

To Kill True Love

by Isaac Linton

Once upon a time, in a far away land, there lived a young maiden with her father, a poor but wise old man. They made their living through a farm that the maiden worked very hard to maintain. She worked from dawn till dusk, but they barely scraped by. When she remembered as far back as she could, the maiden thought of her mother and how she missed the wonderful lady she hardly knew. Ah, how she fondly remembered the times she spent with her mother. The little family had lived a happy and peaceful life until one day when the mother went out to work in the fields after breakfast and never came back. The people in the nearby village knew nothing of what had happened to the kindly woman, and that mystery was shared by her husband and daughter.

The daughter worked tirelessly in the fields to procure food to sustain herself as well as her father. Whatever she did, though, never seemed to be enough. She and her father were worried that they might have to give up their meager plot of land.

One day the maiden heard the sound of horses' hooves galloping towards their property. She wondered who it could be who would possibly want to come and visit. "After all," she thought, "my father is old and weary, and I am but a humble maiden." She soon saw an intimidating sight: three mounted knights with armor glowing all surrounding a noble-looking woman. They halted right in front of the young maiden, who was astounded to see so many people after only seeing her father for so long. "I wish to speak with the owner of this property!" the noble-looking woman commanded.

"Yes, madam, right away," the maiden replied.

"What is it, my dear?" the old man asked as his breathless daughter raced into their dwelling.

"There is a woman outside, with three mounted knights, and she wishes to speak with you!" The daughter hurriedly told her father what had transpired. The old man thoughtfully considered his daughter's words. "This woman may come inside and speak with me here," the maiden's father replied.

"Very well, father, I will tell her as you wish." The maiden hurried back outside of the small shelter to tell the woman what her father wanted. "Very well, you may show me inside," was the woman's reply.

The maiden decided that she ought not to listen to their conversation, so she went out into the woods where an owl lived. This owl was quite unlike the others of its kind in that it was able to communicate with humans through speaking. The owl, however, chose to divulge his wisdom only with certain few individuals, namely, the maiden. "What do you think of our esteemed visitors?" the maiden asked the owl.

"Hooo, hoooot! I don't know what I think of that woman... she looks like she might be good or she might have some not-so-good reason for visiting us. As to the knights, they don't look like they have control of their own minds," the owl finished.

"Well, I'm sure my father will tell me what goes on. Oh, they're coming out now!"

The maiden walked over to meet her father and the woman. Her father seemed quite perturbed about something. "You'll come to my castle tomorrow and report your decision to me." The woman bid the old man adieu and cantered off with her three knights.

"What did she want, father?" the maiden asked. "And by the way, who is she?" the daughter added.

"I have a lot of thinking to do, my daughter," the old man replied. "The woman is the queen of this country. She has made me an offer that seems to be hard to refuse. She knows what a poor state we are in here, and has offered to help us. She has a job for me, she said, that will provide a better state for both me and you, and I have to decide about it by tomorrow." The old man did not mention the type of job or the other obligations that came along with it.

"But father, would you have to sell your property and move nearer to her castle?" the maiden asked.

"I would be living *in* her castle," the old man replied. His daughter was incredulous. "You wouldn't have to *marry* her, would you?"

"I'm afraid that's part of the job."

The man wearily went inside the house while the maiden ran to the woods, sobbing. "It's not fair," she thought to herself. "Mother's only been gone for fifteen years, and she still might be around! How could father marry someone else?"

Inside the house, her father pondered the offer. "Being an executioner is not what I've always wanted to do, yet I've been without my wife for many years. She may still be around, but how could I be faulted for marrying another when I'm almost out of money?"

The next day dawned, and the father had still not made up his mind. When they were eating the morning meal, the maiden asked the old man what his decision was. He was now resolved to do what he thought was best. "I must do it. We will die of starvation before long, and I will be able to get money from this new job, working for the queen." "Very well," the daughter sounded downcast. "You will do well with your work, and send me money back here." "But you must come with me!" the old man implored.

The old man and the maiden set out on foot for the castle, not knowing whether they would ever come back. When they arrived at the castle, they were escorted to the queen's presence by three knights. "I see you've decided to accept my proposition," the queen greeted them. "Yes," the old man replied, "but I must first learn more about the job I am to perform." "Very well then, let me show you the prisoners you are to execute," the queen replied. "Father!" the maiden exclaimed. She could not believe that he would stoop so low as to kill his fellow men. The maiden was so upset that she ran back to their home at once, and went into the woods to seek the owl's advice.

"I have perceived," the owl began, after the maiden had told her story, "that this queen is an evil tyrant. She devises the worst for your father, namely, that in his position as executioner, he should finally have to kill your own mother, his wife."

"You mean that she is alive?" the maiden asked.

"Yes, but in prison," the owl replied. "The reason for her absence these many long years was that she was helping a revolt against this evil queen in a neighboring country. The attempt failed, so now she is in the tower of the queen's castle, awaiting execution with a gallant young lad who led the revolt."

"I must warn my father!" the maiden exclaimed.

Back to the castle she went, where she found her father examining the prisoners with the queen in the tower dungeons. She uttered a small cry as she saw a young man with an old woman in one of the dungeons who she knew must be her mother. "F-father, I n-need to speak with you," the maiden faltered.

“What is it, my child?” her father asked.

“Alone,” the maiden replied.

“Anything you need to say to me can be said in the presence of the queen, for she will soon be your new mother.” The maiden could no longer contain herself. “She is an evil tyrant! She is holding my mother here in prison, and wants you to kill my mother before you marry her! The owl told me everything when I spoke with him in the woods. Oh, father, please, don’t!”

“Is what my daughter says true?” the old man addressed the queen. He didn’t wait for an answer. He went and unlocked all the dungeons, and with the escaped prisoners, the old man went after the queen. Soon they had taken her captive and put her in the dungeon, and the old man found his wife.

“Why did you ever doubt that I was still alive?” the wife questioned. “Alas, we are back together now, and I trust that you did what you thought was best.”

And the maiden found the gallant young man who had been with her mother, and the old man became a wonderful king to his subjects in a land free of tyranny. The owl was rewarded for his services to his country, and the gallant young man and the young maiden lived happily ever after. ♡