

## **The King and His Daughters**

Once upon a time there was a king who had many daughters. These young ladies were not noted for their beauty; in fact, some said they were downright ugly. The king realized he may have some trouble in finding husbands for them, so he offered an incentive. Anyone who married one of his daughters could, upon reaching the age of 50, come into the castle to live and spend the rest of their days in luxury and ease. But even with this incentive, there were very few applicants for the hands of the princesses.

There was a big strapping, handsome farm lad who decided this was his big opportunity. He applied to wed one of the princesses and was accepted.

The wedding was a grand state affair in the town cathedral. The king was there to give his blessing and the nobles attended to witness the ceremony.

The farm lad felt really important. "They must think I'm pretty special to do all this for me," he thought, not realizing all this was because of who the princess was and not him.

He took his bride home and showed her to her room. He then went off to his room. She fixed supper for him that night. He ate in silence and then went off to spend the evening with his friends at the local pub.

His friends teased him, "Hey, I heard you got married today. Where's your wife?" He became very embarrassed and muttered something they couldn't understand and then changed the subject. He came home late that night and went straight to his room, not even stopping to see or speak to his wife.

The next morning, he was up early and out working in the fields. He came home at noon for a snack and then out to work again. This evening again, he ate the supper she had made. After she had cleaned up, he ordered her to her room. "I'm having friends over tonight and don't want you in the way." Later his friends showed up and they played games and drank ale until late at night.

And so the days went, each one similar to the others. He worked hard during the days and went out or had company every evening. Sometimes it was his friends and sometimes his family, but when he went out, he never took her along and he made her stay in her room when company came to visit. He never even acknowledged that he was married to friends or family.

His farm prospered and he had good crops. He gave a large sum of money to his wife every month, "for household expenses and for yourself," he told her. But he never really talked with her or listened to what she may have had to say. Sometimes he would ask her to do something special for him and often, on those occasions, he would read to her from a book that had instructions on how to do what he asked. That was the extent of their communication. He never went into her room and he never made love to her; in fact, he never even touched her.

The big sacrifice of his life that he did for her was to take her once a week to the cathedral in town for Sunday services. This he did faithfully, sitting next to her once a week, for a whole hour. While there, of course, he never talked to her or took her hand or even really acknowledged her presence, but he did share the pew with her.

And so the years went by. Each one the same as before. He in his own world with his life and she in hers. Finally, the day of his fiftieth birthday came and he thought to himself, "Now I will receive my reward for all my hard labor for I have been a good and faithful husband."

So he put his wife in the wagon and got up to sit next to her for their trip to the castle. At the door of the castle, he announced, "The husband of the king's daughter comes to claim his reward on his fiftieth birthday."

The message was conveyed to the king who sent back word for them to enter. They drove their wagon through the massive gate and climbed down in the courtyard. The guards led them to the entrance of the great hall, the throne room of the king.

As they stood at the entrance, the herald cried, "The king's daughter and her husband!" The

trumpets blared and the couple was escorted down the white carpet runner to stand before the king on his golden throne dressed in all his royal finery. The room was ablaze with lights that reflected off the golden armor of the guards lining both sides of the aisle. Beyond the guards stood the court nobles, men and women in luxurious clothing of many beautiful colors, all watching.

The king asked, "Is it true that you are married to my daughter? And have you been a good and faithful husband to her?"

The farmer was awestruck at all the light and splendor and majesty of the king's presence and had trouble speaking at first. He swallowed hard to get rid of the lump in his throat and finally managed to say, "Yes, my Lord. We have been married now for thirty years. I have provided well for her. I gave her clothes, food, and a house. I gave her ten percent of all I earned. I never beat her or struck her. I even took her to church every Sunday, and so was seen in public with her. Although I did require her to wear a veil, her face you know, it's not the most -- well, you know what I mean. I was faithful to her and never went out with another woman. What more could a wife ask for?"

The king turned to his daughter, "What say you, my child?"

"All this is true. But father, he never talked to me. He never took me with him to work or play. He never made love to me. He never let me be a part of his life. The only time I heard my name from his lips was when he wanted something or he was mad and used my name as a curse word."

The king frowned, his forehead furrowed. "And how many children do you have?" he asked.

A tear welled up in the corner of the princess' eye. Then she collapsed on the floor holding her head in her hands as she shook her head.

The farmer looked up and said, "None. Children are a bother. They are just more mouths to feed and they would just get in the way of my lifestyle."

The king now sadly shook his head. He motioned to his servants to come to help the princess up. Then they took her away to her own quarters where she would be comforted.

The king looked at the farmer again and sadly but sternly said to him, "You are not married to my daughter. Yes, you went through the ceremony in the cathedral, but that was only words from your head, not from your heart. Your marriage was never consummated; therefore, it is not legally binding. You lived in the same house with my daughter, but not with her. You had no relationship, therefore, no marriage. And there are no children which would be the evidence, the fruit of your union. No, you are not married to the princess."

"I'm sorry, but you will have to return to your farm and live out the rest of your days there alone without a wife to cook and clean and make you comfortable as my daughter did, although you showed her no appreciation or thankfulness or even acknowledged her existence. Now you will see what life is like without her. You will continue to work, but there will be no reward for your toil. You will never see the inside of this castle again."

"Guards, take him out of my sight."

There was in that same land also another young farm lad who applied to marry one of the princesses. There was the big wedding in the cathedral and then he took her home to his one-room cottage on his farm. He was not well-to-do by material standards but he was lonely and wanted a wife to share his life, including whatever possessions he had. He fell in love with his wife that first night and she with him. He discovered that her plain countenance disguised a soul of rare sweetness, gentleness, and beauty. They talked and made love throughout that whole first night. He was so happy the next morning when he awoke to find her there in his bed, in their bed. He kissed her tenderly overlooking her plain, if not ugly face, and seeing the inner beauty of her soul.

He went out to the fields to work, but she came out to meet him midday with a snack. He put down his work and rushed to meet her. They had so much to say to each other to make up for the years they had not been together. They worked on the farm chores together that evening. After a supper where they both had trouble eating because they kept stopping to look into each other's eyes, they both

climbed into the wagon to go visiting.

They stopped at the local pub where the farm lad used to hang out of an evening. He came in, his wife on his arm. "Boys, this is my new wife. Isn't she beautiful?"

His friends would have laughed at him for calling his wife beautiful, but she turned and smiled at her new husband, and the love shining out of her eyes fairly transformed her face and yes, she was beautiful. In fact, some of his friends were so impressed by his wife that they decided they would go the next day to the castle to see if there were any princesses left to marry.

The next day was similar to the first only that night they went to see his parents. Later they visited his brothers and sisters and eventually all his friends.

On Saturdays, they came to market and made their purchases together. On Sundays, they came to the large cathedral together, sitting next to each other, holding hands and occasionally exchanging a glance.

The days were filled with labor and comradery as they shared their work. The evenings were spent mostly with friends and family, but sometimes just with each other. The nights were for the two of them alone.

It wasn't long until children started coming into their family. They had to enlarge the cottage and add more rooms. One, two, three, four, and finally five children in all were born to them. They all had to work hard to make ends meet but there always seemed to be just enough. The house was filled with the noise and laughter of little children. They were happy years for the farmer and his wife, but they passed all too quickly and soon the children were grown and married and had little ones of their own.

The farmer and his wife were getting older and it would soon be his fiftieth birthday. By now his children were running his farm and they had bought other farms as well. He had lived to see his grandchildren and was ready to take his journey to the castle.

And so the day arrive. He called his children and grandchildren together, blessed them and said goodbye, promising to send for them later if perchance the king should grant his request.

The farmer and his wife climbed into their wagon together and set out to the castle. They arrived at the massive gate and the farmer started to speak to the guard. His wife stopped him and said, "Let me speak for this is my home."

To the guards she said, "Say to the king, his daughter has returned with her husband. We seek admission to the castle to live out our remaining days in rest."

Soon the guards returned. Bowing low to the princess, they spoke. "Come in, your Majesty, and bring your husband with you. The king awaits with eagerness your arrival in the great hall."

Upon entering the presence of the king, the farmer felt awkward, out of place, and embarrassed. He tried to draw back, but his wife held firm to his arm pulling him toward the throne.

The king leaned forward to speak to his daughter. "My child, is this man truly your husband?"

The princess, now old and wrinkled, turned to look at her husband. There was still a glow in her eye from love and the king could not fail to notice it. She replied, "Oh yes, my father, he is truly my husband. He loves me and I love him."

The king turned to the farmer, "Is this your wife?"

"Yes, my Lord. I have loved her and all that I have and my very life also have I shared with her. She is part of me and I of her. Without her I could no longer be myself. Please allow us to live the rest of our lives together."

The king sat back and smiling, asked, "And are there children?"

"Yes, my lord," the farmer replied. "Five in all, three boys and two girls. All married now with children of their own."

The farmer looked at his wife and smiled and she back at him beaming. They were very proud of their children and loved them very much.

The king motioned to his servants to come as he said, "Welcome home, my children. This

castle is now your home. Remain here the rest of your days and enjoy life together."

The servants came and escorted the couple to the chambers prepared for them. Their old clothes were removed and there was a pool of water where they were invited to bathe. As they bathed, the most wonderful thing occurred, for as they came out of the water, the years had been taken from their bodies. Their faces were again the faces of young people. And the princess, whose former beauty had been only inward, now wore an external beauty of face that the poor farm lad could not comprehend. It was still his beloved wife. He could recognize her, but had never seen a more beautiful woman before. And so they lived in eternal youth and joy in the castle of the king.