

The Quest of Prince Vincent

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Chapter one

The Quest Begins

To begin with: The prince's home was an ancient castle and the land for many leagues around marked his father's domain. That his father ruled wisely and well was testified to by the happiness of his subjects, and long have his banners flown from the battlements of the lofty towers.

But now, alas, troubled times had befallen the land for, while the subjects still enjoyed peace at home, an ominous quiet had settled on the neighboring principalities. No visitors had come from them, and all who dared travel thither failed to return.

At length, in hopes of gaining information and of cementing old alliances, His Majesty decided to send his oldest son as an ambassador of goodwill. Months passed slowly by, but nothing was heard from his son. Not without misgivings, the second son was dispatched; but time slipped by and no word was received from either young man.

The youngest son was named Vincent. His position was quite different from that of his two elder brothers. He had been a frail child from birth and had never ventured far from the protective walls of the castle. Notwithstanding this, and lacking the strength to endure an arduous venture, he yet felt impelled to try his fortune, for he sensed his beloved brothers would not return. With mind made up, he determinedly presented himself to his father and in strong, unfaltering tones made known his heart's desire.

No kindlier man ever lived than this king and no doubt this request on the part of his one remaining son brought deep anguish to his heart, but outwardly he expressed no emotion. His reply to the boy's plea was calm: "You must search your own conscience and act according to your own best judgment." Nevertheless, the fear for his one remaining son was clearly written on his brow.

Uncertainly, the prince returned to his quarters where he pondered deeply. He was sorely torn between his love for his parents and the stirring sense of manhood which bade him go forth to try where his brothers had perchance failed. Through the long night he tossed fretfully, until, shortly before dawn, with his mind made up, the young prince resolutely stole softly down the palace stairs. No one could know the anguish in his heart as he passed the apartment where his mother the queen, would be sleeping, unsuspecting of his plans.

Purposefully, Vincent crept into the vast kitchens and sought out what he believed would be suitable provisions for his adventure. Whereupon he made his way to the parapet of one of the towers. There he carefully packed his provender into a bundle and tossed it as far as he could, hoping it would land in the reeds beyond the moat. Then he made his way down the long spiraling stone stairs and through the silent deserted halls. It might have

been hard to explain a burden of food should he have met anyone while carrying it, but now he walked briskly as though intending a stroll in the morning dew, a habit which he sometimes pursued. Boldly, he strolled across the courtyard and gave a casual "Good morning" to the guardian of the drawbridge. The sentry saluted the young prince and obediently opened the portcullis for him without hesitation.

Once well beyond the moat, Vincent circled the castle and waded in among the tall reeds where he judged his pack might have fallen. After a few anxious moments he found it and saw with relief that it was none the worse for its flight. Wasting no time he doubled back toward the high road. The die was cast. The uncertain quest had begun.

Chapter Two

The Captain of the Guard

He plodded steadily on as the first rays of the morning light appeared in the east and the warm wind burst forth in all its glory. Vincent was sure it would be unwise to continue to travel this well used road during the daylight hours. Espying a trail leading into the woods, he turned and entered the welcoming shelter of the tall trees. Here his confidence grew, but a weariness came over him, for the excitement and extra exertion had exacted its toll, and he sat down on a log to rest.

His sense of ease was short-lived. Before he could make a move for cover there rode up behind him none other than the captain of his father's guard, a towering figure, on his war horse. Looking down, as he did, at the surprised and dismayed young prince, he was a forbidding figure of power and authority.

Who and what kind of man was this captain? One day he had appeared out of nowhere and rapidly earned advancement. From the first day that he had been promoted to command of the guards, they performed with distinction and won for him the king's gratitude and confidence. But Prince Vincent never fully trusted him and what followed next justified his inner suspicions and convictions.

With cold deliberation the captain sat silently in his saddle and kept his hawklike gaze on the hapless prince. Then he reached into a saddlebag and drew forth some old clothing which he tossed at the young man's feet.

All at once it was clear to the prince that this self-serving man was helping him on his way and had good reason for wanting to do so. It came to the prince that here in the figure of the captain was the architect of a large plot which included the disappearance of Vincent's two elder brothers. With the third prince out of the way, nought would stand twixt him and the power of the kingdom, for the aging king could not live forever.

Vincent surmised that a refusal to don the old clothes might well mean his immediate death. The captain would reason that the prince could be relied on not to turn back now;

his pride would forbid it. On the other hand he was equally certain that Vincent could not survive the trials and ordeals that lay ahead of him.

Without expressing his feelings, Vincent removed his regal attire and exchanged it for the wellworn garments. Even in this predicament he showed his mettle by retaining his presence of mind and, turning his back, he slipped his crested ring off his finger and deftly palmed it. Then, at the captain's curt command, he handed up his former raiment and opened his bundle for inspection. Satisfied, the captain of the guard, finding no identifying items, left the prince with his few coins and store of food, wheeled his horse and rode back toward the castle.

Chapter Three

The Kindly Woodcutter

It was all the frail young prince could do to fight off the feeling of despair but, exhausted as he was, he felt he had to continue on his journey. Any effort was better than defeat, so determinedly he trudged along and soon was pleased to stumble on a small spring. After quenching his thirst, he heard in the distance the unmistakable creak of wooden wheels behind him. He had no cause to fear pursuit now. It could only be one of the wood-cutters he had often seen delivering their wares in the castle yard. They were a rough but friendly lot and, due to their lonely occupation, loved companionship.

The wood cutter, seeing what he thought was a poor peasant lad standing forlorn with tired, pleading eyes, drew rein and brought his cart to a halt. With a wry smile he leaned over and extended his hand. Vincent needed no second invitation and oh, what a relief it was to gain this respite and the company of someone else. The cart started up and, for the time being, he forgot his fatigue. Noting the driver's curiosity, Vincent began to ask questions regarding his benefactor's way of life, to forestall being queried about his own. When it grew close to the noon hour the lad opened his bundle and shared some bread and cheese with his newfound friend in gratitude for the ride.

Between mouthfuls, the woodcutter continued to delight Vincent with stories of the forest and its wild life, which he loved and knew so well.

When the meal was finished the weary prince could not keep his eyes open any longer and, giving way to sleep, his head came to rest on the woodcutter's shoulder. The old man gently and understandingly made him as comfortable as possible. The next thing Vincent felt was a hand gently shaking him and it was several moments before he was able to remember where he was. The cart had stopped in the middle of the roadway and the horse was standing patiently, swishing its tail at the flies.

The woodcutter, with a steady hand on Vincent's shoulder, pointed to a fork in the road, saying:

"I must leave you, lad. My home lies in this direction and I am sure you want to continue on ahead. Now," he continued reassuringly, "on the crest of that hill," he pointed with his gnarled hand, "is a watchtower. I am sure the keeper will put you up for the night. You may find him a strange man, but I have heard he has never turned any wayfarer away."

A little embarrassed at having fallen asleep, Vincent took his bundle and dismounted stiffly from the cart. He felt refreshed and stood watching with regret as the woodcutter disappeared round a bend in the road.

Vincent realized he must have slept for some time, for the sun was now dipping below the hill and the road was enveloped in shadows. Half walking, half running, he hurried along, fearful of the coming night, for he had never spent an evening alone in the woods, or even away from home. As he scrambled desperately along, the road grew steeper and the darkness deepened and overtook him. Soon he was wholly enveloped in blackness and despaired of finding his way further, when he became aware of a faint gleam straight ahead. It was surely the fire burning on top of the tower mentioned by the woodcutter. Slowly he made out its black bulk in the distance.

Ever hastening his steps, he did not once pause to look to right or left into the dark woods until at length he reached the door of the tower and breathlessly leaned against the huge portal. Just above his head hung a bell-pull, and he tugged on the rope with all his strength. High above, in the vastness of the tower, he could hear the chiming of a bell, and moments later footsteps echoing hollowly behind the heavy door, were heard descending a stone staircase.

Chapter Four

The Keeper of the Tower

Then came the noisy rattle of a latch and the door swung open. There, silhouetted against the glow of a torch stood one of the most impressive men the prince had ever encountered. He was tall, with a countenance speaking wisdom and authority. His silvery gray hair fell down to his shoulders and was held in place by a band around his forehead adorned with strange symbols. The robe he wore, seeming almost to be part of him, was blue and trimmed with gold. All this Vincent took in at a glance. Then he heard the towerkeeper say:

"Come in. I have been expecting you. Quickly please. I have an urgent mission to perform and you, young man, can be of great service. Come, there is no time to waste." Without waiting for a reply he turned and led the way up the circling stairs to the very top of the tower. Here they passed through a skylight and out upon a platform roof. A bright fire was burning in a protective grate and an ample supply of wood was piled within easy reach. A matted pallet lay near the fire and there was a feeling of comfort and security about this lofty perch. No doubt by day there would be a clear view of the surrounding country for miles.

Without even giving the young prince time to catch his breath, the watchman spoke in hurried tones:

"I am sorry, young man, but I must leave you at once. I have an important mission to perform. While I am gone, I warn you, this fire must be kept burning. If it should go out there could be dire consequences. I shall return as soon as my work is accomplished.

Before the prince could regain his composure to reply, the Keeper turned and retraced his steps down the stairway and out of the tower.

Chapter Five

The Magic Fire

Almost too exhausted to care, Vincent slumped down on the pallet to rest, when immediately, right before him, the fire died down for no apparent reason for it had ample fuel. There was nothing he could do but quickly rouse himself and stir it. For a few breathless seconds the fire flickered, then flared up and burned with a steady glow.

The tired prince lay down once more on the pallet, satisfied that the fire was well tended when again it burned low and almost went out. He jumped to his feet and stirred it desperately, reviving the flames at once. Throughout the night, the boy found that each time he turned his back or closed his eyes, the beacon fire, though well fueled, burned low and threatened to become extinguished, while giving it his full attention caused it to burn brightly.

Several times he thought he heard the watchman returning, but each time the tired lad was disappointed. With the night extending into what seemed an eternity, possibly the only thing that kept him from succumbing to the demands of his weary body was the crow of a cock coming very faintly from some distant croft.

Did he hear footsteps? Yes, this time there was definitely someone coming up the stairs. Trying to hide his weariness and fighting back tears of fatigue and relief, Vincent drew himself up to face the approaching watchman. In the tall man's eyes he read deep anguish and compassion. In spite of himself he staggered and was caught by the Keeper's reassuring arms and lowered to the pallet where he lay as one dead. The keeper bent tenderly over him and, producing a small vial of amber-colored liquid, poured a few drops between the prince's lips. Instantly new strength flowed into the young man and he drained the vial without further urging. The ache left his limbs as he fell into a deep refreshing sleep.

When the prince awoke it was broad daylight. He was no longer atop the tower, but lay on a bed in a bare but comfortable room. At a table sat his benefactor, busy at some task before him. Vincent realized he was ravenously hungry, a sensation which, having lived a life void of exertion and deprivation, he had never really experienced before. And yet that was but a symptom of a greater transformation. The weak and sickly youngster that had

been, was become a youth in glowing health. There seemed also to be within him a towering will and strength that he could not explain.

At his stirring the Watcher looked up from his work.

"Good morning, my young and faithful one. You have slept long and well. Now I am sure you would like some breakfast."

He brought some food from a cupboard and placed it on the table, inviting the prince to partake of it. Vincent ate and, his hunger appeased, found himself conversing with the ease that usually comes but with long friendship. There seemed to be a strong bond between the two which belied the fact that they had met only a few hours before. The keeper of the Tower seemed in some mysterious way to know the real identity of this young peasant before him, but without saying so, and to be aware of the nature of his quest.

As they sat talking, the prince heard of many strange and wonderful things, of castles, kings and thieves, forests, rivers and enchantments, much of which he did not rightly understand. But nought could he glean of the path before him nor of what hope he might have of success.

All too soon it was time for Vincent to continue on his way. The Watcher led the way down to the portal to the tower and together they pursued a path leading down on the other side of the hill. Here the man turned to the boy and with a sweep of his arm indicated the general route he should take. Then with a warm, encouraging embrace he sent the adventurer on his way.

That night, after having walked for miles and enjoying every moment of it, Vincent made a rude camp under some fragrant pine trees. In the distance, looking back along the rough trail he had traveled he could still see the faint glow of the fire on the tower, radiating a benediction. With high hopes for the morrow, he soon fell fast asleep.

Chapter Six

A Choice Must Be Made

On awakening the prince lay still, enjoying the fragrance of his pine-bough bed and the freshness of the crisp morning air. Nearby he chanced to see a pair of squirrels cautiously descending a tree, and a doe was cropping the grass not a stone's throw away. Then he heard voices coming from directly overhead. Two mockingbirds were talking about the camper below them.

"That young man," twittered the first, "isn't much of a woodsman, is he?"

"You are so right," the other chirped. "Still, that is no way to judge him, is it? He just might make a better choice than the others who passed this way."

"Yes," rejoined the first bird. "most travelers do foolishly take the broad, well marked road. But let us hope this one chooses the other one that winds eastward."

"Hush! He's awake," said one. "Maybe he is listening to us."

"No matter," trilled the other. "I think he should be warned."

"What's the use?" came the reply. "They usually fail to heed advice anyway."

Needless to say, this startling conversation was of much interest to the young traveler. Having eaten, he gratefully scattered some crumbs from the remains of his breakfast to thank the birds for their advice, though he scarcely stopped to wonder at his ability to understand their chirps and twitters.

Breaking camp, he set out on the trail again. Sure enough, he had not walked more than a mile when he came to a smooth and well marked roadway inviting the traveler into the distance, whereas the path leading in the other direction was, predictably, rock-strewn and far from inviting. The warning of the birds now seemed remote and Vincent began to wonder of he had imagined it.

Undecided as to which way to go, it came to him that there was fortune's way of settling these doubts. He would cast a stick high into the air, which falling would direct his course. Seking about him, he found one suitable for this purpose and he hurled it aloft. Suddenly as if from nowhere, a large raven swooped down, snatched the stick in mid-air and made off with it.

The astonished prince concluded that there was no leaving it to chance. He alone must make a deliberate choice.

Resolutely he set his feet on the uninviting pathway and continued on his journey, never looking back.

For several hours he climbed steadily onward. Hiking thus, he began to envision all sorts of dangers and misadventures. While there was nothing that openly boded present peril, the feeling persisted. After several hours he caught the welcome gleam of a river far below him in a deep ravine, and the rocky path, as it turned to follow the stream, became easier. Close to the high bank he followed the winding course of the river until at last the land sloped down to lush green grass which carpeted the ground down to the water's edge. The trail ended there before him at a narrow in the stream, where bobbed a small boat, which was tied snugly by a rope to a nearby willow. No doubt it was used as a ferry, but no attendant was in sight, nor did any answer come to the prince's call.

There was nothing to do but wait and see if time would bring someone whilst he made himself comfortable and ate some lunch.

As hours passed and no one came, he finally decided to take matters into his own hands. From his tunic he drew a kerchief and a coin which he carefully knotted into one corner of it. He then placed it where it would be safe and easily seen when the owner of the boat should return. This done, he tossed his bundle into the craft and set about to untie the rope from its mooring. It was a knot that should not have been hard to undo, but there was something uncanny in the way the rope would retwine itself as fast as it was undone.

Becoming exasperated, Vincent disregarded this warning and slashed at the rope with his knife. As he did so, there came a piercing cry of pain from the severed strands. Heedlessly and not tarrying to reflect, Vincent jumped into the boat which was now riding free and drifted out toward mid-stream.

Chapter Seven

The River of Doubt

The prince's efforts at rowing were awkward at best, but for a novice he did well enough. In fact, so intent was he on the task that he failed to notice almost imperceptible changes taking place about him. The distant shore became enveloped in a fine mist and, looking back, he could no longer see his point of departure. The once gentle current began to flow first one way and then the other. Looking around him now he became alarmed and aware of the transformation. Vincent redoubled his efforts to gain the other bank. He bent to the unwieldy oars and rowed hard and steadily, but to no avail. To make matters worse, the last rays of sunlight faded and, as darkness drew on, no stars came out to guide him and he lost all sense of direction.

Trying hard not to, Vincent nevertheless became fearful and discouraged and at length shipped his useless oars and let his head droop between his arms. This, however, did not succeed in keeping out the surrounding cold damp silence. From time to time he looked about him, but the awful night seemed, if possible, darker than before.

Sitting there despondently his mind began to wander back over the past and the events of the last few days. After weighing the decisions he had made concerning this quest, he wondered if, after all, he had done the right thing. He pondered upon whether it would have been better had he waited as his father would have had it. With all his brothers gone and the kingdom now in dire jeopardy from the machinations of the Captain of the Guard, he alone was responsible for what might befall it.

Sadly he pondered his dilemma, balancing right and wrong against action and inaction. Then he began recalling the details of his adventure thus far: his good fortune in meeting the woodsman, the keeper of the tower and the conversation of the birds on the previous morning. He thought of his violent reaction to the warning of the coiling rope, and his plight began to make sense to him: this was part of the danger he should have expected and he should have been on his guard when it came.

Following this thread of reasoning, he slowly regained a measure of courage and with it a determination to put the past out of his mind. Whatever the morrow might bring, he would face it with determination and fortitude.

And so with the wind of positive thoughts he pushed the clouds of doubt away and dropped off into a deep sleep.

However, he was not to escape by slumber, for he had a dream wherein he was still adrift on the river, wrapped in the same quiet darkness and shrouding fog. But now he was not alone. There were many others in boats much like his own and they were all drifting aimlessly to and fro. None of the occupants of the other boats were making the slightest effort to row or to guide the course of their crafts. One of them eventually drifted quite near and the prince hailed him. Ever so slowly the slumped-over figure stirred and turned its head in his direction, but where his eyes should have been there was nought but an eerie vacancy. The horror of this apparition sent chills down Vincent's spine. Then the figure returned to its former despondent position, as though he had never seen or heard anyone.

The dream faded, and at last Vincent sank into a profound untroubled sleep.

Chapter Eight

The Valley of Echoes

The gentle lapping of water on the bottom of the boat woke the prince and he was surprised to find the craft safely moored on the other side of the river, having mysteriously made the crossing by itself during the night. A glance back across the river revealed the other bank, barely a bowshot away, and in a tree, clearly visible, hung the kerchief as he had left it just hours ago. He stepped out of the little coracle and the earth under his feet felt very reassuring. The country was pleasant with its rolling hills and little copses of trees and peasant dwellings nestled among them. Securing his bundle he struck out along a narrow lane which soon angled away from the river.

It came to him while walking thus that while this was an enjoyable enough way to travel, he would make better time if he had a horse. There was also a need to replenish his provisions, for his small supply was now depleted. Seeing some workers in a field, he approached one of them and made his needs known.

The peasant dropped his scythe and wiped his brow. He shook his head, saying:

"You must be strange in these parts, lad. You are welcome to break bread with me, but there are no beasts here of any kind. But," he said with assurance, "if you continue in the same direction, you will come to the Valley of the Echoes. There you will surely find what you are looking for."

The prince thanked the farmer and partook of some food and after a brief rest pressed on. Each time he met a stranger he asked the same question, each time the answer was the same: he would find a mount in the Valley of the Echoes.

The prince trudged on and on. Just as he was beginning to wonder if indeed there were such a valley, he topped a rise in the land and saw spread out below him a round bowl-shaped depression, surrounded by steep hills.

Despite his eagerness, Vincent cautiously inched his way down the narrow winding footpath leading down. On all sides he saw animals grazing peacefully on the lush grass. In the middle of the valley were several long low buildings, which he took to be quarters for the animals. Drawing nearer, he was amazed at the strange assortment of creatures, the strangest he had ever seen. There were bi-, tri-, and quadru-peds, there was even a very peculiar beast which did not even have a leg to stand on. Others, he saw on closer inspection, were lame, blind, sway-backed and some were stunted, old, windbroken, and in every kind of age and condition. He now understood why this place had been recommended to him. for there was here represented every possible sort of animal of fact or of fancy. Next to one of the stables stood a small, neat cottage, which was doubtless where a caretaker might be found. Vincent knocked persistently on the door but no one answered from within. Then, cupping his hands, he called loud and long. An unexpected reply came back in the form of his own voice reverberating hin and yon among the encircling hills, endlessly repeating his summons, first with definite din and clangor, then gradually fading away to a hushed whisper. This unusual phenomenon startled him at first, but soon he found enjoyment in calling out to the responding hills and learned to moderate his vocal tones.

Just as he had about given up hope of rousing anyone, he could see the figure of a man approaching in the distance. He seemed to be much in keeping with this place, for there was a sense of oddness about him. As for age, he could have been in early manhood or, for that matter, centuries old. He was neither too active nor passive, nor was the prince ever, during his stay in the valley, to see him portray any emotion whatever.

His greeting was cordial enough as he extended his hand and spoke:

"Welcome, young man, to this Valley of Echoes, whose name you may now have fully surmised. You may call me Lipicus, and it is my duty to be of service to all who pass this way. None are ever sent away empty-handed when they come to select a mount. Come," he continued. "You will dine with me before I show you to your quarters."

Vincent followed the man inside and took in the room at a glance. There was little furniture, but what filled most of the space was a vast number of rolls of parchment. Idly Vincent picked one up and, his host showing no objection, glanced at its inscription. It was filled with neat columns of undecipherable symbols, no doubt some sort of record. Unable to make head or tail of it and being reluctant to ask, he returned the scroll to its place.

Supper was served and they ate in silence. When they had eaten, Vincent was shown to a comfortable cot. Before dropping off to sleep, he lay wondering about the curious creatures he had seen and whether there was among them a horse suited to his needs.

Chapter Nine

Stella Polaris

In the early morning light, Vincent arose and hurried to explore the valley and examine the animals at closer quarters. Lipicus was just finishing a tour of inspection and he answered Vincent's question before he could ask it.

"Where did they all come from? They are all cast-offs left behind by former owners. There is every kind of specimen here, because, of course, there are all kinds of people. Sooner or later, each and every one is claimed by its proper master. See if you can find yours."

The prince stopped to think for a moment. Some of the beasts were loathsome and pitiful to behold. Surely no one in his right mind would ever choose one of them. Yet, this was just what Lipicus had implied.

"And what is the price exacted?" asked the prince. Lipicus evaded a direct reply: "We see only what is reflected in our hearts," he said. "And we pay measure for measure for our choice."

With this enigmatic response he left the prince alone to ponder his remark while the caretaker tended other self-appointed duties. One thing Prince Vincent did understand at once was that something worth possessing is worth striving for. So he set himself the task of caring for the horses and trying to make himself useful, grooming many of them and determinedly cleaning out their stalls. This gave him the opportunity to examine them closely and study them.

Cleaning the stables proved to be a backbreaking task, for they had evidently been neglected for a considerable time. While most of the animals were a quite ordinary lot, three among them attracted his immediate attention: they were all spirited and desirable. Two were responsive and easy to manage, but the third, a magnificent mare, while gentle to handle, steadfastly refused to take a bridle.

Meanwhile the caretaker quietly went his way apparently paying the prince no heed though Vincent felt sure that little escaped his attention. As Vincent continued his attempts to woo the shy mare, his overtures met with nothing but failure, for Stella Polaris, as he aptly named her from the star on her forehead, persistently refused the bridle. He was beginning to wonder if a second choice might yet be better than continued wasted effort, but something within him demanded that he persist.

One day, disheartened and brooding over his difficulty, he chanced to hear a buzzing sound from a corner of the stable. Turning to investigate he saw that a bee had become entangled in a spiders web. Moved by the bee's plight, the prince found a twig and, with great care, succeeded in releasing it from the clinging web. But when bourned to the window the bee though liberated, made no effort to fly away. It remained buzzing about the end of the twig. Puzzled, the prince found he could faintly make out what sounded like words. The soft buzzing tones were repeated over and over until he felt rather than heard what sounded like "the old bridle, the old bridle." When Vincent caught the words, the bee seemed satisfied and flew out over the meadow.

Not at all certain of what he had heard, the puzzled lad went to look over the numerous pieces of harness that lay about and hung on hooks on the wall. Then he found, under a pile of discarded equipment, an ancient bridle. When examined, it proved to be strong and supple. With renewed hope he once more approached his Stella and, much to his relief and surprise, she came to meet him with a friendly whinny and offered no objection whatever to being bridled. Saddling his new won prize, Vincent now rode the beautiful mare round the valley and the two became immediately as one, a magnificent mount and its rider in perfect harmony.

There was nothing further for Vincent to do here but to settle his account with Lipicus and be on his way. He found the ageless caretaker in his study, poring over a parchment. When Vincent entered, he put down his quill and gave the young man his full attention.

"Well, I see your choice is made," he commented.

"Yes," said Stella's proud new owner, trying to hide his elation, "and I am here to settle accounts and be on my way."

Lipicus looked steadily at him for a time, then he replied: "I tried to tell you that you earn and pay for what you get in life each step of the way. After all, you will long enjoy -- or regret -- the just effects of your decision."

Grateful for this seeming generosity and taking to heart the caretaker's words of wisdom, Prince Vincent thanked him cordially and took his leave.

Chapter Ten

The Ruined Castle

With a sturdy mount, Prince Vincent was able to put the miles quickly behind him. One day, as he was riding along, he saw in the distance a massive ruin and, drawing near, he could see that it must once have been a splendid castle. Making his way carefully among the rubble he found that a part of it had escaped destruction and seemed, to his surprise, to be inhabited. He reined in his horse at the entranceway, dismounted, and rapped on the door. After a few moments it was slowly opened by a whitehaired lady of noble mien,

whose features, despite obvious traces of suffering, still held the exalted beauty of poise and character.

She bade him enter and showed him a shelter where his horse could be stabled. The drafty high-vaulted room where she was making her home was bare and cold. There was evidence of neither food nor fire. The lady spoke with quiet dignity:

"I fear my hospitality is as empty as my larder. The last morsel of food was gone today and I have no more."

Glancing about, Vincent saw hanging on a wall a stout bow and a quiver of arrows. These he took down and, with an assurance he did not feel, promised to find game to replenish the larder. At his father's castle, Vincent had seldom joined in the hunting which used to delight his brothers, for, being a sickly child, he could not string the heavy bows they used. He had watched them at practice though and knew how it was done. He waited until out of sight, in case the lady should note how awkwardly he handled his weapon, before he tentatively drew the bowstring tight to test it.

In the nearby woods the game had been undisturbed for a long time, and Vincent had the good fortune to sight a small deer and the even more unusual good fortune to bring it down. He hauled the carcass to the castle court and there set about dressing the meat, then laid a fire and erected a spit. His hostess watched him as he tended the fire and prepared the meal. When the meat was well cooked, he gave her the tenderest cut he could find and then sliced off a piece for himself.

When they had eaten, the lady lay down on her couch and beckoned him to sit by her. She then spoke in a quiet musical voice:

"There is so little time and so much to tell," she began. "I feel I must trust you, for something tells me you are the one who is to find the secret. First, there is the history of this castle: As you may have surmised, this was a place filled with the sounds of happy and contented people, and I am sure you too must feel in the air around you the joy and laughter of children who played here many years ago. My husband and I," she half-whispered, "tried to rule with temperance and justice, respecting all our subjects."

"One day a strange knight passed this way and, as is customary, we offered him our hospitality. With pleasant and beguiling ways he extended his stay and charmed one and all with his winsome appearance. Nor was it long before he began to court our eldest daughter, our beautiful Ellen, and they were soon thereafter wed."

"What none knew at the time," she sighed, pausing to gather strength, "was that this intruder was a powerful and evil sorcerer, who had come hither for but one purpose. He had heard about a certain wonderful sword which was in the king's possession and which he felt was a threat to his own dark power. One terrible night our guard was overpowered by treachery and soon the castle was swarming with his hordes, admitted by this traitor

within our gates. Never did anyone see such carnage ..." The old lady made a gesture of despair then, rallying her courage, she continued:

"After a desperate and futile stand the king, badly wounded, was able with the help of a few trusted guardsmen to escape and flee to the nearby woods. All his followers were hunted down and, one by one, killed, but the king -- and the precious sword he bore -- were never found. The sorcerer and his men scoured the forest from one end to the other for days, but to no avail. At last, in a violent rage the sorcerer gave up the pursuit of the wondrous sword and its owner, and sacked and demolished the castle.

"I am telling you this," the queen's voice was choked with emotion, "because my days, as you can see, are numbered. Even with your humble raiment, I have observed in your bearing the mark of royal blood. Somewhere in that wood," she pointed dramatically with a long, delicate finger, "lies the secret of the fate of my beloved and, I am sure, the sword as well. Rumor has brought many a hapless adventurer to seek it, but to this day all have departed empty handed."

Having told her tragic tale, the queen fell back in a faint against the pillow. Prince Vincent gently spread a robe over her. He made a rude bed nearby for himself and he pondered, deeply moved, the tale of this grand and enduring soul far into the night.

Chapter Eleven

Behind the Waterfall

The next morning, after seeing to the queen's simple needs, Vincent set out early, determined to try his hand where others had failed. Methodically he searched every inch of the forest, but his efforts, again and again, proved fruitless. Not even a clue could he find. Yet he diligently sought the forest's secret, though with each passing day less hopeful of success.

Many times he had passed and repassed an imposing waterfall that shimmered in a shady glen and disappeared into a pool below a high rocky promontory. One day as he sat astride his mare gazing despondently into the cascading water, he was struck by a thought which offered one unexplored possibility. Suppose the answer to the mystery lay right before his eyes! Even at the risk of his life, he had to ascertain the truth. Dismounting, he removed his cumbersome boots and, making his peace with his maker, leapt feet first into the caldron of swirling water at the foot of the falls.

Foolhardy as he knew this act might be, the prince felt his courage would protect him. Some deep conviction forced him to gamble all on what must lie behind this waterfall. Hitting the water hard, he was immediately caught in the churning waters and drawn down, down into the very vortex of the seething caldron. Just as he felt his lungs would burst, it was as if a giant hand had seized and thrown him free of the whirlpool and up toward the surface. While the harrowing experience lasted it had seemed like an eternity, though in reality it could scarcely have been more than a minute. Vincent trod water,

gasping for breath, and looked about him to try to get his bearings. In the dim greenish blue light that filtered through the falling water he could see a hollow place in the face of the cliff just above him and, with slight difficulty, succeeded in pulling himself up on the lower lip of jutting rock. Rising to his feet, he stood at the entrance of a vast grotto whose far side was lost in the dimness of space. For a long time he stood with the sound of the turbulent water behind him and gazed in awe into the vastness of this cool green cathedral, patiently carved through the centuries by the skilled and purposeful hand of nature.

Chapter Twelve

The Flaming Sword

For a long time the prince was too overwhelmed to move. Surely, he felt, the sanctity of this place should never be violated. He gazed at the jeweled sparkle of the rock face, the magnificent proportions of the grotto itself and listened to the organ tones that echoed from the waterfall. His eyes came to rest on a thronelike rock in the center of the grotto, where he made out the form of a seated figure of impressive proportions whose presence seemed to fill the place with majesty.

Vincent approached slowly but the seated figure made no move. Closer inspection proved it to be the long-sought king, as regal in death as he must have been in life. On a nearby rock, as though carefully placed there, lay his crown, while leaning against the throne gleamed the sword itself. There was no question but that this was the eagerly sought weapon. The entire hilt and the sheath were encrusted with precious gems. In the dim opalescent light they gave forth a dazzling luster. Reverently picking it up and drawing the blade, the prince marveled at the craftsmanship of the weapon.

Following some inner urging, the prince knelt and paid simple homage to this most courageous and gallant of men. This done, he carefully reached down and took up the crown. This he secured within his tunic and, buckling the sword about his waist, he turned to leave the cavern. There must be another way out, he mused, for the king could not, wounded as he was, have entered through the waterfall. Patiently he explored the cavern minutely but to no avail. How his noble peer had made his entrance would remain a mystery.

Vincent had no desire, however, to repeat his experience in the maelstrom. He sought and found a ledge jutting out toward the wall of falling water. Edging himself out on to it, he weighed his chances of traversing the cascade to firmer ground beside the torrent, but found the rocky wall near vertical and quite impassable. Grasping the sword firmly against his tunic where the precious crown was secreted, he leaped as far out as he could at the green cascading curtain of the falls. This time he succeeded in plunging squarely into what turned out to be a gentle flume, which tossed him pleasantly up and down in midstream, where he continued to bob along with the current.

He was soon able to gain his footing and waded ashore with ease. There he lay for a while on the soft turf to dry himself, rest from the buffeting, and take stock of his exhilarating experience.

It was nearly dark when the prince rode into the castle yard. The queen tried to rise as he entered the room. When she saw the sword at his side, her face became radiant and her eyes glistened through her tears. Falling back on her pallet, she held out her hand and Prince Vincent, grateful for the honor tacitly bestowed on him, tenderly took it into his own.

When they had supped, the prince bade the queen good- night and retired early. He found in the morning that she had passed away peacefully in the night, her task accomplished. He set about to perform the final services that must be done. He dug a grave in the glade near the waterfall. Then he rolled a large stone to mark the spot and hollowed out a place to hold it. He carefully wrapped the two crowns of the royal couple in the deer skin and reverently placed them in the shallow depression before rolling the stone in place. With the warm rays of the sun shimmering through the trees he laid the queen to rest for the last time.

Symbolically the two devoted souls were now together and, understandably, when Vincent departed a part of his heart would forever remain with them.

Chapter Thirteen

The Stableboy

Prince Vincent once again found himself on a broad highway, which wound over the undulating countryside. As far as he could see the land lay fallow and he saw no friendly workers in the fields. The sun beat mercilessly down and the traveler could see that there had been no rain for a long time. It was with some relief that he espied in the distance ahead of him a solitary figure trudging along the dusty road. As he drew near he was touched by the appearance of the stranger, for his clothes were threadbare and he had the most woebegone expression on his face. By the fear in his eyes as he turned his head at the sound of the horse's hoofbeats, the prince felt sure he must have been ill-treated. Almost without thinking and filled with pity, the prince reached down and lifted the youth up into the saddle behind him. The lad made no protest, but gripped his benefactor lightly about the waist, no doubt glad to rest his tired bare feet.

As they rode along, the prince wisely felt it best to keep his own counsel and after riding thus for a while, he reached into his saddlebags and drew out some bread and cheese. Breaking off a fair share, he passed the food over his shoulder without turning his head. The cheese and bread disappeared from his grasp and he was sure it was quickly devoured with relish.

Not long after finishing their meal, they came to a wooden bridge spanning a little brook. The prince reined Stella and the two dismounted. After drinking and splashing cool water

on themselves to wash off the dust of the road, they romped in the shallows like carefree children. At length, quite tired, they threw themselves laughing onto the cool grass under a tree, while the ever-faithful animal cropped contentedly near by. The prince, having gained the boy's confidence, now broke the silence:

"What is your name?" he asked softly, "and what mission are you on?" The boy hesitated for a moment, then haltingly replied:

"They call me Janus. I'm returning to the inn over yonder where I am bound out as a stableboy. I was on an errand for my master, when the horse I was riding bolted and threw me. I tried to catch him but I couldn't." The panic in his voice made the prince realize Janus expected to pay dearly for this. Perhaps later, he mused, he could be of help to the unfortunate lad. Changing the subject he asked: "What of your family?"

"I have only a mother," responded Janus, "whom I dearly love. But she is very poor and depends on what little I earn to keep body and soul together."

Feeling it unwise to question him further, Vincent rose briskly to his feet and said matter-of-factly: "Come. Time for us to be on our way."

It was dusk when they came to the inn, where Janus worked, and entered the compound where a sign hung overhead. On it was written in large crude letters: The Falcon's Roost.

Chapter Fourteen

The Shield

They dismounted in front of the stable and by force of habit the lad picked up the reins to lead Stella away but, before dismissing him, Prince Vincent put his hand on the boy's shoulder and with the other extended a small coin.

"Here," he said reassuringly. "Don't worry too much about your loss. I am sure I can come to terms with this master of yours."

The boy's worried look vanished and he managed just the ghost of a smile as he led Stella away.

The inn was a massive wooden structure standing on a high bluff with a clear view of the countryside for miles around. The atmosphere of the place was forbidding to say the least and, if there had been another inn within miles, most assuredly the prince's choice would have been different. As it was, he pushed through the door and, as he did so, a small bell was tripped overhead. Looking about him in the dim interior he found he was in a long low room. On one side were several rough-hewn tables and chairs, and on the other a passageway leading, he was sure, to the kitchen. At the rear and to one side was a stairway which must lead to the various living quarters. At the far end of the room in an alcove there was a high stone fireplace, above which were displayed crossed halberds

and, between them, an imposing shield whose coat of arms was curiously indistinguishable.

His inspection of the shield was interrupted by the arrival of a charming young maiden. She was in the bloom of youth and strangely out of keeping with this depressing place. Recovering from his surprise, the prince, feeling unwontedly awkward, stammered out a request for food and lodging. If she was aware of his embarrassment, the girl made no sign but beckoned him to follow as she led the way up the stairs and opened the door of a room. As she turned to leave she said:

"Supper is almost ready." With this she went about her business.

After removing the dust of travel, Prince Vincent descended and found the room below still empty. He seated himself at a table with some noise to make his presence known, and soon the maiden brought a plate of food which she set before him with a smile so radiant the prince could not help but smile back.

At this moment a bearded giant of a man entered with several hard-looking ruffians. They crowded round the tables, pounding them loudly for service. They eyed Vincent suspiciously but made no customary overtures.

All might have happened differently had not the young maid tripped over the feet of one who sat sprawled on his bench. The platter she was carrying left her hands and sailed across the table straight at the dumbfounded face of the redbearded giant. He rose angrily and would have struck the girl had Vincent not swiftly risen to his feet and blocked the man's way. Thwarted, the giant reached for his weapon, when his eye fell on the prince's sword whose jeweled hilt gleamed and sparkled like a thousand fires. Something made him pause and back away; he even managed a weak apology to the girl and a thin smile which did little to disguise the malice in his eyes.

Supper continued in tense silence. Slowly the hum of conversation resumed until, when the meal was over and the dishes cleared away, the rafters echoed with loud talk and raucous laughter, the incident apparently forgotten. Prince Vincent retired to his quarters with some misgivings.

Not taking time to disrobe, he threw himself on the bed to mull over the events of the day and evening and soon dropped off to sleep. His slumber was interrupted by someone trying gently to rouse him. Startled and still half asleep, he dimly made out the form of the maid-servant who, as a precaution, placed her small hand over his mouth.

"Shh!" she whispered. "There is no time to explain now, sir. You are in very grave danger. These men are brigands of the worst kind, and the big one with the red beard is their leader. I am sure it is your sword they are after and they will stop at nothing to get it. Come with me. I can hide you in a safe place and you can leave later when it is safe."

The prince rose to his feet and started to obey her wish, then drew back, while attempting to hide his apprehension.

"No," he said firmly. "It is best that I stay and defend myself here. I thank you for the warning, which helps make the odds less overwhelming."

The girl may have felt this foolhardy wayfarer was acting rashly, but there was no time to argue. Seeing he was determined to stand his ground, possibly to impress her with his courage, she shook her head, turned, and tiptoed softly from the room.

The prince again returned to his bed but first he unsheathed the sword and laid it by his side. He forced himself to lie still and pretend to sleep. After what seemed like hours, which in truth was only a few minutes, the door slowly opened. With half-closed eyes he watched as one by one several armed men pressed into the room. Waiting till the last possible moment, Prince Vincent sprang into action. Wielding the wondrous sword with both hands he felt it arch through the air as though possessed of some mysterious will of its own, cutting his would-be assailants down right and left. Not one remained standing. The whole affair was over almost before he could draw a second breath.

The prince was overcome with horror at what he had been compelled to do. His only thought was to flee from the awful carnage. He dashed out the door and down the stairs four steps at a time with the naked, bloodstained sword still in his hand.

The fire was still smoldering in the great hearth. He heaped it high with fuel and huddled in the inglenook to thaw out a chill that seemed to freeze him to the very marrow of his bones. At last weariness overtook him, and he lay down on an oaken bench and fell into a troubled sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

"I Am the Princess Aurora"

When Vincent awoke there was a blanket over him, and the maid was busily stirring the fire. He lay quietly watching her every move and noted that she moved with a grace quite out of keeping with this dreadful place. She sensed he was awake for, without turning her head, she greeted him cheerfully.

"Well good-morning, whoever you are." She smiled at him and continued: "I see you are alive and well, though how you managed it I cannot imagine."

Vincent did not have a ready answer. He was more than ever puzzled by this servant girl who now spoke to him like an equal. He stretched to relieve the stiffness of his limbs. The oak bench was not the softest couch he had known. His sword caught his eye. It had been wiped clean and stood leaning, with lustrous sparkles, against the wall. If this was the doing of the lassie, she was surely someone to be reckoned with. More perplexed than ever he asked:

"Who are you? And what, may I ask, are you doing in this dreadful place?"

The answer was as forthright as the question:

"I am the Princess Aurora. If you believe me, I will tell you my story. If not, I will not waste your time."

"Please," responded Vincent. "I would like to hear it."

"Very well," the princess replied. She sat quietly for a moment, gazing wistfully into space, then she continued:

"It all happened many years ago, when I was still a child. One day I was out riding with one of my father's most trusted knights, when we were unexpectedly set upon by some of these brigands. My knight-escort, oh, how brave he was and how he fought, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. At high cost to these highway men, nevertheless, he was overcome and slain. The prince considered this new turn of events. There was nought in his own appearance that might betray his nobility, his royal crested ring he kept safe from sight.

As you can see," she reflected, "while they refused to give me my freedom, they have done me no real harm. Of course, they make me wait on them and have never trusted me - I am closely watched, just as you were from miles back. This came as a great surprise to Vincent, but he made no sign.

Picking up her story she continued: "For a long time my captors wandered from place to place, looting and murdering and often forced to hide from pursuers. They came to this out-of-the-way place by chance and made away with the owners. As you can see, they use it as a stronghold, for it overlooks the country for miles around.

"But there are more of them," she said earnestly, looking onto Vincent's eyes and her hand on his arm trembled. "The rest are but a day's ride from here and they will be back before this nightfall."

Her remark brought Vincent to his feet. If her surmise was correct, there was little time to waste.

"Let us have breakfast first," the prince decided. "Then we can decide what is to be done." Until this moment he had completely forgotten about Janus, the stableboy and, while the princess set about to prepare the meal, Vincent went out to see how he had fared during the night's events. Not unexpectedly, he found Janus, totally unaware of the violent happenings, had slept blissfully through it all in his cubbyhole over the stable. The lad was dumbfounded when he was told what had transpired during the night and Vincent had to repeat his message and patiently reassure him. He placed an arm about the lad's shoulders and spoke gently:

"The villains are dead. Just be thankful that you are now free from them. Come," he added. "Let us go inside where breakfast is being prepared."

The boy needed no second urging. The princess had often been kind to him and he knew the secret of her royal birth. When they entered, they found food already on the table, so the three of them, now lords and masters of the inn, sat down to enjoy their repast to the full.

Despite the uncertainties that might be boded by the future, their happy laughter soon echoed from the ancient rafters, and a strong fraternal bond was forged among them.

Breakfast over, Vincent turned their attention to the serious business at hand. He explained how, much to his regret, he would be unable to remain with them, as he had an urgent and important quest to continue. He would help them find a place to live until he could return and join them in seeking the princess' home and parents. At this point Janus broke in with a suggestion: If the princess so wished they might both find lodging with his aged mother, whose humble cottage was a mere day's journey from the inn. To Vincent's relief, she readily consented.

Though neither Janus nor Princess Aurora had any knowledge of Vincent's royal blood, when he spoke there was an unmistakable note of authority in his voice and manner and they both recognized it and were prepared to follow his lead. The princess was to gather up her few possessions, while Janus removed all the horses from the stable and hobbled them at a safe distance from the inn. Thereafter they took from the buildings any articles that might prove useful and were not too bulky to carry.

Vincent spoke: "Let us gather faggots and all the straw in the stables. We are going to fire the inn."

Aurora and the boy were a little taken aback at this, but they trusted his judgment and dutifully set about to fulfill their share of the task.

Chapter Sixteen

The Inn is Burned

One after the other they appeared with their chosen belongings, Janus stumbling out with a pair of boots hanging round his neck. Aurora, for some unknown reason, had taken the shield that had hung over the fireplace. They now placed their faggots round the base of the walls and methodically set fire to them. They hurled burning torches on the roofs and hastily retreated to where Janus had left the horses.

For a while they stood in awe of what they had dared to do, watching as the purifying flames destroyed the old inn that had housed so much evil.

All too soon it was time for the companions to part. The prince helped the dainty Aurora into her saddle, made sure the saddlebags and other gear were secure, then handed up the heavy shield he had been carrying for her.

"No," she said, "if your mission is as dangerous as you believe, you will be in need of it." Her voice faded to a whisper as she continued: "May it serve you well." She turned her head away to hide a mist of tears.

Vincent accepted the shield and thanked her. He led her horse in the direction she and Janus were to take. He took his ring from its hiding-place and, tenderly kissing Aurora's hand, he placed the ring in it and gently folded her fingers over it. Thereupon he slapped the horse's rump and set it cantering away with Janus following at the head of a string of horses taken from the inn's stables.

Vincent now mounted Stella and sat watching his friends disappear. Meanwhile the fire roared through the tinder-dry structure of the ancient inn until, suddenly, the whole edifice came crashing down in a great shower of sparks. In the east Vincent saw storm clouds gather. They could not have chosen a better time to hide the perpetrators of this rash and daring deed. It was time for the prince to be on his way.

Chapter Seventeen

To Shoe a Horse

The prince's quest now brought him to a small mountain hamlet. Stella had thrown a shoe and he had to find a smithy, which he hoped to do here, for this seemed a prosperous countryside with pretty cottages lining the road-way between towering pines. Lofty snow capped mountains made an awe-inspiring backdrop to the little village nestled among them.

Hailing one of the townfolk passing by, Vincent made known his wishes.

"A blacksmith?" echoed the man. "Yes, there is a place here that may serve your needs, if you can shoe her yourself. There lived an unusual old iron-smith here who was a wizard at his trade, but alas," he continued sadly, "he died a short time ago and his workshop now stands empty. But I am sure young man, you are most welcome to try your skill there and do the job yourself. The shop stands alone at the end of the village. You can't miss it."

The man pointed down the little rutted street.

The prince thanked him cordially and set off in the direction indicated. Minutes later he left the inhabited place well behind and caught sight on a structure ahead of him, but it did not look like any smithy he had ever seen. To begin with, it was quite large and of a symmetry and beauty that filled him with wonder. It was an organ-like structure of perpendicular lines that blended perfectly with the evergreen covered rocky escarpment

and gave a singular effect of serene harmony with not a harsh line anywhere. The prince found it hard to believe this to be the smithy and was quite perplexed by the unusual architecture. Later, he was to discover the reason for the unusual design of this nature-temple.

He dismounted and opened the beautifully carved portals. The interior was surprisingly well lighted and his attention was at once drawn to the well-kept forge, bellows, anvil and tongs neatly arrayed on a workbench. There was an assortment of many useful tools. Horseshoes of all types hung in neat rows according to size along the cross beams near the forge. But what surprised the young prince was an extraordinary, and seemingly unnecessary, array of hammers that covered most of the four walls. They were of all sizes and shapes, some small and intricately designed with ornamented shafts, others large; some plain, others fancy and, to a casual observer, they were arranged in a haphazard way quite out of keeping with the meticulous order that governed the disposition of the rest of the tools. In a corner three suits of armor stood propped up in various stages of completion. The pleasant sound of the wind in the pines had followed him in and filled the atmosphere with its soft fragrance.

Delighted with his surroundings, the prince set about to make himself at home. First he unsaddled Stella and saw to her comfort. Then he explored the smithy and found a small door leading to a cozy chamber. Here he would rest during his stay.

These matters out of the way, he set about to fire up the forge and try his hand at smithying. He was not entirely ignorant of the art, having often watched his father's armorers at work, when as a child he spent many hours dreaming of castles in the glowing embers and of deeds of derring-do while they forged the caparison of steeds and knights. It took him a while to get the fire to a white heat. Then he whistled for Stella. She answered his call and cooperated well enough, but the task still proved to be more arduous than he had expected. At last, Stella was well shod.

By the time Stella had been made comfortable it had grown quite dark. He banked the fire, ate a light supper and, filled with warm satisfaction at a task well done, he retired to the little chamber for the night.

Chapter Eighteen

An Irascible Cricket

The first thought that came to the prince's mind on awakening in the morning was of three suits of armor he had seen standing in a corner. He rose at once, eager to examine them. All three were of excellent design, but one of them of a pale gold color very much took his fancy; also, it needed only seven links to complete it. With this thought in mind he fired up the forge and, while it was heating, proceeded to breakfast. This done he returned to the new challenge: the setting of the seven missing links. But his good fortune of yesterday was not so soon to be repeated. To forge even one link into place proved exasperatingly impossible.

All that day he worked diligently at the task, patiently fitting the link and holding it with the tongs, but as soon as he raised the hammer, it would slip awry as though it had a will of its own and refused to close in its proper position. At dusk, tired and discouraged, he put the tools aside and walked out into the cool of the evening to try to shed some of his bitter frustration. After bathing in the little stream that ran near by and lent its note to the song of the wind in the trees, he retired to rest, hoping to be more successful on the morrow. A novice at the task, he felt sure increased dexterity would come with determination and practice.

But the following day he fared no better, and how long he would have continued his fruitless efforts it would be hard to say, had it not been for a certain cricket. It was at a moment when the prince had paused to wipe the sweat from his brow before making another stubborn attempt that he heard (or thought he heard) a sound that seemed to say:

"Hey, you! You there with the hammer!"

Looking around him, he saw nothing. Then he heard it again:

"Hey there! look this way!"

He looked in the direction from which it seemed to come and there in a crevice on the rock wall sat a tiny cricket, angrily waving his little antennae.

"Are you speaking to me?" he asked in a surly tone, being a little out of sorts.

"Certainly I am," came the angry reply. "I want you to know that this was a place of peace and harmony until you came and began your raucous noise. By nightfall, when it is time for me to get up and go to work, I am a nervous wreck. Why can't you finish what you are doing and be on your way?"

The prince was beginning to feel the effects of his discordant hammering too, and, realizing he was the intruder here, offered his apologies.

"You see, Cricket," he explained. "I have my heart set on this suit of armor and if I can only forge these last few links in place, I will be on my way and leave you alone."

"Well," the irascible cricket rejoined, his temper now subdued, "I must say you are not very bright about it." Without waiting for a reply he continued, "If you want my advice, young man, and any cricket could tell you this, you are using the wrong hammer." With this the cricket disappeared into the crack in the wall.

The prince was more puzzled than ever. How was he to know what the cricket meant? And which of all the hammers covering the walls was the right one? As it was getting dark and he was very weary, he banked the fire for the night and retired.

For a long time he lay listening to the soothing sound of the wind sighing in the pines. He had no fear of this element and considered the mighty Eolus his friend. The rivulet added its note to the wind and he heard the intermittent whisper of the cricket and his friends. Suddenly he became aware of the message they carried, which was also the answer to his problem. And so he fell peacefully asleep, filled with the murmur of wind and water, and sure of tomorrow's success.

Chapter Nineteen

The Task is Completed

Rising with the dawn, Vincent eagerly set about to see if his surmise of the night was correct. Systematically, he began to remove the hammers exactly in the order, or seeming disorder, in which they were placed, and arranging them in groups. This done, he took them each in turn and struck them one by one on the anvil. The thunderous tones filled the high vaulted chamber, echoing and re-echoing, the waves of sound traveling out into infinity. He realized that he was hearing a mighty symphony, all movement, power and life itself; he could hear the singing of atoms in their orbits, the laughter of little children at play, the waves booming and pounding the coastal shores, the planets whirling round their fathers, the suns, in a vast universal harmonious whole; there were also the discordant sounds of war, the roars of predators devouring their weaker brethren. All nature was singing its paean to the purpose of being.

On increasing the stroke of the hammers he found the whole orchestration changed and an entirely different dramatic theme played in endless procession of events. The prince was reluctant to break the magic spell and he stood in silent wonder at the genius who had constructed this acoustical masterpiece, and who had given audible to the mysteries of life. But there was more work to be done, so, carefully replacing the unneeded hammers, he held the one that he had selected, which matched the quality of sound of nature at work. Setting the white hot links in place, He dropped the hammer straight and true and with each stroke joined a link without resistance. The task was completed in moments.

As he put the tools carefully away for the last time, he sensed rather than heard a very small sigh of great relief. He chuckled and murmured, "Good noight, Cricket. And thank you!"

Chapter Twenty

The black knight is Vanquished

It was still early morning when Prince Vincent descended from the foothills and emerged on a vast plain. Far ahead he saw his objective. Even from a distance the massive size of the castle was singularly impressive. As he approached his goal, he pondered deeply. Who was this adversary he soon must challenge? He was sure he had known him in the past, had met him many times in many forms and guises: the Captain of the Guard bore

no resemblance to the brigand chief, yet Vincent felt they were closely connected. He wondered at his own temerity in hoping to rid the world of this evil power, when his father's emissaries and even his heroic brothers had not succeeded.

As he rode along thus musing, his eyes scanned the plain for signs of danger and, straying, caught sight of his shadow, moving parallel and faithfully reflecting his every movement and that of his faithful steed. In a flash he found the answer to his thoughts, and it broke the spell of his brooding: causes, he saw, are reflected always, and light inevitably makes a shadow.

The crenellated towers now loomed ever closer and Stella's hoofbeats sounded an echoing cadence on the surface of the roadway. As he came near, the prince observed the drawbridge of the castle was in place, surely a sign that someone was expected, and beyond it, in the large central court waited a mounted warrior. a huge threatening figure, sooty black from his plume to his horse's caparison, and armed for combat.

The prince well knew he must not hesitate but act at once. Dropping his vizor, he made his peace with his Maker and charged. The foe was without mercy, abiding by no rules of chivalry or honor, smiting unexpectedly with all the guile and malice at his command. The prince was keenly aware of his tactics and that he would receive no quarter. All depended on his own courage and determination, and, inexperienced in combat as he was, he could rely completely on the dexterity and speed of his wondrous horse, on the shield which unfailingly repelled every onslaught, and on his sword which was invincible and always found its mark.

The opponents were in many ways evenly matched and the conflict might have lasted much longer, but it ended as suddenly as it had begun, when the dark adversary lost his balance and fell headlong to the ground where he lay stunned. He was now at the mercy of the prince. Panting for breath, Vincent dismounted and stood over the fallen knight. Then, to satisfy a compelling curiosity he bent over him and raised the vizor.

What he saw startled him, for the face was familiar although the resemblance lay not so much in the features as in a certain undefinable quality. Recovering his composure, the prince knew the natural outcome of the series of events he had gone through had given him the margin of victory. But only temporarily, for each ending, he knew, was but a new beginning.

The vanquished knight opened his eyes and, rising on one knee, he took Vincent's hand and placed it on his head, saying:

"You are the victor and now you are my master. I am forever at your service."

Chapter Twentyone

Maya, the Enchantress

The vanquished foe, now his servant, conducted Vincent to a pleasant room in the castle and made every effort to see to his comfort. Spent from the day's ordeal he threw himself on the bed and fell into a dreamless sleep. When the prince awoke it was morning, and it took him a few moments to realize where he was. He had been too tired the evening before to take in his surroundings and had slept the clock round.

The quarters where he found himself were the most lavishly furnished he had ever seen. Tapestries and costly paintings hung on the walls while deep carpeting from foreign lands covered the floor. The room was light and airy, with warm sunlight streaming in through the high windows. Hanging in a shaft of this light was a caged bird which was singing lustily. To complete the scene, a table was set with succulent dishes ready to eat. He did not see his new servant, but found his wishes anticipated in the days that followed.

Donning the fine silken garments that were laid out for him, the prince partook of a leisurely breakfast and there upon set out to explore the castle. Passing from room to room, he could see they had been unoccupied for some time, and were given over to dust and cobwebs. Nowhere did he find any sign of life.

Bewildered, Vincent wandered out into the gardens. There, in contrast to the lifelessness inside, were strange exotic plants growing in wild profusion. Making his way among them, Vincent came to a marble archway leading to a spacious pavilion, wherein lay a long pool between white colonnades, its glittering water fed by graceful sprays from several fountains. All along the sides of the pool stood hundreds of lifelike stone statues, while on a centrally placed marble bench sat a woman, combing the long shining tresses which covered her face and fell in a cascade of pure gold to her waist. In one hand she held a mirror. Vincent walked toward her, making his footsteps ring on the marble floor to alert her to his presence. She turned slowly toward him without pausing in her rhythmic combing, and raised her eyes to meet his.

Instantly, when Vincent met her glance he lost all interest in the castle and its mysteries, in his quest, in all the world about him. Drowning in her glance, he stood rooted to the spot and remained thus immovable until the twilight shadows hid her from his sight and released him.

It was dark when he returned to his room and, once more, found the table set and all in readiness for his comfort and delight. It became his habit each morning to return to the pavilion at daybreak and resume his strange vigil by the pool, unable to move yet enjoying his enslavement, gazing at the enchantress (which she was) without wearying of her beauty. Nor was he aware of almost imperceptible changes that took place about him: the fountains stopped playing one by one, the most beautiful of the flowers were dying in the gardens, while in his quarters the colors of the tapestries and paintings were fading, the carpets became worn thin and threadbare, the food became tasteless and unappetizing. Meanwhile, his own feelings had become more and more melancholy and despairing, to that he listlessly came and went more like his own shadow than a living being.

One morning, wakening with a leaden heart, he chanced to notice that the bird was no longer singing but sat perched in his cage with drooping feathers. The cage itself was placed in the darkest corner of the room.

"Why should you share my misery, poor little bird?" the prince whispered as he returned the cage to its customary place in the sunlight by the window. The bird burst into immediate song, while Vincent returned to his vigil by the pool, remaining there until it was too dark to see, as had now become his wont.

The following morning he suffered as though his heart would break with dull despair, and, noting that the bird had once more been moved to the darkest corner, he again replaced it in the sunlight, where it burst into joyous song. Vincent was about to leave when something in the bird's song arrested his attention and he paused to listen. Woven into its lilting melodies he heard:

"A mirr-rror, a magic mirror! A mirr-rror, a magic mirror!" over and over the message was repeated. He had not altogether lost his power to hear and heed nature's creatures, though his mind had become filled with doubts. As Vincent made his way to the pool, he knew he must gain possession of the mirror with which she had cast this spell over him. Carefully, he gauged his approach so that she should not detect him in the glass and sidled close until he was able, with a quick movement, to wrest the mirror from her grasp. Instantly the enchantress turned to gaze at him with her hypnotic eyes, but Vincent, remembering the little bird's message, held the mirror so that he might watch her without looking directly at her. With disbelief, he saw to his fear and horror her beauty change and take on ever more hideous and frightening guises. At length, Maya the enchantress, seeing that all her efforts were doomed to failure, vanished like smoke in clear air.

At once the fountains began to play, the flowers raised their heads and spilled their fragrance far and wide, as Vincent felt the weight of his unhappiness and discontent lift from his heart.

Chapter Twentytwo

The Spell is broken

After the disappearance of Maya the enchantress, Vincent was conscious of a strong feeling of relief, as though he had awakened from a vivid nightmare. Slowly there began to return to him the memory of the vital importance of his quest. If the mirror, which he still held in his hand, held the key to the riddle and power of the enchantress, then it might also hold the answer to the spell that lay over this castle. He looked into the mirror and found it was now clouded over and the prince could hardly make out his own features. Thinking to clear the glass, he knelt down and dipped it into the pool and once more held it up before him.

Not only could he now see his own image reflected back to him, but also the statues immediately behind him, which seemed in the glass to be alive and real. Intuitively and in

a flash the answer came to him. Quickly he doffed his cap and scooped up some water from the pool and tossed it over a nearby statue. Slowly the figure began to move and, wonder of wonders! it came to life as a human being. He repeated this action many times and, while not all the stonework revived and became human, the pavilion quickly became full of happy souls glad to be free of the spell that had been cast over them. The king himself was among them and the ambassadors of Vincent's fathers court, and Vincent's delight knew no bounds when his two brothers also appeared, alive and well.

The king of this splendid castle arranged for a great feast to honor the young prince who had delivered them, and Vincent was hailed as their hero and liberator.

That evening by the light of flaring torches, the banquet was held in the great hall and the rafters rang with the joyous shouts of revelers. But under all the feasting and merriment something was sadly amiss! the king betrayed some hidden sorrow, and Prince Vincent sensed that his queen also concealed under her smile a secret sadness. Fearing lest his boldness might offend them, he nevertheless pressed the king to find what troubled the royal pair. Sighing deeply and recognizing the young man's interest and sincerity, the king related his tale:

"Many years ago, before this dreadful spell came upon us, we had a lovely child. She was the sun and stars to us and filled our hearts with joy. Alas," his eyes filled with tears and his voice was choked with feeling, "if she could only be with us now, our happiness would be complete. But I fear she is no longer alive."

Vincent murmured his sympathy and asked the king how he could be sure of this, whereupon the aged monarch answered:

"It has been so many years now that, even if she were still alive, she must have forgotten us. We have had no news at all."

Seeing the prince's deep concern, the old king continued:

"It happened one day when the little princess was out riding, escorted by our bravest and most trusted knight. They did not return. For many days my subjects scoured the countryside but no smallest trace of them was ever found. Throughout the years, rumors have occasionally reached us, but each one has proved false. We have long ago given up all hope of ever seeing her again."

This revelation set Vincent's thoughts in a turmoil but, not wishing to raise false hopes, he kept his peace and merely asked:

"What name did the princess hear, Your Majesty?"

"Her name? It was Aurora," replied the king.

With great presence of mind Vincent awaited a moment when he felt sure he was unobserved. He summoned a young page and whispered careful instructions in his ear, then while the lad went to do his bidding, waited with suppressed excitement for his return.

At length, the page re-entered the large hall. He walked into the very center between the large horseshoe-shaped tables and held aloft a shield for the royal couple and all to see. The burnished metal gleamed in the twinkling torchlight and the crest of its honored owner stood out bright and clear.

Instant silence fell over the assembled company. The king and queen both turned deathly pale, and the king turned to Prince Vincent with mingled apprehension and suspicion in his eyes. Vincent lost no time in setting his mind at ease and rose to speak with quiet dignity:

"The Princess Aurora is alive and well. She is at present living in a humble cottage, having escaped the captivity in which she was long held."

The cheers of the court well nigh lifted the roof off its rafters and, amid the deafening clangor, the king embraced Prince Vincent and received a detailed account of the events at the inn. A royal escort was immediately dispatched to find the cottage where Janus and his mother harbored their honored guest, and to bring all three back to the court.

* * *

This story, dear Reader, has only the ending you would give it; as the tale has been spun out of the writer's imaginings and as each ending is another beginning, I leave it to you to continue where I left off.

AFTERWORD

To the Young at Heart of all Ages

Truly this wonderful world of ours is a place of fascination and enchantment, where each and every wayfarer must, sooner or later, find his own way and break the magic spell of illusion around him.

For, to begin with, it is wrong to think of our Mother Earth as just a chance co-mingling of elements. No, it has a soul and a spirit of its very own, and is fully alive and aware in every part of its being. And -- to clarify further -- it does in very truth have its mysterious mountains, its rivers of doubt and uncertainty, its enchanted forests, and its serene and yet often deceptive, peaceful valleys.

Also the paths and byways are beset with many unexpected perils where strange, phantom creatures and terrifying dragons are encountered. They must, in due time, be overcome and mastered or slain.

The Quest of Prince Vincent tries to convey in simple symbolic form how to acquire first the necessary armor of truth, honor and courage. Then, with the protection of right thought and action, to do battle with those powerful forces of Ignorance and Darkness.

Always, in so doing, each warrior must constantly bear in mind and heart that he (or she) is a live Vincent, the son or daughter of a king. And in the course of this daring adventure of life and living there is a glorious mission and destiny to be fulfilled. Again and again we can expect the terrors of the (k)night and the unknown to challenge us. But, come what may, we must, and can, with determination win through. For, once this adventure is begun, there is no return, no quarter is asked nor any given.

Now, one may wonder, why the use of this allegorical style? Why not come right out and tell the story simply and directly? There are of course many sound reasons and for a start, we might say that, at any given point in time, we are all tyros. As novices we must open one door at a time. For, to understand the inner nature of this spiritual quest there must be, by necessity, reflections in shadow and substance. In like manner, all ancient traditional teachings were presented in this manner -- a story within a story.

The real purpose for this is obvious: to whet the intuition, so that the earnest and sincere inquirer will seek to find the real message behind the outer garment of illusion. Just as in this adventure the prince must find the sword (of truth) in that protected and inviolable sanctuary of the grotto (within himself) behind the waterfall (the veil of illusion); likewise each must, in his own way, find that same invincible weapon so that we may slay the dragons of our own illusions and imaginings.

Once this inner intuitive faculty and quality begins to stir and awaken, then comes the marvelous (re)discovery of the hidden meanings in the numerous age-old myths and legends; as in the fantasy of the Sleeping Beauty where, after a long period of sleep and forgetfulness, everything again awakens and comes to life. The self-same theme is repeated here in still another form which one should instantly recognize.

As you can see, this magic fire has never been permitted to go out, and the charge to keep it burning is up to each of us. For once having acquainted oneself with the true purpose of life, one is on one's own. As for this allegorical tale, you can set it aside, for it has served, hopefully, its purpose. You are now invited to weave the same theme in your own way. For, as indicated, the sum and substance must be drawn from your insight and experience; you now are the modern Ulysses reaching out into the ever challenging frontiers of enlightenment.