

Heart of Stone

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Once upon a time, on the far other side of the world, there lived an old king. He was quite prideful, for though he had a son who was to be king after him he wanted to be certain that the line would not stop there. His son Prince Lurenus was a selfish young man who paid neither heed nor respect to his aged parent. He spent all his time in the castle library reading, studying and researching, for he loved knowledge. But he only learned what he found interesting, and as soon as he tired of one subject he went on to the next, until his mind became filled with all sorts of useless facts. He was the most unsociable person in his father's whole kingdom, for he never came near people if he could help it, and if he did meet anyone, he behaved so sullen and morose that people began to avoid him. He was not married and had no wish to be, and as his father was determined to have a grandson who would one day obtain the throne, the King did everything in his power to convince his son to take a wife.

"Lurenus," began the King, coming into the library one morning to broach the martial subject, "I think you would be very happy married. Wouldn't you like to be wed to some rich Queen?"

"No."

His father tried again. "Or what about a young beautiful girl? Imagine spending the rest of your days—"

"I have my books, that is all I wish," Lurenus interrupted.

"But you would still have your books. Why, I'll have every book in this kingdom brought to you if you like!"

Lurenus laid down his pen and looked up. "Shall I tell you the real reason I don't want to marry? The truth is, I can't stand girls." He shuddered. "Always giggling and smiling and gossiping...so senseless and giddy. I can't see what use anyone would have for them." And with that he returned to his writing.

After many more similar conversations and after numerous balls, parties and feasts—at which the very prettiest and richest unmarried women he could obtain were present—the King gave up in despair.

One day Lurenus's willy-nilly interest turned to art, particularly sculptures. He wandered through the art gallery carefully inspecting every statue he came upon. He soon became bored with this occupation, and was about to turn away when his eye was caught by an object standing in the gloom in one corner of the room. Walking over to it he saw that it was an old and incredibly dusty life-size statue of a person. His curiosity was aroused, and he instructed his servants to

carefully transport it into his own chamber, where much scrubbing, polishing and scouring revealed that it was a sculpture of a beautiful young woman.

There was something in the expression carved into her stone face which made it hard for Lurenus to take his eyes off her. As the days went by Lurenus grew more and more fascinated with it, and he soon ceased his customary studying and spent all his time gazing at his beloved statue. Strange as it was, he felt himself falling in love with his statue, and before long he was completely infatuated.

“What a beautiful, exquisite, gorgeous lady!” the prince exclaimed one day, “A lady who does not chatter or tease or gossip, but one who simply stands there smiling with her adorable lips and gazing with her delightful eyes.”

By this time the prince had grown so smitten with his sculpture that he ventured to plant a kiss on her “adorable lips.” In an instant everything changed. Lurenus felt the cold hard body which he was kissing transform into something completely different, and with yelp of surprise he leapt back.

Standing in front of him was a lovely woman, though her handsome face was contorted in a mask of cold fury.

“How dare you!” she cried. “How could you so desecrate and abuse my gift to humanity?”

“Who are you?” Lurenus faltered, “What gift?”

“My name is Love,” replied the woman, “I have given myself. It is I who kindles that first flame of passion between a young man and woman. It is I who bestows the conjugal affection which joins a husband and wife. It is I who gives mothers that indissoluble love which they feel toward their children. It is I who imparts the filial tenderness amongst brothers and sisters. And you have bequeathed my gift on a statue, a piece of rock?”

She stopped, as if waiting for answer, but Lurenus was totally speechless. “As a wife becomes one with her husband,” the woman continued, “The one whom she loves, so shall you become one with your love. You have given your heart to a stone, now you will be given a stone for a heart.” At that moment Lurenus felt a faint but distinct throbbing in his chest.

“Every day,” said the woman, “The beating of your heart will become heavier and heavier as it turns more completely into stone. Once your heart is a solid rock, it is only a matter of days before you also will become one.”

She made as if to go but Lurenus stopped her. “Wait!” he screamed, “Don’t just kill me and then leave!”

She turned to him. “What more would have me do?”

“How can I prevent this? There must be some way...”

“There is one way, but only one. You must learn to love.” Suddenly she began to fade away, but Lurenus could hear her parting words loud and clear. “Remember, it must be true love.”

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And so Lureinius began his journey to search for his true love. He sought for only women who very beautiful or rich, for he knew that he simply could not endure being married to one who was neither, such as the poor unpretentious peasant girls who were in his father’s kingdom.

He searched country after country, village after village; he met with empresses, queens, noblewomen and aristocrats, but he loved none. Finally, after one year of searching, he despaired of his seemingly hopeless task. By now his heart had become so heavy that it was labor some even to talk or breathe.

One chilly evening he sat down upon the steps of a closed inn. His beating heart felt so harsh in his tired chest that he felt as if he simply could not go on. He shivered in the cold and drew his coat tighter about him.

Out of the dusk he saw a small person approaching, and looking harder he made out the figure of a young women. She was shaking violently with cold, as she had only her thin dress to shield the cruel wind which came blasting against her. Lurenus instantly pitied the wretched creature, and jumping up he ran over and drew her into the small alleyway beside the inn. He wrapped his coat around her and hurried to collect a small bundle of sticks to light a fire.

Half an hour later they were both much warmer sitting in front of the fire. Lurenus gazed at his companion. She was not pretty, she was really quite ugly, but there was something warm and friendly about her which attracted Lurenus.

They began talking, and Lurenus realized just how warm and friendly she really was. Though she must be freezing cold, Lurenus thought, she is as joyful as though she were one of those wealthy queens living in a luxurious palace. Though she has never met me before in her life, she treats me as kindly as she would her closest friend. Is it just possible, reflected Lurenus, that sometimes there is more to girls than just giggles and smiles? And that maybe kindness and friendship are worth more than wealth or beauty?

He looked at the girl and smiled, and then reached over and took her hand. And suddenly he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from inside of him.

Because it had.