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A GIRL OF THE LONG AGO.

An old man sits at [illegible] when the summer's sun is low;
His thoughts, like birds of [illegible] wing, go back to the long ago;
He leans upon a golden [illegible]
In his wrinkled palm, and tears will start unbidden in his eyes.

[illegible]

—T. C. Harbaugh in Good Housekeeping.

SIMPLICITY.

Once upon a time on an island, which the sea has long since engulfed, there lived a king and a queen who had one son. The king was a great king; his drinking cup was the very largest in all the realm; his sword the heaviest; he fought and he drank royally.

The queen was a beautiful queen; she had so many wonderful cosmetics, and they wrought so mysterious and wonderful a charm that she looked not a day older than forty.

The son was a fool. "A fool of the most pronounced type," said the brilliant lights of the kingdom. When he had reached the age of sixteen the king, his father, took him to the wars. These wars were carried on in order to exterminate a certain neighboring nation that dared to possess too much territory.

Here it was that Simplicity showed himself a dunce. He saved twenty-four women and thirty-six children from slaughter, and every stroke of the sword which he was himself forced to give caused him to weep bitterly, while the battlefield itself, running over with blood and encumbered with the dead, filled his heart with such deep pity that for three days he could not eat.

So you must see that he was a dunce, my dear.

When he was seventeen he was obliged to assist at a great festival given by the king to all the magnates of his kingdom. Here again he committed many blunders. He contented himself [illegible]; ate sparely of the great banquet spread before him, and he swore—not at all! His glass would have remained always full before him had not the king himself, to save the dignity of the family, emptied it slyly from time to time.

At eighteen, as he began to grow a beard, he was noticed by one of the queen's court ladies.

Court ladies are dreadful creatures, my dear.

This particular court lady wished for nothing less than to be kissed by the prince! The poor boy did not dream of such a thing; he trembled when she spoke to him, and hid himself the moment he saw the edge of her skirts in the gardens. The king, who was a good father, saw what was passing and laughed in his sleeve. But as the lady still pursued the prince, and the kiss was still withheld, he blushed for such a son and himself gave the kiss asked for, always, to be sure, for the dignity and honor of his family and his race. "Oh, the little fool!" said the king, who was a man of spirit.

It was at the age of twenty that Simplicity became completely idiotic. He met a forest and fell in love! In those olden times people did not try to beautify the trees by pruning and cruel incisions. The branches grew as they listed; God alone had them in charge, and moderated the roots and managed the saplings. Simplicity's forest was an immense nest of verdure, interspersed here and there by majestic avenues. The moss, drunk with the dew, flourished wantonly; the eglantines spread their pliant arms, sought each other and played mad pranks around the mighty trunks of the trees. The great trees themselves, standing calm and serene, twisted their roots in the shade and mounted tumultuously upward to kiss the rays of summer. The green grass flourished, while in their hurry to blossom the daisy and the [illegible] grass, growing confused at times, clung together on the broken trunks of fallen trees. And all these branches, all these grasses, all these flowers, sang; all mingled and pressed closely together to gossip more at ease, to whisper low together of the loves of the corolla. A breath of life floated low down in the shadowed coppice, giving voice to each sprig of moss.

The forest held high carnival. The ladybirds, the beetles, the dragonflies, the butterflies—all the beautiful lovers of the flowering hedges—had gathered at the four quarters of the forest.

There they established their little republic; the footpaths were their [illegible], the streams, their streams, the forest, their forest. They lived luxuriantly at the foot of the trees, [illegible], in the dried leaves; [illegible] as though at home, quietly and by right of conquest. They had, like good citizens, abandoned the higher branches to the [illegible] and the nightingales. The forest, that had little [illegible] in all its branches, in all its leaves and flowers, sang now with the insects and with the birds.

In a short time Simplicity became an old friend of the forest. They chatted so happily together that it robbed him of the last vestige of sense. When he left the forest to shut himself again within four walls, whether seated at his table or lying in his bed, he was always dreaming.

At last, one beautiful morning, he suddenly abandoned his apartments, and went and installed himself under the old foliage. There he chose for himself an immense palace. His salon was a vast glade. Long dark green draperies ornamented the periphery; but flexible pillars, interlaced like a fine gauzy veil, and of the bright hue of the emerald, towered high in the air. The roof itself was one large dome of changeable blue satin, starred with golden nails. His sleeping room was a delicious boudoir, filled with mystery and fragrance. The flooring and the walls were hidden under a soft carpet of an inimitable pattern. The alcove, hewn through a rock by some giant, had walls of pink marble and a floor of ruby powder. He had also his bathroom, a living fountain of pure water, a crystal bath laid in a bouquet of flowers. I will not tell of the thousand palaces which crossed each other in this palace, nor of the wondrous landscapes, nor of the gardens. It was one of those royal habitations that God alone knows how to fashion. The prince, therefore, could now be as foolish as he pleased. His father thought him changed into a wolf, and so sought another heir more worthy of the throne.

Simplicity was very busy during the next few days after settling himself in his new home. He made friends with his neighbors, the beetles and the butterflies. They were kind neighbors, with as much bright intelligence as man. At first he had some difficulty in understanding their language, and he soon perceived that he would have to educate himself anew. He learned the concise language of the insects. A sound indicated a hundred different objects, following the inflection of the voice and the length of the note. Soon he lost the habit of speaking the language of his race, so poor in spite of its wealth of words. The way of living of his new friends charmed him. He felt supremely ignorant compared with them, and resolved to go and study at their schools.

He was more reserved in his relations toward the mosses and the pines. As he was not yet able to understand the language of the blade of grass and of the flowers, his ignorance caused a certain reserve in his intercourse with them. But the forest did not eye him coldly. It understood that he was a simple soul, and that he held the most amiable intercourse with the denizens of the wood. No one hid from him. It often chanced that he would surprise, at the end of a glade, a butterfly ruffling the collar of a daisy. Soon the hawthorn overcame her bashfulness, just enough to give lessons to the young prince. She lovingly taught him the language of perfume and of color. The purple corolla hailed Simplicity on his awakening, the green leaves told of their wild midnight dances, the grasshopper confided to him in a whisper that he was madly in love with the violet.

Simplicity had chosen for his bosom friend a golden dragonfly, with a slender waist and quivering wings. This beauty was a dreadful coquette; she sparkled near him, [illegible] to call to him, then flew lightly from his hand. The great trees, who saw these maneuvers, rebuked her vigorously and solemnly whispered that she would come to a bad end.

Simplicity suddenly became restless. The ladybug, who was the first to perceive the sadness of her friend, gently sought to win his confidence. He answered sadly that he was as happy as ever. He rose now with the dawn, and wandered through the glade until dusk. He softly held back the branches, searched the thicket and the shadows formed by the leaves.

"What is our pupil seeking?" demanded the hawthorn of the moss.

The dragonfly, wondering at this desertion of her lover, concluded that he was mad for love of her. She came and roguishly fluttered about him; he did not perceive her. The big trees had judged her rightly; she consoled herself quickly with the first butterfly at the crossway.

The leaves were sad as they watched the young prince, questioning each tuft of grass and searching with an eager eye the long avenues. They heard him complain of the impenetrable thickness of the brushwood, and they said, "Simplicity has seen Flower-of-the-Water," the Undine of the spring.

Flower-of-the-Water was the child of a sunbeam and a dewdrop.

She was so limpidly beautiful that the kiss of a lover would cause her death. The perfume of her breath was so sweet that a kiss from her lips would cause the death of her lover. The forest knew this, and with jealous care it hid its adored child. It had given her as a sanctuary a spring shaded by a thick cluster of trees. There, in the silence and the shadow, Flower-of-the-Water glittered in the midst of her sisters, idly she floated with the tide, her small feet half hidden by the ripples, her golden head crowned with liquid pearls. Her smile was the delight of the water lilies and the gladioles. She was the soul of the forest. She lived without a care, knowing naught of earth but her mother, the dew, nor of the heavens, but the sunbeam, her father. She knew herself beloved by the ripple that cradled her, by the branch that shaded her. She had [illegible], but not one lover. Flower-of-the-Water was not ignorant of the fact that she would die of love; she was pleased with the thought, and lived in the hope of such a death. Smilingly she awaited the well beloved.

One night, by the light of the stars, Simplicity beheld her at the winding of a glade. He sought her during a long month, hoping to meet her behind every tree trunk. Sometimes it seemed to him that he saw her gliding through the coppice; but he found only the great shadows of the poplars, swayed by the winds of heaven.

The forest became silent now; it mistrusted Simplicity. It pressed low its leaves, and threw dark shadows of night on the young prince's path. The danger that threatened Flower-of-the-Water made it melancholy; it gave no more soft caresses, no more loving prattle.

Undine came again to the glade, and once more Simplicity beheld her. With longing he pursued her. The child, mounted on a moonbeam, did not hear the sound of his footsteps. She flew onward, light as a feather floating in the wind. Simplicity ran, but could not overtake her. He wept bitterly—despair filled his soul; but still he pressed onward, while the forest watched with growing anxiety this mad race. The bushes barred his way; the thorns held him in their sharp embrace, grimly arresting his progress—the entire forest was in arms to defend its child. Still he kept on, though the moss grew treacherous and slippery beneath his feet. The branches interlaced more firmly and faced him, immovable as a wall; fallen trunks of trees threw themselves in his path; the rocks rolled down of their own volition and strove to entrap him; the insects nipped his heels; the butterflies, brushing his eyelids with their wings, blinded him.

Flower-of-the-Water, neither seeing nor hearing him, still flew onward. Simplicity, with anguish, felt that the moment was approaching when she would again vanish, and desperate, breathless, he dashed on.

He heard the old oaks call angrily after him: "Why did you not tell us that you were a man? We would have hidden away from you; we would have refused to teach you, so that your dull eyes would have failed to see Flower-of-the-Water, the Undine of the spring. You came to us with seeming innocence, the innocence of the dumb animals, and now today you show us the spirit of man. Look, you are crushing the beetles, you tear our leaves, you break our branches; the spirit of selfishness is sweeping you away—you would steal our very soul!" And the hawthorn added: "Simplicity, pause in pity. If Flower-of-the-Water should desire to breathe the perfume of my starry blossoms, why not leave them to grow freely on my branches?" And the moss said: "Stay, Simplicity; come dream on the velvet of my fragrant carpet. In the distance among the trees thou canst see Flower-of-the-Water playing. Thou shalt see her bathe in the spring and casting glistening pearls around her throat. Thou canst share the joy of her glances; stay with me; thou shalt live and see her." And the whole forest cried: "Stay, Simplicity. A kiss will kill thee—do not give that kiss. Dost thou not know? The evening breeze, our messenger, has he not told thee? Flower-of-the-Water is the celestial flower, whose perfume is deathly. Alas! poor child, her destiny is a strange one. Have mercy, Simplicity; do not drink her soul on her lips."

Flower-of-the-Water turned and saw Simplicity; she smiled and beckoned him to draw near, as she said to the forest: "Here comes my well beloved!"

Three days, three hours, three minutes had the prince pursued her; the words of the oaks still rumbled around him—he felt half tempted to turn and flee. Flower-of-the-Water already clasped his hands; she tiptoed on her tiny feet; her smile was reflected in the young man's eyes.

"Thou didst long delay," murmured she. "My heart recognized thee in the forest; I climbed on a moonbeam and I sought thee—three days—three hours—three minutes!"

Simplicity was silent, scarcely daring to breathe; she bade him sit by her on the brink of the fountain; she caressed him with her glances, and he! long time did he gaze!

"Dost thou not recognize me?" whispered she. "I have often seen thee in my dreams; I went to thee—thou didst take my hand; then together we would walk silent and trembling. Didst thou not see me? Dost thou not remember thy dreams?" and as at last he found voice to speak, "Do not say anything," she interrupted quickly. "I am Flower-of-the-Water and thou art my well beloved! We shall die!"

The great trees leant forward the better to behold the young lovers; they trembled with anguish and whispered each other that the souls of the lovers would soon fly away! All the voices grew hushed. The blade of grass and the oak were overcome with pity; the leaves had forgotten their anger; Simplicity, the lover of Flower-of-the-Water, was now the son of the forest.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and together they gazed into the stream; they smiled into each other's eyes! Again, looking upward, they watched the golden dust that trembled in the rays of the setting sun. Slowly their arms entwined—slowly—slowly. They awaited the coming of the evening star, when they would blend together and fly away forever!

Not one single word ruffled the harmony of their ecstasy. Their souls, breathing through their lips, mingled together.

The day failed; the lips of the lovers grew ever nearer. A terrible anguish held the forest motionless and rigid. Huge rocks, from which the water sprang, threw heavy shadows around them; they alone were radiant in the growing night!

At last the star appeared in the blue above and their lips met in the supreme kiss, and through the oaks there quivered a long sob—their lips had met, and their souls took wing!

On the edge of the stream they found Simplicity resting in the sleep of death. His feet dipped in the ripples, his head reposed on the grassy bank. Closely pressed to his lips was a small pink and white blossom, daintily exquisite, and of a penetrating perfume.—Translated from the French of Emile Zola, for Short Stories, by Marion Opper.

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