

## THE PRINCESS OF KINGDOM GONE

A. E. COPPARD

LONG ago a princess ruled over a very tiny kingdom; indeed, it was too small for ambition. Had it been larger she might have been made a queen, and had it been seven times larger, so people said, she would certainly have been an empress. As it was, the barbarians referred to her country as "that field!" or put other indignities upon it which, as she was high-minded, the princess did not heed, or, if she did heed, had too much pride to acknowledge.

In other realms her mansion, her beautiful mansion, would have been called a castle, or even a palace, so high was the wall, crowned with pink tiles, that enclosed and protected it from evil. The common gaze was warded from the door by a grove of thorns and trees through which an avenue curved a long way round from the house to the big gate. The gate was of knotted oak, but it had been painted and grained most cleverly to represent some other fabulous wood. There was this inscription upon it: *No Hawkens, No Circulars, No Gratuities*. Everybody knew the princess had not got any of those things, but it was because they also knew the mansion had no throne in it that people sneered, really—but how unreasonably; you might just as well grumble at a chime that hadn't got a clock! As the princess herself remarked, "What *is* a throne without high-mindedness!"—hinting, of course, at certain people whom I dare not name. Behind the mansion lay a wondrous garden, like the princess herself above everything in beauty. A very private bower was in the midst of it, guarded with corridors of shaven yew and a half-circle hedge of arbutus and holly. A slim river flowed, not by dis-

pensation but by accident, through the bower, and the bed and bank of it, screened by cypresses, had been lined, not by accident but by design—so strange are the workings of destiny,—with tiles and elegant steps for a bathing pool. Here the princess, when the blazon of the sun was enticing, used to take off her robes of silk and her garments of linen and walk about the turf of the bower around the squinancy tree before slipping into the dark velvet water.

One day when she stepped out from the pool she discovered a lot of crimson flower petals clinging to her white skin. "How beautiful they are," she cried, picking up her mirror, "and where do they come from?" As soon as convenient she enquired upon this matter of her Lord Chancellor, a man named Smith, who had got on very well in life but was a bit of a smudge; he had been brought up at the union.

"Crimson petals in the bath!"

"Yes, they have floated down with the stream."

"How disgusting! Very! I'll make instant enquiries!"

He searched and he searched—he was very thorough was Smith,—but though his researches took no end of a time, and he issued a bulky dossier commanding all and sundry to attack the defiant person of the miscreant or miscreants who had defiled the princess's bath, stream, or pool with refuse detritus or scum, offering, too, rewards for information leading to his, her, or their detection, conviction, and ultimate damnation, they availed him not. The princess continued to bathe and to emerge joyfully from the stream covered with petals and looking as wonderful as a crimson leopard. She caught some of the petals with a silver net; she dried them upon the sunlight and hid them in the linen of her bed; they were full of acrid but pleasing odours. But the

egregious Smith could offer no enlightenment, so she herself, early one morning, walked abroad, early indeed, and passed along the river until she came to the field adjoining the mansion. Very sweet and strange the world seemed in the quiet after dawn. She stopped beside a half-used rick to look about her ; there was a rush of surprised wings behind the stack and a thousand starlings fled up into the air. She heard their wings beating the air until they had crossed the river and dropped gradually into an elm tree like a black shower. Then she perceived a taller tree shining with crimson blooms, its long dark boughs bending low upon the river. Near it a tiny red cottage stood in the field like a painted box, surrounded by green triangular bushes. It was a respectable looking cottage, named "River View." On her approach the door suddenly opened, and a youth with a towel, just that and nothing more, emerged. He took flying rejoicing leaps towards the flaming tree, sprang upon its lowest limb and flung himself into the stream. He glided there like a rod of ivory, but a crimson shower fell from the quivering tree and veiled the pleasing boy until he climbed out upon the opposite bank and stood covered, like a leopard, with splendid crimson spots. The princess dared peer no longer ; she retraced her steps, musing homewards to breakfast, and was rude to Smith because he was such a fool not to have discovered the young man who lived next door under the mysterious tree.

At the earliest opportunity she left a card at "River View." Narcissus was the subject's name, and in due time he came to dinner, and they had green grapes and black figs, nuts like sweet wax, and wine like melted amethysts. The princess loved him so much that he visited her very often and stayed very late. He was only a poet and she a princess, so she

could not possibly marry him, although this was what she very quickly longed to do ; but as she was only a princess, and he a poet clinking his golden spurs, he did not want to be married to her. He had thick curling locks of hair red as copper, the mild eyes of a child, and a voice that could outsing a thousand delightful birds. When she heard his soft laughter in the dim delaying eve he grew strange and alluring to the princess. She knew it was because he was so beautiful that everybody loved him and wanted to win him and keep him, but he had no inclination for anything but his art—which was to express himself. That was very sad for the princess ; to be able to retain nothing of him but his poems, his fading images, while he himself eluded her as the wind eludes all detaining arms, forest and feather, briar and down of a bird. He did not seem to be a man, but just a little fairy image that slipped from her arms, gone, like brief music in the moonlight, before she was aware.

When he fell sick she watched by his bed.

“Tell me,” she murmured, her wooing palms caressing his flaming hair, “tell me you love me.”

All he would answer was : “I dream of loving you, and I love dreaming of you, but how can I tell if I love you ? ”

Very tremulous but arrogant, she demanded of him :

“ Shall I not know if you love me at all ? ”

“ Ask the fox in your brake, the hart upon your mountain. I can never know if you love *me*.”

“ I have given you my deepest vows, Narcissus ; love like this is wider than the world.”

“ The same wind blows in desert as in grove.”

“ You do not love at all.”

“ Words are vain, princess, but when I die, put

these white hands like flowers about my heart ; if I dream the unsleeping dream I will tell you there."

"My beloved," she said, "if you die I will put upon your grave a shrine of silver and in it an ark of gold jewelled with green garnets and pink sapphires. My spirit should dwell in it alone and wait for you ; until you came back again I could not live."

So the poet died.

The Princess was wild with grief, but she commanded her Lord Chancellor and he arranged magnificent obsequies. A shrine of silver and an ark of jewelled gold were ordered, a grave dug in a new planted garden more wonderful than the princess's bower, and a *To Let* bill appeared in the window of "River View." At last Narcissus, with great pomp, was buried, the shrine and the ark of gold were clapped down upon him, and the Princess in blackest robes was led weeping away on the arm of Smith—Smith was wonderful.

The sun that evening did not set—it mildly died out of the sky. Darkness came into the meadows, the fogs came out of them and hovered over the river and the familiar night sounds began. The Princess sat in the mansion with a lonely heart from which all hopes were receding ; no, not receding, she could see only the emptiness from which all her hopes had gone.

At midnight, the spirit of Narcissus, in its cerecloth, rose up out of the grave, frail as a reed ; rose out of its grave and stood in the cloudy moonlight beside the shrine and the glittering ark. He tapped upon the jewels with his fingers, but there was no sound came from it, no fire, no voice. "O holy love," sighed the ghost, "it is true what I feared, it is true, alas, it is true !" And lifting again his vague arm

he crossed out the inscription on his tomb and wrote there instead with a gray and crumbling finger his last poem—

“Pride and grief in your heart,  
Love and grief in mine.”

Then he crept away until he came to the bower in the Princess's garden. It was all silent and cold; the moon was touching with brief beam the paps of the plaster Diana. The ghost laid himself down to rest forever beneath the squinancy tree, to rest and to wait; he wanted to forestall time's inscrutable awards. He sank slowly into the earth as a knot of foam slips through the beach of the seashore. Deep down he rested and waited.

Day after day, month after month, the constant Princess went to her new grove of lamentation. The grave garden was magnificent with holy flowers, the shrine polished and glistening, the inscription crisp and clear—the ghost's erasure being vain for mortal eyes. In the ark she knew her spirit brooded and yearned, she fancied she could see its tiny flame behind the garnets and sapphires, and in a way this gave her happiness. Meanwhile, her own once happy bower was left to neglect. The bolt rusted in its gate, the shrubs rioted, tree trunks were crusted with oozy fungus, their boughs cracked to decay, the rose fell rotten, and toads and vermin lurked in the desolation of the glades. 'Twas pitiful; 'twas as if the heart of the Princess had left its pleasant bower and had indeed gone to live in her costly shrine.

In the course of time she was forced to go away on business of State, and travelled for many months; on her return the face of the Lord Chancellor was gloomy with misery. The golden ark had been stolen. Alarm and chagrin filled the Princess. She went to the grave. It, too, had now grown weedy and looked forlorn. It was as if her own heart had

been stolen away from her. "O!" she moaned, "what does it matter!" and, turning away, went home to her bower. There, amid that sad sight, she saw a strange new tree almost in bloom. She gave orders for the pool to be cleansed and the bower restored to its former beauty. This was done, and on a bright day when the blazon of the sun was kind she went into the bower again, flung her black robes of mourning from her, and her white garments of linen, and slipped like a rod of ivory into the velvet water. There were no blooms to gather now, though she searched with her silver net, but as she walked from the pool her long hair caught in the boughs of the strange tall squinancy tree, and in the disentangling it showered down upon her beautiful crimson blooms that, as they fell, lingered upon her hips, kissed her sweet shoulders, and graced her shining knees.

A. E. COPPARD.

## AFTER THE WAR

LESLIE COMBER

**G**OD grant we grow not commonplace again  
 After the heights of these heroic years—  
 We who have forced life's armoury of fears,  
 Felt every differing edge and dared to deign:  
 Mortified Death by laughter, wounded Pain  
 By gay indifference, made the rivering tears  
 Motives for mills of Thought (by God's wise gears  
 To shape fresh faith) and highways to Hope's main.  
 Else shall we be as those Plutonian Shades  
 For their strong manhood bartered by mean  
 Death;  
 As sojourners on mountains who have sunk  
 To foolish bickering and spent their breath;  
 Or Peter, who the Well of Life had drunk,  
 Then found false converse with those serving maids.