

ABBIE BROWN

THE FLOWER
PRINCESS

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The Flower Princess

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Abbie Farwell Brown

The Flower Princess

THE FLOWER PRINCESS

I

ONCE upon a time there was a beautiful Princess named Fleurette, who lived in a white marble palace on the top of a high hill. The Princess Fleurette was very fond of flowers, and all around the palace, from the very gates thereof, a fair garden, full of all kinds of wonderful plants, sloped down to the foot of the hill, where it was snugly inclosed with a high marble wall. Thus the hill was like a great nosegay rising up in the midst of the land, sending out sweet odors to perfume the air for miles, bright with color in the sunshine, and musical with the chorus of birds and the hum of millions of bees.

One part of the garden was laid out in walks and avenues, with little vine-clad bowers here and there, where the Princess could sit and read, or lie and dream. There were fountains and statues among the trees, and everything grand and stately to make a garden beautiful. Another part of the garden was left wild and tangled, like a forest. Here all the shyest flowers grew in their own wild way; and here ran a little brook, gurgling over the pebbles in a race to the foot of the hill. There never was seen a more complete and beautiful garden than this of the Princess Fleurette.

Now the fame of the Princess's beauty, like the fragrance of her garden, had been wafted a long way, and many persons came to prove it. A continual procession of princes from lands near and far traveled the long road that wound from the foot of the hill up and up and up to the entrance of the palace. They came upon their noble steeds, with gold and jeweled harness most gorgeous to see, riding curiously up amid the flowers, whose perfume filled their hearts with happiness and hope. The further they rode the more they longed to tarry forever in this fair place. And when each one at last dismounted at the palace gate, and, going into the great hall, saw the Princess herself, more fair than any flower, sitting on her golden throne, he invariably fell upon his knees without delay, and begged her to let him be her very ownest Prince.

But the Princess always smiled mischievously and shook her head, saying, —

"I have no mind to exchange hearts, save with him who can find mine, where it is hidden among my flowers. Guess me my favorite flower, dear Prince, and I am yours."

This she said to every prince in turn. She did not greatly care to have any prince for her very ownest own, for she was happy enough among her flowers without one. But the Prince, whoever he might be, when he heard her strange words, would go out eagerly into the garden and wander, wander long among the flowers, searching to find the sweetest and most beautiful, which must be his lady's favorite. And, of course, he selected his own favorite, whatever that was. It might be that he would choose a great, wonderful rose. At the proper time he would kneel and present it to the Princess, saying confidently, —

"O fair Princess, surely I have found the flower of your heart. See the beautiful rose! Give it then to me to wear always, as your very ownest Prince."

But the Princess, glancing at the rose, would shake her head and say, —

"Nay! I love the roses, too. But my heart is not there, O Prince. You are not to be my lord, or you would have chosen better."

Then she would retire into her chamber, to be no more seen while that Prince remained in the palace. Presently he would depart, riding sorrowfully down the hill on his gorgeous steed, amid the

laughing flowers. And the Princess would be left to enjoy her garden in peace until the next prince should arrive.

It might be that this one would guess the glorious nodding poppy to be his lady's choice. But he would be no nearer than the other. A later comer would perhaps choose a gay tulip; another a fair and quiet lily; still another earnest soul would select the passion-flower, noble and mysterious. But at all of these the Princess shook her head and denied them. There had never yet come a prince to the hill who found her heart's true flower. And the Princess lived on among her posies, very happy and very content, growing fairer and fairer, sweeter and sweeter, with their bloom upon her cheek and their fragrance in her breath. There never was seen a more beautiful princess than Fleurette.

Now the Princess loved to rise very early in the morning, before any of her people were awake, and to steal down by a secret staircase into the garden while it was yet bright with dew and newly wakened happiness. She loved to put on a gown of coarse green stuff, wherein she herself looked like a dainty pink and white flower in its sheath, and with a little trowel to dig in the fragrant mould at the roots of her plants, or train the vines with her slender fingers.

No one suspected that she did this, and she would not have had them suspect it for the world. For if the palace people had known, they would have followed and annoyed her with attentions and suggestions. They would have brought her gloves to protect her pretty hands, and a veil, and parasol, and a rug upon which to kneel – if kneel she must – while weeding the flower-beds. Indeed, they would scarcely have allowed her to do anything at all. For were there not gardeners to attend to all this; and why should she bother herself to do anything but enjoy the blossoms when they were picked for her? They did not know, poor things, that the greatest joy in a flower is to watch and help it grow from a funny little seed into a leaf, then a tall green stalk, then a waking bud, until finally it keeps the promise of its first sprouting, and becomes a blossom. They did not guess that the happiest hours of the Princess's life were those which she spent in the early morning tending her flower-babies, while her fond courtiers, and even the curious princes on their way to woo her, were still wasting the best part of the day on lazy pillows. Many a time the Gardener declared that a fairy must tend the royal flowers, so wonderfully did they flourish, free from weed or worm or withering leaf. It even seemed to him sometimes that he could trace a delicate perfumed touch which had blessed their leaves before his coming. When he told this to Fleurette she only smiled sweetly at him. But in her heart she laughed; for she was a merry Princess.

One beautiful morning the Princess arose as usual, soon after sunrise, and, putting on her green flower-gown, stole down the secret staircase into the garden. There it lay, all fresh and wonderful, sparkling with diamond dewdrops. The Princess Fleurette walked up and down the paths, smiling at the blossoms, which held up their pretty faces and seemed to smile back at her, as if she were another flower. Sometimes she kneeled down on her royal knees in the gravel, bending over to kiss the flowers with her red lips. Sometimes she paused to punish a greedy worm, or a rude weed which had crowded in among the precious roots. Sometimes with her little golden scissors she snipped off a withered leaf or a faded flower of yesterday. Up and down the paths she passed, singing happily under her breath, but seldom plucking a flower; for she loved best to see them growing on their green stalks.

She came at last to a little summer-house, up which climbed morning-glories, blue and pink and white – fairy flowers of early morning, which few of her people ever saw, because they rose so late. For by the time those lazy folk were abroad, the best part of the day was spent; and the little morning-glories, having lived it happily, were ready for their rest. They drowsed and nodded and curled up tight into a long sleep, in which they missed nothing at all of the later day.

When Fleurette spied the morning-glories she clapped her little hands, and, running up to the arbor, danced about on her tiptoes, whispering, —

"Good-morning, little dears! Good-morning, my beautiful ones. How fresh and sweet and fair you are!" And, plucking a single blossom, a cup of the frailest pink, she placed it in her yellow hair, her only ornament. Then she danced toward the little arbor, for it was her favorite early-morning

bower. But when she came to the door, instead of entering, she started back with a scream. For through the morning-glory vines two bright eyes were peering at her.

"Peek-a-boo!" said a merry voice. And out stepped a lad with a smiling, handsome face. He was dressed all in green. By his side hung a sword, and over his shoulder he bore a little lute, such as minstrels use.

"Good-morning, merry maiden," he said, doffing his cap and bowing very low. "You, too, love flowers in the early morning. We have good taste, we two, alone of all this place, it seems."

"You are not of this place. How came you here?" asked the Princess, stepping back and frowning somewhat. "Do you not know that this is the garden of a Princess, who allows no one to visit it between dusk and the third hour after sunrise?"

"Ah!" cried the youth, with a merry laugh. "That I learned yesterday down below there in the village. And a foolish law it is. If the Princess knows no better than to forbid the sight of her garden when it is most beautiful, then the Princess deserves to be disobeyed. And for that matter, pretty maiden, are not you, too, a trespasser at this early hour? Aha! Oho!" The lad laughed, teasingly, shaking his finger at her.

The Princess bit her lip to keep from laughing. But she said as sternly as she could: "You are rude, Sir Greencoat. I am one of the best friends the Princess has. She allows me to come here at this hour, alone of all the world."

"Ah, share the right with me, dear maiden, share it with me!" exclaimed the Stranger. "Let me play with you here in the garden early in the morning. Do not tell her of my fault; but let me repeat it again, and yet again, while I remain in this land."

The Princess hesitated, then answered him with a question. "You are then of another country? You are soon to go away?"

"Yes, I am of a far country. My name is Joyeuse, and I am a merry fellow, – a traveler, a minstrel, a swordsman, an herb-gatherer. I have earned my bread in many ways. I was passing through this country when the fragrance of this wondrous garden met my flower-loving nose, guiding me hither. Ah, how beautiful it is! Because I wished to see it at its best in early morning I stole through the gates at sundown, and spent the night in yonder little arbor. I have been wandering ever since among the flowers, until I heard your voice singing. Then I stole back here to hide, for I was too happy to risk being discovered and sent away."

"You are a bold, bad fellow, Joyeuse," said Fleurette, laughing; "and I have a mind to tell the Princess about you and your wanderings."

"Would she be so very angry?" asked the Stranger. "I will not pluck a single bud. I love them all too dearly, just as you do, dear maiden, for I have watched you. Ay, I could almost tell which is your favorite flower – "

"Nay, that you cannot do," said the Princess hastily. "No one knows that."

"Aha!" cried the lad. "You make a secret of it, even as does your mistress, the Princess Fleurette. I have heard how she will choose for her Prince only him who finds the flower which holds her heart. I had thought one time to find that flower, and become her Prince."

"You!" cried the Princess, starting with surprise.

"Ay, why not? I could fight for her, and defend her with my life, if need be. I could sing and play to make her merry. I could teach her many things to make her wise. I am skilled in herbs and lotions, and I could keep her people in health and happiness. Moreover, I love flowers as well as she, – better, since I love them at their best in this early morning: even as you love them, fair maiden. I should not make so poor a prince for this garden. But now that I have seen you, little flower, I have no longing to be a prince. I would not win the Princess if I might. For you must be fairer than she – as you are fairer even than the flowers, your sisters. Ah, I have an idea! I believe that *you* are that very flower, the fairest one, whereon the Princess has set her heart. Tell me, is it not so?"

"Indeed no!" cried the Princess, turning very pink at his flattery. "How foolishly you speak! But I must hasten back to the palace, or we shall be discovered and some one will be punished."

"And shall I see you among the maidens of the Princess when I present myself before her?" asked Joyeuse eagerly.

"Oh, you must not do that!" exclaimed Fleurette. "You must not try to see the Princess to-day. This is a bad time. Perhaps to-morrow – " She hesitated.

"But you will come again to the garden?" he begged.

She shook her head. "No, not to-day, Joyeuse."

"Then to-morrow you will come? Promise that you will be here to-morrow morning early, to play with me for a little while?" he persisted.

The Princess laughed a silvery little laugh. "Who knows whom you may find if you are in the garden again to-morrow morning early." And without another word she slipped away before Joyeuse could tell which way she went. For she knew every turning of the paths and all the windings between the hedges, which were puzzling to strangers.

II

The next morning at the same hour Joyeuse was wandering through the paths of the garden, seeking his flower-maiden. He looked for her first near the arbor of morning-glories, but Fleurette was not there. He had to search far and wide before he found her at last in quite another part of the garden, among the lilies. She wore a white lily in her yellow locks.

"Ah!" cried Joyeuse, when he spied her, "it is a lily to-day. But yesterday I thought I guessed your favorite flower. Now I find that I was wrong. Surely, this is your choice. So fair, so pure, – a Princess herself could choose no better."

Fleurette smiled brightly at him, shaking her hair from side to side in a golden shower. "One cannot so easily read my thoughts as he may suppose," she cried saucily.

"Dear maiden," said Joyeuse, coming nearer and taking her hand, "I have no wonderful garden like this where I can invite you to dwell as its little princess. But come with me, and we will make a tiny one of our very own, where no one shall forbid us at any hour, and where we will play at being Prince and Princess, as happy as two butterflies."

But Fleurette shook her head and said: "No, I can never leave the garden and my Princess. She could not live without me. I shall dwell here always and always, so long as the flowers and I are a-blooming."

"Then I, too, must live here always and always!" declared Joyeuse. "Perhaps the Princess will take me for her minstrel, or her soldier, or her man of medicine, – anything that will keep me near you, so that we can play together here in the garden. Would that please you, little flower?"

Fleurette looked thoughtful. "I should be sorry to have you go," she said; "you love the flowers so dearly, it would be a pity."

"Yes, indeed I love them!" cried Joyeuse. "Let us then go to the Princess and ask her to keep me in her service."

The Princess looked long at Joyeuse, and at last she said: "How do I know what manner of minstrel you are? I cannot take you to her without some promise of your skill, for she is a Princess who cares only for the best. Come, let us go into the wilder part of the garden, where no one can hear us, and I will listen to your music."

So they went into a wild part of the garden, and sat down under a tree beside the little brook. And there he played and sang for her such sweet and beautiful music that she clapped her hands for joy. And when he had finished he said, —

"Well, dear maiden, do you think I am worthy to be your lady's minstrel? Have I the skill to make her happy?"

"Truly, Joyeuse, you have made *me* very happy, and you are a Prince of Minstrels," she answered. "Yet – I cannot tell. That is not enough. But hark! I hear the chapel bell. I must hasten back to the palace. To-morrow I will come again and listen to another song. Meanwhile do not try to see the Princess."

"I care not for the Princess, I," he called after her, "so long as I may see you, little flower!" And for an answer her laughter came back to him over the flowers.

So that day went by; and early the next morning Joyeuse took his lute and sought the flower-maiden in the garden. This time he sought her long and long before he found her among the roses. There was a crimson rose in her hair, and one upon either cheek when she glanced up, hearing his footsteps on the grass. There was also a crimson spot upon her white hand.

"See!" she cried, "a cruel thorn has pricked me. Let me test your skill in herbs, Sir Doctor."

With a sorry face, for it gave him pain to see her pain, Joyeuse ran to find the leaf of a certain plant which he knew. Presently he returned, and, taking a bit of linen from his scrip, tenderly bound the leaf about the poor wounded finger.

"Now will it be cured," he said. "This is a remedy which never fails."

"How wise you are," murmured Fleurette, "a very Prince of Doctors!"

"Say, may I not then hope to be the doctor of the Princess?" he asked eagerly.

But Fleurette shook her head. "We must see how the finger is to-morrow morning. If it is quite healed then, perhaps – But hark! That is the Gardener's whistle. It is late, and I must return to the palace, or he will find us trespassing." And away she ran, before Joyeuse had time to say another word.

Now when the morrow arrived, Joyeuse sought Fleurette in the garden, long and long. But at last he found her among the lavender. Her finger indeed was healed, so that she smiled upon him, and she said, —

"Now you shall teach me to play the lute. The Princess, I know, would fain master the lute. But I must see first what sort of teacher you make before I take you to her."

So they sat down beside a marble fountain in the fairest part of the garden; and there Joyeuse taught her how to pluck the lute and to make sweet music. He taught her so well, and they passed the time so pleasantly, that they forgot how the hours were flying.

"Joyeuse, you are the very Prince of Teachers!" said Fleurette.

At that moment a shadow fell upon the grass beside them, and lo! there stood the head Gardener, who had heard the sound of the music, and had hurried to see who might be in the Princess's garden at this forbidden hour. The Princess gave a little cry, and without a word slipped away through an opening in the hedge that she knew, before the Gardener had a chance to see her face.

"Huh!" grunted the Gardener. "She has escaped, whoever she is. But we shall soon know her name. You shall tell us that and other things, you minstrel fellow."

"That I will never tell you!" cried Joyeuse.

"Huh! We shall see about that, too," retorted the Gardener surlily. "You shall not escape, Sirrah. I will take you to my lady the Princess, and you will have a chance to explain how you came to be here playing the lute in her garden at a forbidden hour. Come along!" And he advanced to seize Joyeuse by the collar. He was a huge, burly fellow, almost a giant in size.

But Joyeuse laid his hand on his sword and said: "Keep back, Gardener, and do not attempt to lay hands on me! I promise to follow wherever you may lead, but you shall not touch me to make me prisoner."

"Huh! A valiant minstrel!" sneered the Gardener. But he looked twice at the Stranger's flashing eyes and at his strong right arm, and decided to accept his promise. At once he led the way through the winding paths of the garden until they came to the palace gate. Now Joyeuse was shut into a dark dungeon to wait the hour when the Princess was wont to hold council, to listen to the prayers of her suitors and the wishes of her people.

Poor Joyeuse! "This is the end of my happy time," he said to himself. "The Princess will now dismiss me, if she does no worse. She will have no charity for a trespasser in her garden, of which she is so jealous. I may not tell her how her fair maiden met me there and urged me to remain. I cannot tell; for that might bring trouble upon the flower-maiden, whom, alas, I may never see again!"

So he mused, wondering wistfully that she should have left him without a word. But there was no blame for her in his heart; he loved her so very dearly.

III

It was afternoon when the Gardener opened the cell of Joyeuse and bade him follow to the great hall of the palace where the Princess would hear his crime and appoint his punishment.

With a heavy heart he followed down the white marble corridors on the heels of the giant Gardener, who muttered to himself as they went. Now and then he would turn to look at Joyeuse and shake his head, as though foreseeing for him some dreadful punishment. At last they came to a great hall, carpeted with green and ceiled with blue, while the walls were of rosy pink. At the further end of the hall was a throne of gold; and upon it sat the Princess Fleurette. But Joyeuse dared not lift his eyes to look at her.

He walked slowly down the hall after the Gardener, and they took their stand near the throne, but behind the first rank of people. These were the gayly dressed attendants upon a great Prince, who had come that day to woo the Princess. Even at that moment the Herald was calling out his name and titles – "Fortemain, Prince of Kalabria, Knight of the Silver Feather, Captain of a hundred spears!" The Prince Fortemain himself bowed before the throne, while his attendants stood behind him, bearing most wonderful gifts for the royal lady. There were caskets of jewels, pieces of rich silks and ermine fur, singing birds in cages, little monkeys, and other curious pets from far lands. There were never finer presents than those which the Prince Fortemain brought to the Princess Fleurette.

A chorus of "Ohs!" went up from the maids of honor when they saw the richness of these gifts. But Joyeuse dared not even look up to see if his flower-maiden were among the white-robed band. He feared to betray her to the fierce eyes of the Gardener, who was watching him closely.

The Prince Fortemain made his speech very prettily, offering the Princess his heart and hand, and all his riches, as well as his kingdom beyond the seas, to which he hoped to carry her.

Then the Princess spoke in answer, very gently. And the sound of her voice was like music in the hall.

"I have no wish to leave my own little kingdom of flowers," she said. "I am happy and contented here. I have no wish to exchange hearts, save with him who understands mine well. Let him find it where it is already bestowed, among my flowers. Choose my favorite flower, dear Prince, and I am yours."

At the sound of her voice Joyeuse started, and for the first time looked up. There she sat upon the golden throne, – his own dear flower-maiden, she who had met him for three mornings in the garden! But now she wore no coarse gown of green. She was robed all in white, from her head to her little feet, which were shod with gold. A golden girdle she wore, and a golden band confined her golden hair. She glanced at Joyeuse as she spoke the last words to the Prince, and Joyeuse was sure that her eyes twinkled. Instantly a bold thought came into his head, for he was a bold fellow. He had been brought to her as a trespasser, ready for punishment. He would remain as a suitor! This Princess was his little playmate; he could not, would not lose her. Had she not thrice called him a Prince? He would woo her, then, like any prince.

But now the Princess was speaking again, and this time she looked straight at him. "Whom have we here, good Gardener?" she asked, trying to force a little frown.

"A trespasser, your Highness," answered the Gardener, in his gruff voice, hustling Joyeuse to the foot of the throne, "a trespasser whom I found in your royal garden this morning at a disgustingly

early hour, sitting with a fair maiden among the lavender, strumming on a lute. I saw not the face of the girl, but I fancy she must be one of your own maids of honor. She also should be punished for listening to the music of the wicked youth."

A little cry of horror arose from the gay group about the Princess, as they looked at one another, wondering who the shocking early-riser could be. The Princess looked sharply at Joyeuse and said: "Tell us the name of the maiden, Sirrah, and you shall be pardoned of your grievous fault."

Joyeuse looked up at the Princess and said gently: "Lady, I will tell her name to you, and to you alone, if you ask it; though I think that you guess it already. But first, I pray you, hear my suit. For I also have come hither as a suitor."

At these words the Princess started, and her cheek flushed. The Gardener seized Joyeuse by the arm to drag him away. But Fleurette made a sign for him to stand back.

"Let the Stranger speak," she said, "and let him show, if he can, why, instead of being punished, he should be welcomed as one of our suitors."

Then Joyeuse knelt on the lowest step of the throne and laid at his maiden's feet his sword and his lute and the scrip, or little pocket, which he wore at his side.

"Fair Princess," he said, "I come with scanty gifts and with no attendants – poor and alone. But all that I have I offer you; my sword for your protection, my music for your joy, my little learning for your aid in sickness and in health. To atone for my boldness in forcing your garden gate I offer the service of all these for as long as you will have them. And withal I offer my merry heart, as true and faithful as that of any prince in the world; but more loving than any."

At this saying the Prince Fortemain pushed forward indignantly. "You shall not listen to these idle words, O Princess!" he cried. "This fellow has no right to speak thus to you. He is no prince; he is but a wandering minstrel and vagabond. Let him be flogged from the gates."

"Ay, let him be flogged away!" echoed the Gardener and others, and they jostled closer as if to seize him. But Joyeuse still knelt at the feet of his flower-maiden, not at all afraid. The Princess rose, and, stamping her little foot, angrily commanded her people to be quiet. Then she spoke to Joyeuse, and the anger was gone from her voice.

"It is true you are no prince," she said. "What have you to say in reply to this Prince's word?"

"Am I no prince?" he answered, looking her straight in the eyes. "The fairest Princess in the world has thrice named me Prince, – Prince of Minstrels, Prince of Doctors, Prince of Teachers. Does not that make me a prince indeed?"

There was a silence in the hall at this bold answer. Then Fleurette beckoned to her the Wise Man of the court, a wise man dressed all in black, with a long white beard and hair like silver thistledown.

"O Wise Man, if a princess gave him these titles, is he indeed a prince?" she asked, and her voice was eager.

The Wise Man thought for a little time, then nodded gravely thrice. "Ay, my Princess, so it is written in the Book of True Chivalry. If he has been so honored, he is in deed and in degree a prince."

"Nay!" cried the Prince Fortemain, "I say nay! She has not also named him the Prince of Courage. The Book of True Chivalry declares that he is no very prince who cannot do battle nobly for his lady's sake."

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