

## **The Prince and the Peasant**

Ephesians 5:32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the Church.

Once upon a time in a land far away lived a nobleman and his lady. One day they were blessed with the birth of a beautiful baby girl with raven-black hair and milk-white skin. They loved her dearly and showered her with attention and affection. The child thrived on their love and became a sweet and kind child to her parents and all around her. When other children would not share their toys, she was quick to share. When other children talked back to their parents and refused to obey, she answered with a cheerful, "Yes, I'll do it." As she grew, she was loved by all. But in the fall of her fifth year, her parents and many of the servants became ill with a dread disease. In spite of the best treatment, the sickness worsened. And as the first flurries of winter snow fell, her parents' lives ebbed and their spirits departed.

Her only living relative was a distant great-uncle, a mean, ugly man who spent his time and money on wine, women, and gambling. He inherited the estate and was appointed guardian of the little girl. Within a few years, he had dissipated the wealth of the entire estate and was forced to sell the house and land and to let the servants go in order to pay his debts. He took the little girl with him to his old cottage, or rather hovel, on the other side of the kingdom. There he kept the little girl who by now had grown enough to be quite a help. so he used her to do all the work, treating her like a slave. He raised pigs for his income and it was her job to feed and care for them as well as to attend to the household chores, while he spent most of his time at the taverns.

Year in and year out, faithfully, she worked for her uncle, suffering much abuse and ill-treatment. As time went on, she grew into womanhood, always hoping and praying that someday, someone, somehow, would come to rescue her from her plight.

She had faint memories of a distant time when there was love and kindness shown to her, when she had pretty clothes and a huge wonderful house to live in, when there were toys, dolls and friends to play with. But they were after all, only that-- dim memories. Sometimes she thought perhaps they were all part of a dream or perhaps she even had made them up and they never had been a reality.

She thought of herself only as a peasant girl and so did the people in the village. They seldom saw her, as her uncle would not allow her to visit or to have any friends. When she came to market, she did her business and left quickly. She seemed kind and pleasant, but there was such sadness in her eyes and no one had ever seen her smile. And so they wondered about her, how such a sweet girl came to be living with a man of such a horrible reputation, but no one did anything about it.

This same land was ruled over by a very wise, wealthy, and powerful king. He was called the High King because his domain stretched from sea to sea and included many smaller kingdoms that he ruled over. This high king had a son and one day, he called the prince to him.

"Son, you are of age now. It is time you start looking for the right young lady to become your bride."

The prince was very glad to hear these words because these very same thoughts had already been going through his head. So he set off on his quest to find a bride with his father's blessing.

The king had issued a proclamation to all parts of the kingdom for all the single young ladies to present themselves to the prince when he came to their town. So at each little village and large town, the prince would set up his pavilion and all the young ladies in all their finery, clothing, jewels, and perfume would parade before him, each one hoping they would be the one chosen. As each one passed before his seat, he would look them squarely in the eyes, or try to. Some would not meet his gaze, but in those that did, he saw selfishness, jealousy, pride, and greed. As each one passed, he slowly shook

his head. He was looking for something, the ability to return his love. The ladies he met only wanted to marry the prince for what he would give them. None really cared about him. Town after town he visited, all with the same results until finally he returned to the castle, quite discouraged.

"Father, there is not one woman in the whole realm who really cares about me. They only want my wealth and position."

So the prince gave up his search for a bride and returned to his normal life which included hunting. One day while out chasing a stag, he was separated from his companions. His horse being the fastest, soon outdistanced the others as they chased after the deer. When the stag entered the woods, the prince followed on his horse. Deeper and deeper into the forest he went until he could no longer see the stag or the trail and realized he was quite lost. However, he continued on through the woods until he came out on a sunlit grassland. He realized he had gone completely through the forest and was now on the other side. He had never ridden this way before so this was new unfamiliar country to him and it was a long way from the castle.

As he came out of the woods, he spotted a small cottage badly in need of repair. One whiff of the air told him it was a pig farm. It was not an attractive place and he thought to go on. But both he and his horse were thirsty and he had no idea how far it would be to another farm, so he decided to stop and ask for a drink.

As he approached riding slowly, he heard singing. He paused a minute to listen. The notes were sweet and clear, but the melody was so mournful and sad. The notes tugged at his heart and he wondered who the singer could be when he saw the girl feeding the pigs.

He called out to her, "Maiden, can you spare some water for a thirsty man and his horse?"

As he came closer, he was amazed at her dress. He had never seen such a dirty, raggedy dress on a woman before. Her dark black hair hung around her unkempt so he could not see her face. He dismounted and approached the well as she came to it from the other side. She put the dipper in the bucket and as she lifted it to him, her hair fell back and he saw her face and their eyes met. He was shocked because as he stared into the depths of her clear blue eyes, he saw that for which he had been searching. His heart quickened and he almost dropped the dipper. But he also saw something else in her eyes, the look of a frightened, caged animal.

Her gaze pleaded silently, "Can you help me?" She seemed so helpless and vulnerable, yet there was a strength there, an ability to persevere under adversity. He admired her for that. She was beautiful in spite of her dirty ragged hair and so beautiful it almost made him dizzy. When she spoke, "Here you are, sir," the music of her voice made his heart leap again.

He wanted to stay to look at her, to be with her, to talk to her, to find out who she was and what she was doing here. But just then her uncle came to the door.

"Who's out there? Who are you talking to?" he said gruffly. "Didn't I tell you not to talk to anyone?"

"But Uncle, he just asked for a drink."

"I don't care. Tell him to leave now or I'll make him leave."

The smile which had come to her face and made her fairly radiant in spite of the grime, now faded as a cloud blocking the sunshine. Sadly she said, "You must go now, sir."

He turned to mount his horse and then bending down, pressed a small gold ring to her palm, saying, "I will see you again. Keep this ring around your neck as a token, but let no man see it." He turned his horse and rode off.

After the prince had left, the uncle came out of the house again. "Didn't I tell you never to talk to anyone?" He smacked her across the face with the back of his hand knocking her down into the pigsty. "There, that will teach you," and he turned to enter the house again.

She started to cry, but then remembered the ring in her hand. She opened it to look at it wondering what it meant and who this man was. How could she ever possibly see him again? He was only a hunter--and yet his horse--it was very well bred. Perhaps he was a servant of a nobleman. If she had

not been ignorant and uneducated, she would have recognized the signet on the ring as belonging to the royal household, but she could only make judgments on what she had seen. He was dressed as a simple hunter and so he must be a simple hunter. Yet, she longed to see him again. For a few brief moments, he had brought more joy and happiness to her life than she had ever known before. She fingered the ring about her neck daily pondering what it all meant.

Then one evening about dusk, a well-dressed, elderly gentleman came riding up to the cottage leading another horse. The peasant girl was out doing her evening chores. The man asked if her uncle was home and could he please speak with him.

"Yes, come with me, sir." As she led him to the door, she noticed his fine clothing and wondered what this man would want with her uncle. She called her uncle who was not pleased to see the stranger. But being impressed by his fine clothes and elegant manners, out of curiosity invited him inside.

They sat down at the table. After an attempt to exchange pleasantries, the uncle said, "Alright, state your business."

The stranger replied, "I am the servant of a very wealthy nobleman. It has come to his attention that you have a servant, a certain young lady who he would very much like to purchase."

Now it so happened that the uncle had recently been involved in another gambling episode that left him heavily in debt with the threat of losing his farm. So the thought of money made his eyes light up. But he was also shrewd, so he replied, feigning reluctance, "Servant girl? I have no servant girl. The only girl here is my niece, my very own flesh and blood. I could not be persuaded to part with her."

"I don't care if she is your niece or not. My master wants her as his servant and is prepared to pay a high price."

The girl was in the shadows crouched down and listening. Working as a servant for a wealthy man would surely be better than her life here. Oh, how she hoped her uncle would say yes.

"Well, I don't know," the uncle said, taking a sip of ale.

"My master is prepared to pay in gold," as the stranger took a pouch from his cloak and plunked it down on the table.

The uncle reached out to finger the bag, but would not commit himself. Back and forth they went. The uncle not willing to lose his slave, yet being strongly attracted to the gold being offered. On into the night they went until finally the girl fell asleep where she sat.

It was close to dawn when the stranger finally said, "Name your price."

The uncle picked a ridiculously high price, not expecting to be taken seriously, "Ten thousand pieces of gold."

The uncle said this so loudly that the girl woke up. Ten thousand pieces of gold! No one had ever heard of paying that much for a servant. Why even the richest nobleman's daughters' dowries were less than that. The most she had ever heard of was one thousand pieces. But she was being sold as a slave, not a bride. It made no sense. No, there was no way that price would be met. A tear started to trickle down her cheek, when she heard, "Done!"

The stranger plopped a large, heavy bag on the table, took out a sheet of paper and said, "Sign right here."

The uncle was taken aback. Yet he had made the offer and had to abide by it. He somewhat reluctantly signed, but then greedily grabbed the bag and began to count.

The stranger rose and came over to where the girl was sitting in complete amazement at what had just happened. "Get your things together. We leave immediately."

The girl replied, "I have no things except this dress I wear."

And so, as the dawn was just breaking, the stranger helped the girl onto the extra horse and they set out. She would still be a slave, but nothing could be worse than what she had experienced at the hands of her uncle. She felt light-hearted and began to sing, a gay, happy melody. The gentleman, listening

to the sound of her voice, turned to her and said, "I can understand why my master was so eager to have you."

The girl was full of questions as they rode. "Where are we going? Who is my new master? What is he like?"

The gentleman smiled and said, "You will find out soon enough."

They rode through the village in the early light and the few villagers who were out and about saw the girl and the gentleman and wondered, "Isn't this the peasant girl who lives with the gambler? Where is that man taking her? He must be wealthy, just look at his clothes and the horses. But what would he want with that ragamuffin of a girl?"

Out from the village they rode and into the countryside again. The sun was shining brightly and the day was starting to get warm. They came to a lane bordered with overhanging trees. Turning into it, they arrived at its end at a little cottage nestled between the trees. It was a beautiful, newly-thatched cottage with bright colored flowers along the walk and in the window boxes. There were chickens walking around the yard clucking, sheep bleating in a pen, and a cow mooing in the corral. The peasant girl looked around and inhaled deeply of the fresh air. No pigs! She fell in love with this charming little farm instantly, but questioned in her mind, "Certainly, my rich master does not live here. I wonder whose house this is. Perhaps we're only stopping for lunch."

They rode up to the cottage. The gentleman dismounted, tied the horses to the rail, and came to help the girl down. He led her up the steps across the porch and in through the front door. The inside of the cottage was neat and clean. It was simply but adequately furnished. A man sat at the table with his back to the door.

The girl did not have to wonder who it was for very long because he turned as soon as she entered the room. As soon as she saw his face, she recognized him as the hunter she had given a drink. He rose to greet her and extended his hand. She gave him her hand and as she curtsied, he bowed and kissed her hand. She blushed and became quite flustered. This was not the sort of treatment she expected as a servant girl. She was confused and her thoughts showed on her face. "Where is my new master? This cannot be his cottage. It is much too humble an abode for a nobleman."

The hunter who, of course, was really the prince, saw her confusion and guessed what she was thinking. "I promised I would see you again, but I knew your uncle would never allow it while you were under his control. So it was I who bought you, not to be my slave, but to set you free. This is your new home. This is your farm. I have bought it and given it to you. There are chickens for eggs and a cow for milk. Instead of raising pigs, you will be a shepherdess and take care of sheep and learn to spin and weave to earn the money you need to live on. I will leave my servant here with you to teach you what you need to know, to help you do the things that you cannot do in your own strength, and also to be a companion to you. If you have need of something, ask him and he will be able to contact me and see that you get it."

The girl turned to look at the gentleman who had brought her to the cottage. It was as if she really hadn't paid much attention to him before, being so caught up in her own thoughts of her future. He smiled a broad smile as she looked at him and taking off his hat, bowed low before her. She felt she could trust him and felt a security she had never felt before. He seemed to remind her of someone in her distant dim memory, her own father perhaps?

She turned her gaze back to the prince who she now thought was a rich nobleman instead of a huntsman. He spoke to her, "I promised I would see you again. I have and I will come again, often. Do you still have the ring I gave you?"

"Yes, sire, here it is," as she pulled the ring out by the leather thong around her neck where it had been hidden so none could see.

"Here, let me put it on this gold chain. Now you are to wear it for all to see and wonder at. It is to be a reminder to you of the price I paid for your freedom." He took the ring from her and strung it on the chain and clasped it around her neck.

"In your bedroom you will find new clothes. Take off the dress you wear, tattered, soiled, and worn, but do not throw it away. It is to remind you of your past, where you came from. It is the only dress that is truly yours and you must never part with it until it is taken from you."

"Yes, sire," she replied and curtsied again.

"And now for some refreshment. Let's go to the kitchen."

After a simple lunch, the three walked around the little farm. They explored the outdoors, the barn and chicken coop, and pens and corrals, orchard and garden. Then they came inside and went through the cottage. It was small, but adequate for 2 people. It had a bedroom, kitchen, pantry, sitting-dining room, and a loft where the servant gentleman would sleep.

It was getting late in the afternoon when the prince said, "It is time for me to leave. I must hurry to be able to return to my home by dark." With his words he took her hand and bowing low, kissed it again. He turned, mounted his horse, and rode off at a gallop.

With the pounding hoofbeats in her ears and her heart thudding in her breast, she waved goodbye to this wonderful young man who had rescued her from such a terrible plight and then gave her more than she had ever dreamed of. She felt so grateful that tears came to her eyes.

"Why do you cry, my lady?" the prince's servant asked her.

"I'm not a lady," she replied. "But I cry because no one has ever been so kind to me in all my life. These are tears of joy, not of sorrow."

She had much to learn, for all she had known up to now had been basic cooking, housekeeping, and pigs. Now she had to learn to milk the cow and care for the chickens. She had to take the sheep out to pasture every day and learn to work with the wool, spinning, dying, and weaving. The prince's servant worked with her, teaching her and helping her to do the things she couldn't do by herself, like making a weaving loom. She had to learn to cook all over because now there were so many more foods available to her that she had never had before. The servant showed her how to plant a garden and to grow her own fruits and vegetables, when to harvest them and the fruit from the orchard trees and how to preserve them for later use.

And then there was the matter of clothing. The prince brought her a few dresses and sometimes material, but she had to learn to sew to make clothes of her wool both for herself and to sell in the market for income. The servant also taught her to embroider and do the fine needlework that was expected of a lady. She did not learn everything at once. It took months, even years to become really proficient at all her tasks.

She did not know that the ultimate goal of these tasks was not just so that she could support herself. But she had to know and understand all the work that needed to be done to be able to adequately supervise the royal household someday.

However, during this time that she was being taught to become a lady, the prince came to see her regularly. She could hardly wait until his next visit and looked forward to the visits so eagerly, but was so sad when he had to leave. It was not long until she was hopelessly in love with him, almost as much as he was with her.

During his visits, they would walk hand-in-hand through the forest, stroll through the meadow, or sit under the trees watching the sheep as they grazed. They just enjoyed being together. Sometimes the prince would help her with work around the farm, hoeing the garden, putting up hay, or even cleaning up the kitchen after a meal. But being together was the main thing and the job to be done secondary. Sometimes they went riding together and a few times the prince even took her hunting. Many evenings, especially in the colder months, they could be found by the fireplace, sitting, just gazing into each other's eyes.

In his presence, she was happy, content, and fulfilled; there was a magic in his presence. Just the thought of him made her heart beat faster and she felt excitement in the pit of her stomach at the first sight of him. He was the most important thing in her life. She lived for his visits, to be with him, to see him smile, to see the way he looked at her with all the love in his eyes. In his presence, she sang

for him and to him and as she went about her daily work, sang about him. Her heart was filled with joy because of him and in her heart was a secret hope that someday he would come not just to visit, but to stay and they would never have to be parted again.

The prince, meanwhile, had been talking to his father. "Father, I have found her, the most beautiful, gentle woman on earth. And she loves me for myself. I have not yet told her who I am and still she loves me. She sings to me. Her voice is so sweet to my ears words cannot describe it. And she sings for me and me alone. She has eyes for no one else and her heart is totally mine. I have given my heart totally to her. She will be my bride."

And so one day as they sat among the green grass and wildflowers under the canopy of trees, the sky blue above and the sheep white against the green pasture, he took her hands in his and asked her, "My love, my dear one, will you marry me?"

Her eyes lit up like sparklers. "Oh, yes, yes, I will marry you. I want to be with you always."

"Wait, my precious, before you pledge yourself. I must tell you who I really am. You know me as a rich nobleman, and so I am, but more than that, I am the son and rightful heir of the High King of this whole land. I ask you to become my bride and my queen."

The peasant girl could not answer. She grew weak and faint. She could not comprehend. How could she who had been a pig keeper, become the bride of the high prince?

He saw the look in her eyes and said, "When I saw you that day in the dirt and mire, I saw in your eyes what I was looking for. I heard in your voice the song of your soul. I read in your face your longing. I knew then that you would be my bride. So I bought you, not to be a slave, but to hope that someday I could win your love and your hand in marriage, that you by love would consent to be my equal, my wife. I love you, my precious one."

And with these words, he took her in his arms and held her close and, of course, she melted into his embrace.

After this, their relationship gradually started to change. At first, things went on as usual. They would do things together or sit and talk or just enjoy one another's company, but now there was an added dimension. They would be getting married. So plans had to be made and so many things to be done to prepare.

Her attitude also started to change. Once she was humble and filled with gratitude for everything the prince brought her, but now she started thinking, "Since I am to be the princess, I should start to live like one. These things are owed to me."

Of course, the prince had been taking her little gifts and presents all along, but now that she knew he was the prince and how much wealth he really had, she started asking for more things, jewelry, clothes, material, and furniture. She wanted to redo the cottage to make it more attractive for the prince when he came to visit. She was no longer content with her simple cotton or wool dresses. She wanted dresses of linen, silk or velvet, what a rich lady would wear. She still wore the gold chain with the ring, but that was not enough now. She wanted pearls and jewels.

And now she was so busy when he came to visit. She didn't have time to just sit with him or to take walks together. She had to measure and cut material for the new drapes or design a new dress or cook a new dish or something else. She didn't have time to just talk.

The villagers and especially the children also noticed a change in her. She used to come to town so cheerful and the children would gather around her as she told stories about the prince and the wonderful castle he would take her to someday. (Of course, the parents thought she was just making it all up, but the children believed her and hung on every word.) But now she seemed to be distracted and preoccupied and didn't have time for them anymore. She used to share her money that she had earned with the poor, but now she felt she needed every bit to get her cottage and herself ready for the wedding. She used to go around and help the elderly with their housework, but now she needed all her time to keep her own cottage clean enough for a prince.

It got so that when the prince would come to see her, she would not even stop her work to be with him. More and more he felt squeezed out of her life and heart by her business and preoccupation with things and even her doing things for him. Sometimes she would spend all afternoon preparing a special meal, and then all evening cleaning up and never had a chance to sit down and really be with her prince at all. He started to feel that she was becoming more and more like the other girls that he had rejected, who only wanted to marry him for his power, wealth, and prestige and not for himself. The more he gave to her, the more she seemed to be enamored of his gifts and the more she neglected him.

He started coming less and less frequently because each visit left him with an awful ache in his heart, the feeling of rejection. Where once there had been sweet communion, now there was emptiness. He was heartbroken. Finally, when he could take it no more, he approached his father, the king.

"Father, I do not know what to do. My intended bride, who I love dearly, is becoming like all the other women I refused to marry. What can I do? I still love her, but I cannot marry her while she is like this."

The king wisely told him, "My son, you will have to stop visiting her. Stop giving her things. Let her alone for a season. Perhaps she will come to her senses and realize the source of her happiness is not in what you have given or will give to her, but her happiness is in you, in her love for you, and your love for her."

And so the prince took his father's advice and stopped visiting the one he loved. He stopped sending her clothes and jewels and whatever else she desired. But sad to say at first, the peasant girl did not even notice or miss the prince's visits so busy was she with her work. Finally, after several weeks went by, she began to realize that he hadn't come for awhile. A month went by, then two months. At first, she was mad at him and then began to wonder what could have caused him to stop seeing her.

Meanwhile, the prince, back in his castle, aching for his sweet loving bride, waited. The days seemed to stretch endlessly. Would his love ever come to her senses and realize what had happened to her?

One evening it was raining hard and thunder and lightning were crashing and flashing outside the peasant girl's house. She felt afraid and missed the strong comforting arms of her prince. She was sitting by the fireplace with the servant next to her.

"Kind sir, why does my prince not come to see me anymore? Do you know? Does he not love me anymore?" she asked him.

"Ah, fair lady," the servant said sadly with tears in his eyes. "I have been waiting for you to ask. He loves you as dearly as ever, but feels it is you that has ceased to love him. Each time he comes to visit you, his heart is broken because you are so busy, often doing things for him, but not with him or to him. You spend the time when he is here fixing an elaborate meal, preparing your trousseau, fixing the cottage, or myriads of other things. Your mind and heart are no longer on him, but on all these other things, your clothes, jewels, the gifts he has brought you or will bring you, and the life you will live when you are married, the power and prestige you will have. You have become self-centered, ungrateful, and have been caught up in the position and glamour of being a princess instead of the joy of being with your prince. My child, his heart is broken over you. Where does your heart lie? What is really important to you?"

His words cut her to the quick and her heart was laid bare before her eyes. She saw what she had done so unintentionally to him. She felt his pain. Tears came to her eyes and great sobs escaped her lips.

"I never wanted to hurt him," she exclaimed as she ran to her bedroom and flung herself across her bed. She cried and cried until finally in the wee hours of the night, sleep overtook her.

She woke up in the morning, eyes red and swollen. She looked at her wardrobe of beautiful dresses and realized they meant nothing to her compared to being with her prince and pleasing him. She looked at her jewels and all his other gifts, shaking her head in sadness. They brought no joy to her

life. Without her prince, nothing else mattered. She went through the chores of tending the animals mechanically. Usually she sang a bright, happy song as she worked and the animals would come and listen. But today, she could not sing. She felt physically sick. She ached all over and there was such a lump in her throat that she could scarcely eat. She looked at her cottage. It was nice, but what did all her fixing it up matter if her prince was not there to see it. Other than doing her essential chores, she spent most of the day sitting, staring into the fire.

After a few days, when the servant was convinced that the peasant girl really did love her prince, he sent word to the castle. "She is pining away for love of you. She refuses to eat and sits and mourns day and night. Come quickly, lest she die!"

The prince rejoiced to hear these words and he wanted to leave immediately to go to her. But then he thought, "Has she really learned her lesson?" How could he know? So he planned to visit her in disguise to test her.

He dressed and disguised himself as a poor, blind beggar, and came fumbling down the lane to her cottage with his eyes closed, using a cane. "Alms for a poor man," he cried, and then tripping over a tree root, fell headlong to the ground.

The girl was out in the yard feeding the chickens when she first saw him, but it was not until he fell that she dropped her feedsack and came rushing over to help him.

"Sir, let me help you. Are you all right? You look so tired and hungry. Come into my cottage and let me fix you something to eat."

The prince, still feigning blindness, allowed himself to be led into the cottage. As she prepared the food she sang, but it was such a sad, melancholy tune, the prince had to turn his head away lest she see the tears in his eyes.

"Why so sad?" he asked her.

She brought him a plate of food and sat down across the small table from him. "Oh, sir, I was in love and engaged to be married to the prince of this land. We loved each other dearly and enjoyed each other so much. But I became so busy doing things for him and making plans, clothes, and furnishings for our wedded life, that I neglected him and I started paying more attention to his gifts than to him. Now he comes to see me no longer and I fear he loves me no more. I have wounded him grievously. I don't know if he can ever forgive me. How I long to see him again. I would gladly trade all of his gifts for just one glimpse of him again." Looking down at her hands, she saw one of many rings he had given her since that first one. "See this ring he gave me? It means nothing to me now. Here, you take it. It is valuable and you need what it can buy for you." She slipped the ring off her finger, handed it to the beggar and then hiding her face in her hands, broke into sobs again.

"Oh, I think you will see him again," the beggar said. There was something so familiar about his voice. It was no longer the voice of an old man.

She looked up only to see his eyes wide open, looking into hers, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. She knew it was him, her prince, her beloved. She shrieked, jumped up, knocking the chair over, and rushed to his arms. He barely had time to stand up to catch her or they both would have fallen to the floor in her rush.

He held her while she sobbed, "I'm so sorry. Please, please forgive me. Do not leave me again. Anything, take away anything and everything you have given me. Send me back to tending pigs, but never, never take your presence from me again. I cannot live without you. I would surely die."

The prince, knowing her repentance was genuine by now, was also crying. He tilted her face to his and covered her lips with his own as their tears mingled on their cheeks.

They spent most of the day together, sitting and talking or walking and talking, or just being there with each other, no distractions, no work, just the two of them. Near evening he took his leave with the promise he would soon return.

The next day there was light, happy singing about the prince in the barnyard. The animals seemed to sense the joy of their mistress. The lambs frolicked more, the rooster crowed louder, and even the



cow gave more milk. In the market that day, the people noticed a difference. "What has happened to the peasant girl?" they asked. "She is happy again."

She called the children to her again and told them how the prince had come to see her yesterday and how he still loved her.

Day after day she went about doing her chores joyfully. She sold some of her jewels to give money to the sick and poor. She cut up some of her dresses to make clothes for the orphans. She ate simple meals and shared her food with the hungry.

Most of the villagers still didn't believe her stories about the prince, but some of those she helped, after seeing the jewels and the fine material, did believe.

And the prince came to see her often. Again, they would walk in the woods and meadows hand-in-hand. She worked at what was necessary and often he helped her. But there was special time just for the two of them and no work or chores could distract her then.

The prince noticed a difference in the cottage. The expensive furnishings he had brought her began to disappear. He asked his servant what was happening and the servant related how she had been giving away the wealth he had given her to those in need in the village. He noticed she was dressing more simply and with fewer jewels. But as she did, the love she had for him shone even stronger and she appeared even more beautiful to him. She was so enthralled with his presence, she had hardly noticed the change in the cottage or in her wardrobe and she no longer asked for him to bring things for herself.

Then one morning as she was at the market in town, a man came galloping through town shouting, "The prince has left the castle with his whole entourage. He is coming to claim his bride."

The villagers looked at each other, "Oh, the prince has found his bride at last. I wonder who she is and where she lives."

When the peasant girl heard the announcement from the courier, her heart stood still for an instant. "He's coming for me!" And with that thought, she ran as fast as she could home to her cottage to prepare for his arrival.

As she entered the cottage this morning, she saw it with different eyes. She noticed the bare walls where pictures and tapestries had hung. She saw the empty windows where there had been curtains and drapes. She looked at the furniture, only a table and two chairs left. All the rest, gone, to meet the needs of the people around her. She looked down at her dress. She was wearing the only dress she had left, her old tattered dress she had promised to keep. Her other dresses and her jewelry were gone, too. Only the ring on the golden chain around her neck had she kept. Also gone was her dream of entertaining her prince when he came for her wearing a beautiful gown in a well-furnished and decorated room. She sat down to feel sorry for herself, but then remembered. He had first met her in a pigsty and loved her then so it would be alright. He would still love her in her old tattered dress.

Just then a knock sounded at the door. "He can't be here this quick," she thought, but ran to the door anyway. She flung it open. Her prince was not there, but instead, a whole crowd of his servants, maids, ladies-in-waiting, squires, and coachmen. Beyond them she could see wagons filled high with boxes and furniture. One group hurried to the windows and began measuring. Others started bringing in boxes. The maids came with their brushes and buckets. And that was all the peasant girl had time to see because another group of ladies hustled her off to the bedroom. A large tub was brought in and soon filled with warm, sudsy water to which costly oils and perfumes were added. The ladies removed her old and tattered dress, helped her to bathe, and then applied lotion to her hands, softening the work-worn hands of a peasant girl and turning them into the soft, delicate hands of a princess. Cream was applied to her face to erase the lines caused by exposure to the sun and wind. Then make-up was tastefully applied to her face. The ladies primped and fussed with her hair until they had it just right. A chest was opened and jewelry taken out that made all the jewelry she had ever seen before look like mere baubles. There was a necklace, bracelet and tiara--all a matching set of gold and diamonds. And lastly, a dress was brought out. But such a dress! Her eyes grew wide in wonder of it. Never had she

seen or even imagined a dress so wonderful. It was pure white, of the finest satin, overlaid with hand-made lace, studded with diamonds and trimmed with pearls. It came to her feet (now in satin slippers) and extended in the back in a long train.

She emerged from her bedroom to see the rest of her cottage completely transformed. She realized all that she had tried to do in fixing the cottage was as child's play compared to what she saw before her. Furniture, pictures, draperies, rugs, it was gorgeous.

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of trumpets, shouting, and cheering. She went to the door and looking down the road saw a procession coming. As the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, "The prince comes for his bride!" She looked down at her dress. She was ready!

The prince stopped the procession several yards away and rode up to the porch alone. She waited for him in the doorway, face radiant and eyes glowing with love. She had never before seen him in all his royal attire and he seemed more handsome to her now than he had ever been before. She could not keep her eyes from him. He dismounted, sprang up the steps, and swept her into his arms.

The people could hardly believe that this peasant girl was actually the bride of the prince. They had never seen the beauty the prince had seen in her until today. Today, they understood why he had chosen her. The inner beauty of her character shining through the outer beauty of her face made her by far the most beautiful woman in the whole realm. They cheered and cheered.

After he had taken her in his arms, he ushered her into the cottage and closed the door behind him.

"My dear one, my fair one, where is the ring I gave to you when I first met you?" the prince questioned.

The ladies who had taken it during the preparations quickly came forward. "Here it is, your majesty."

He took the ring, removed it from the chain and placed it on his beloved's finger. "Now you are mine and I am yours forever."

Then he took her by the arm and steering her towards the door, said, "Now it is time to go. We must return to my castle, to the wedding feast my father has prepared. You must meet the nobles and ladies of the land who will be awed by your beauty."

She took a quick glance around the room and asked, "Will we ever return to this cottage where our love grew and blossomed, where we spent sweet hours in fellowship and communion?"

"Yes, my beloved. I will have my servants maintain this cottage for us and we will come here often when the pressure of the kingdom become too heavy. We will slip away and spend time here together, walking as we did in the forest and meadows and sitting by the hearth.

She smiled and nodded and together walked out the door. When the people saw them they began shouting and cheering again. The prince escorted her down the walk and helped her into the waiting carriage. It was the royal carriage used only for the most important occasions of state, overlaid with gold and pulled by four pure white horses. When his bride was seated comfortably, he climbed in himself. The carriage headed for the castle with the people still cheering. But inside the carriage, the prince and his bride had eyes only for each other as they looked into each other's souls and feasted on the love that was there.

Scriptures for discussion:

Ephesians 5:23-32

Revelation 2:1-5 especially verse 4

Revelation 3:17

I Peter 1:18, 19

I John 3:2

I Thessalonians 3:16-17

Revelation 19:7-8

Romans 5:6 & 8

Romans 6:22

James 1:27

Hebrews 13:16

Zachariah 12:10

Song of Solomon