous colors of the flowers and the gold-strewn paths.

At the farthest extremity of the garden was a sort of grove of a certain variety of the tulip, growing to a size perfectly prodigious, and surrounding and overshadowing what appeared to be a summer-house or arbor. Toward this the prince now hastened, hoping to find at last some owner of this glowing garden; but on penetrating the circle of tree-like stems, he paused in utter astonishment, for what he supposed a building was in reality an immense tulip as large as a small room, plucked from its stem and turned upside down, so that it formed a sort

of tent, the curtains of which were the velvety petals of the flower, gayly striped with scarlet and gold.

Prince Rudolf stood for a moment, as I have said, lost in astonishment; then lifting the edge of one of the curtains, soft and thick as velvet, he entered with some hesitation this strange pavilion. At first he could distinguish nothing clearly in the dim light which found its way through the thick curtains; but presently he perceived that he stood beside a straight and polished column of gold, which with five others upheld the tent, and answered to the stamens of an ordinary tulip. To the pistil of the plant was attached a petal of a very small tulip, which waved constantly backward and forward, causing a gentle breeze, which softly fanned away the sultriness of the heated air.

Directly under this fan was heaped up a mass of tulip petals, making a delightfully soft and elastic couch, upon which reclined gracefully the most beautiful maiden whom Rudolf had ever beheld. Her rich, dark hair, combed straight back from her white forehead, was thickly powdered with gold dust, and formed into a crown upon the top of her head, around which was a wreath of small tulips of a brilliant crimson, streaked and splashed with gold: her large, sleepy brown eyes were fixed upon the face of the young prince, while her full scarlet lips smiled a welcome to the handsome youth. Her dress, which left bare her lovely shoulders and round, dimpled arms, was of the same glowing, gorgeous colors as the drapery of her tent, and everywhere upon it glittered the gold dust which powdered her hair.

“O the lovely flower! O my tulip queen!” whispered Rudolf, sinking upon his knee. The tulip maiden said not a word, but only smiled

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