

## *The Princess and the Peacock*

**O**H, THANK YOU,” said the peacock. “When I saw that my tail feather was caught in that great gate I thought I must surely break it getting it out.”

“It’s too pretty to be broken,” the little princess answered. “And what a shame it would be to have one of those beautiful feathers gone! When I see you spread out your tail in a half circle I think of a huge feather fan that opens and closes. It is like one that Mother has, set with many jewels of different colors.”

The peacock smoothed his shining feathers with his little curved bill and answered, “You see, it is my duty to be beautiful. That is why your father, the king, has placed me in the garden with all the strange and lovely flowers. But, little princess, I thought that you were crying as you came along the path.”

The princess looked sad as she remembered. “I was crying,” she said softly.

“Tell me the trouble,” coaxed the peacock. “It is my turn to do you a favor now. And you may be sure that I will tell no one anything that you tell me. Most people cannot understand me if I do try to tell them anything.”

Down on the grass sat the princess, weeping. “Oh!” she burst out, “I hear the people say that I am not a princess at all. They watch me as I ride in my father’s royal carriage and as I wave from the high balcony of the palace, then they say that I am only a plain child like their own children.”

“You seem very like a princess to me. Why do they say that?” asked the peacock, the eyes in his



Devon Pierce

*“There was the peacock waiting for her, just beyond the great iron gate, his many-colored feathers shining in the sun, his graceful head held high, his eyes agleam with pride.”*

feathers glinting in the sun.

“They say I wriggle and squirm when I am tired of riding about. And they say I do not walk as a princess should. Sometimes I point at people and whisper about them, as their own children do. Then, I heard someone say that a real princess would never be cross and rude just because she must leave her play to be kind to people. Why, sometimes, if I want something that a princess shouldn’t have, I even cry. Lots of children do better than that!”

“This is a puzzle,” frowned the peacock. “You are a princess to me, so why aren’t you a princess to them?” The peacock thought and thought. He even tucked his head under his wing for a few minutes so that he could think better. Finally he exclaimed, “Come to think of it, my dear princess,

it's really just today that I've liked you so much that you've seemed so truly a princess. In fact, it's mostly since you opened the gate and got my poor old tail feather loose. I didn't know you were nice before.

"Nobody knows I'm nice. That's just the trouble," said the little princess very sadly.

Again the peacock was quiet "I have it now!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Do little things for the people as you did for me and they'll like you the way I do."

"You're right! If it's no harder than that I could do it." She thought a moment, then she said mournfully. "But that doesn't make me walk quietly and straight, as the young princess of a kingdom should. My feet get tangled in the long robes that I must wear in court, and when I have my little golden crown upon my head I always feel as if it is slipping off. "I wish I walked like you." She cried again, just to think of the disappointed people staring at her.

"That's easy. We'll soon settle that question. Come and walk with me every day along the garden paths and over the grass. Practice walking like me."

"That would be fun," wailed the little princess, "but it wouldn't settle the robes and the crown."

"The way you hunt for trouble, I could give you a good hard peck," the peacock joked. "Just see if we don't settle the robes and the crown and the wriggling, in the bargain.

The princess grinned. Well, you wanted to straighten out all the trouble, you know."

At that the peacock decided to talk about something else. "Haven't you an old lace curtain from one of the palace windows that you play with in the royal playhouse, your highness?" he inquired sweetly.

"A long, long one. Yes," she answered.

"As long as the white satin train to your robe of state?" asked the peacock.

"Now I see what you are thinking about," she exclaimed. "I'm to practice with the curtain for a train. I'll trail it along on the ground behind me the way a bride does her veil. Yes, I'll do it as beautifully as you trail the fringes of your long lacy feathers when they are folded together like a closed fan. And what shall I use for a crown?"

The peacock glanced about. "There are always

flowers," he remarked.

"A flower would be too hard to keep there on top my head," the princess cried quickly.

"The harder it is the easier the crown will seem afterward, when you wear it in the great court room, with people all around," he said firmly.

"That's so," replied the little princess. "I'd better practice until I can do very hard things out here with you. Let's begin tomorrow!"

"No, indeed. Let's begin now. Right now. It's always best to begin right away. Go get the curtain." So the princess hurried to the royal playhouse for the royal old lace curtain while the peacock put his head under his wing again to think about the rest of her troubles.

For an hour she walked beside the peacock along the paths of the royal garden, trailing the long lace curtain from her shoulders. Very slowly and very beautifully now she walked. And all the while they talked.

By the end of the week she was ready, the peacock told her, to keep a flower lying on the top of her head as she walked. But the flower, which was to be her crown, would slip off almost as soon as she put it there.

"Oh, dear, this is just an easy flower too," she mourned. "I thought the troubles would be over now, but here is another."

"The difficulty must be that you don't stand straight enough," remarked the peacock thoughtfully. "I've heard it said that if you stand straight enough you can even walk with a book on your head and it won't fall off. And here, by the way, is just the teacher to show you how to stand—this tall, straight, slim little tree."

"I'm sure I'd like to look like it," said the princess. "It's such a lovely tree. Perhaps if I look at it every day when I walk with you I'll learn to stand straight and tall also. And then I'll lean against it to see if I'm straight as its trunk." The peacock suggested that she should try the flower crown again when she was straighter.

After the many pleasant practice hours in the garden, the little princess' back would be tired from stretching up tall, but she was happy for she knew that she was gaining a little. And when the flower crown was tried again it wasn't half so slippery!

Once when she was tired from walking and playing with the peacock, she dropped down in the shade by the quiet stone-rimmed pool in the depths of the garden. Water lilies floated on its surface. A few golden fish slipped about among the plants wavering deep within the pool. The princess almost went to sleep there, it was so very still. But suddenly something roused her. It seemed as though she had heard someone speaking, but she saw no one. It was as though someone had said, "Come tomorrow." She listened again and heard nothing, but she thought, "Whatever it was, I'd like to come tomorrow, anyhow."

The next day the princess did go to sit by the quiet pool. She watched the sunlight on the grass about it and saw birds come to drink from its edges. A hummingbird passed. Finally she knelt on the edge of the pool and peered straight down into its depths. A soft voice said, "You have eyes like the blue sky above me, so I will help you. Yes, there is darkness like the night sky in them, too, and I even see some little stars. Come tomorrow."

When she came again, the pool told her how she could learn to be quiet and calm just by sitting or lying there without moving, without wriggling even a finger. "Come every day," the pool would whisper. "It takes an hour."

And the princess was happy, for she knew that she could think of the pool and be quiet, as a princess should, instead of wriggling when she was tired of riding about in the carriage.

One morning as she came to meet the peacock he asked, "Are you happy now, my princess?"

"Of course. So happy," she answered. "Why do you even ask?"

"You didn't look happy," the old peacock said, shaking his head. "You looked straight and quiet and beautiful, almost like a queen as you came along the path, but you didn't smile."

"Well, I didn't especially feel like smiling," she said.

"How am I to know that you are happy out here with me if you don't smile? How will the people feel if you don't ever smile at them? It won't be long until your birthday party, and you want to be a princess in every way by then, you know."

"Oh, that's so," said the princess, feeling as though her months of practicing princess ways still left much to do. "But I still don't feel like smiling, so how can I do it?" she asked rather crossly.

"Come with me and I will show you," the peacock said proudly, spreading his tail in a beautiful fan shape. "I wager I know how to make you smile." Then he led her past the row

of stone statues to the side of the garden where there were small white flowers blooming in a misty spray.

They were sweet smelling and very soft to touch. Stop-ping there he looked sideways up at her, curving his graceful neck. These are the flowers you like best. I know, for I've watched you. Now you feel like smiling, don't you?"

"Some," the princess answered

doubtfully, "but not so very much."

"Then you'll have to put your face right down in the flowers till you do," he said sternly.

Over the little white flowers the princess leaned. Suddenly she laughed, "That's near enough! Why didn't I think of that way myself? I should be able to smile at them all the way across the garden!"

"Smile when they nod little nods at you," suggested the peacock. "Smile whenever any flower nods to you. That should give you lots of practice."

"Are you sure that will make me feel like smiling at the people on my birthday when I am seated by my mother and father on the golden throne?" the princess asked him.

"There will be flowers there, too. They will be banked around the throne and in great baskets in the corners of the room."

"That's so. I can smile at them first and it will be easier then to smile at the people."



*Ruby-throated Hummingbird*

Photograph: Robert A. Tyrell

Those were the things the princess practiced out in the royal gardens part of every day all summer. It became much easier for her to do the things everyone expected her to do because she was a princess. She knew too that it would be much easier in the fall, on her birthday. Then she was to wear a longer richer robe embroidered in a pattern of gold and many colors, with jewels scattered over it. Her crown would be just a bit larger, more like her mother's crown. For the first time she would wear a necklace of shining, square-cut stones about her throat.

Truly enough, when her birthday party came she found that it was quite different from the year before. Her work trailing robes of state was not new to her now. They seemed just about like an old lace curtain. And hadn't she been balancing little things on her head all summer. She



didn't even need her friends the flowers, for once she had smiled at the people they all cheered and waved to her. And who could help beaming back at them? When the party in her honor was over, her crown was still on just so. She looked at the jewels of green and blue and every color sparkling all over her stiff court gown. She smoothed the deep plush of the long white cape which hung from her shoulders. "Now I must show my new clothes to the peacock," she thought, "and tell him what a help he has been."

She hurried down the wide stone steps leading toward the garden. There was the peacock waiting for her, just beyond the great iron gate, his many-colored feathers shining in the sun, his graceful head held high, his eyes agleam with pride. □

—Gedge C. Harmon

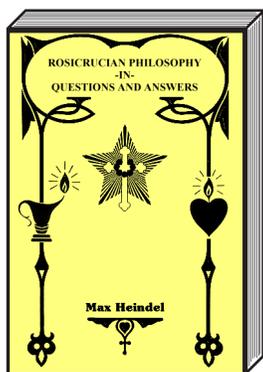
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