

A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

BY JOHN C. WINDER.

IN the far-off land of Bombaloo there reigned, long, long ago, a cruel and wicked Queen. All day long, year in, year out, the unfortunate people of her realm groaned and wept under her merciless rule. On a high hill, overlooking the city, she dwelt in a magnificent palace, with spires and turrets reaching to the clouds. Years before, when good King Greybeard had held his Court there, the land had been peaceful and smiling; contentment reigned in palace and cottage alike, and happy faces appeared everywhere in place of sorrow and tears.

But, alas! the good King fell on evil days. His beautiful young wife died, leaving him a little, tender girl babe to care for, and in the midst of his sorrow his country was attacked by Queen Grizzle and her fierce knights, and although King Greybeard's forces fought long and

bravely they were overcome, and he was slain.

The first thing that Queen Grizzle did when she had seized the throne was to order the death of Princess Pearl, King Greybeard's little daughter; but the soothsayers and magicians of her Court warned her that, if the child were killed, fortune would turn against her, and not even their evil powers would be able to protect her from punishment for her crimes. So the little Princess was carried away into the depths of a great forest, and given to a frightful old witch to take charge of.

Now this old witch was a very wonderful person. Ordinary magic was nothing to her; and she was only to be consulted on very special occasions, and with great ceremony. She lived in a large inclosure right in the midst of the forest, surrounded by a high wall which she had made herself. This wall was very thick, and of a dark grey colour, quite smooth and warm, and—alive.

Inside the wall was her cottage, with a garden all round it, in which grew curious herbs and flowers. The witch could please herself what sort of weather she had; so that, when you got up in the morning, you never knew whether it would be summer or winter; and if she were in a bad temper she would, you may be sure, have the ground several inches deep in snow, and a cold wind blowing. Here Princess Pearl was brought up, and she grew, year by year, into a maiden of wondrous loveliness. Her features were exquisitely formed, her eyes large and soft and of a deep blue colour, and her hair fell in shining waves down to her waist.

She knew that she was a Princess, and, although the witch often gave her menial tasks to do, she seldom murmured.

"She cannot have power over my mind," said Pearl. "I am a Princess still, and my heart is pure and noble, even if my hands have to do work which is distasteful to me."

But she was very sad and her beautiful face wore a wistful expression, which would have touched any but a witch's heart. Once, when the witch was very bad-tempered, Pearl begged her, with tears, to tell her what was the matter.

"The matter is," said the witch, "that I would like to have your heart to eat. Mind I don't tear it out some day," and she gnashed her great teeth in Pearl's face.

Then Pearl stood up, pale and proud, and said: "You may try to frighten me, if you like; but I am a King's daughter, and though you kill me I will not fear you."

"Go along, you little hussy," growled the witch; "boil me a beef-steak at once, and see that there are plenty of black-beetles in the sauce; you will catch as many as you want in the kitchen."

You will perhaps wonder why Pearl did not try to escape. It was of no use. No one could get past the terrible living wall that surrounded the witch's habitation. The

only way out was through its mouth, and that would only open at the witch's own command. But deliverance was nearer than Pearl thought.

Outside in the forest, one fine summer morning, a youth was wending his way down the long, sun-flecked, whispering aisles that stretched away among the trees.

There, straight in front of him, a little rosy cloud stretched across his path. It was like one of those delicate films that float awhile and fade in a summer sunset; and on it, poised as lightly as thistledown, was the most exquisite little creature that could possibly be imagined.

Small as a child, she had the form and beauty of a full-grown woman, and seemed like some charmingly moulded statuette endued with life—yet so fragile that a breath



"FLORIAN STOOD STILL IN AMAZEMENT."

would destroy her. Florian, for that was the youth's name, stood still in amazement, and gazed on the wonder. Presently she spoke, and the air seemed full of faint, delicious music.

"Fair youth," she said, "I see you are

surprised. You may well be so, for to few is it allowed to meet me face to face. I am Fairy Echo."

"I am the youngest son of the King of Cosmogon," replied Florian, "and I am travelling over the world seeking my fortune."

"If you desire adventure, go no farther," said Fairy Echo. "Here, in this forest, is adventure to satisfy the most venturesome."

"I pray you tell me the meaning of your words," said Florian.

"There is," replied the fairy, "held prisoner by a foul witch the most beautiful Princess in the world. Long has she pined in captivity, and only a truly brave man can set her free. If I am not mistaken," she continued, "I see one before me now."

"I do not know," said the Prince, "whether I should allow you to call me truly brave; but I am ready to do my best to set the Princess free."

"Very well," said the fairy, "I will give you all the help I can; but 'tis no easy task you undertake. In the first place, you will have to climb the wall that surrounds the witch's house, and, as that is quite smooth and very lofty, without a single break or crevice, you will find these very necessary."

Hearing a slight jingle on the ground at his feet, Florian looked down and saw several large spikes and steel hooks.

"The spikes you must fasten to your feet, and with the hooks you must pull yourself up," explained the fairy. "But the witch has very sharp ears, and will soon know that someone is trying to climb the wall, so that, as soon as your head appeared over the top, she would send her ravens to pick out your eyes. Take this jewel, and, so long as it remains in your pocket, you will be quite invisible. You must then climb down the inside of the wall, and when the witch has her back turned towards you, go boldly up to her, and with this sword strike off her head."

"Oh," cried Florian, "I cannot kill a woman."

"She is not a woman at all," said the fairy, "only a vile enchantress who is unworthy to live. Do as I bid you, and all will be well."

As she spoke, the music again sounded, the shining cloud grew gradually dimmer, and, with a soft sigh of harmony, the fairy vanished from Florian's sight. For a few moments he stood as if dazed, listening to the murmurs of the forest, and then he picked up the sword, fastened it to his side by its splendidly-jewelled belt, placed the spikes

and hooks in his pouch, and the jewel in his pocket.

"I wonder if I am invisible," he thought, and stepped boldly forward.

Presently he heard the cooing of a dove in a tree close to him, and, looking round, saw a white one, which, as soon as he had observed it, flew in front of him as if to show him the way.

"The fairy gave me no directions," he said to himself; "I will follow the dove, and perhaps it will lead me to the witch's house."

Deeper and deeper he went into the shade of the forest, and always in front of him he heard the soft note of the dove, until at last he stood before the great, smooth wall behind which the Princess Pearl was imprisoned.

He touched it with his hand, and to his surprise found that it was quite warm. He looked up, and the top seemed to be right up in the clouds. Then he drew his sword, and stuck the point into the wall, which cringed and quivered, while the air around was filled with strange, dull moanings.

Nothing daunted, he fastened the spikes to his shoes, and, grasping the sharp hooks in either hand, he commenced to climb. The witch, who sat in her cottage, heard the hollow groans of the wall, and knew that someone was outside.

"Let them kick," quoth she; "they cannot get in, and a little knocking about will do my wall no harm."

The groans and howlings continued so long, however, that she went out into the garden to find out what was the matter.

"If anybody is trying to get in," she muttered, "I will frighten them."

Then she threw something up in the air, and immediately a violent thunderstorm commenced. The wind roared through the forest, and the rain came down in a perfect deluge. Still the weird moaning went on.

"I never knew my wall behave like this before," said the witch. "I must have a look round."

So she looked carefully at the wall, and in one place she saw what looked like large gashes on the inside of the wall, from which a dark liquid was oozing. They were really the marks made by Florian's spikes, but, as he was invisible, the witch could only see the wounds he made in the wall.

After a while the groans ceased, but that was because Florian had climbed down and was inside the inclosure. The witch sniffed the air. Florian thought he had never seen such a hideous creature, and was not at all sorry that he had to cut off her head.

"Oh, oh," said the witch, "what a peculiar smell. I declare I could almost persuade myself that there was a man in my garden. How I should like one for dinner. Pearl, come here," she called.

Then Pearl came slowly and wearily out of the cottage, and Florian was filled with admiration for her beauty, and longed to tell her that he had come to save her. The witch caught her by the shoulder.

"Do you smell anything, you plague-spot?" she screamed.

"No," replied Pearl, "only the herbs and flowers."

Florian sat down on a bench in the garden, and as soon as the witch turned her back on him, he took the jewel out of his pocket and placed it beside him. In a moment Pearl saw him, and gave a loud cry. He hurriedly replaced it in his pocket.

"What is the matter with you, you little wretch?" cried the witch. "If you startle me again, I'll have your great eyes stewed for my supper."

The witch saw that Pearl was looking with astonishment at the bench on which Florian sat, and she moved towards him, holding out her long, claw-like hands. Florian started up to escape her clutch, and in doing so the jewel fell out of his pocket.

Then the witch, with flaming eyes, rushed upon him, and a dreadful scene ensued, the hag pursuing Florian round the garden, and in and out of the cottage, with frightful cries, while the Princess looked on with mingled horror and admiration. At last, just as the witch was making a wild dash at Florian, he sped past her, and, with a great sweep of his fairy sword, cut off her hideous head.

There was a terrific crash of thunder, and in a moment all was enveloped in thick darkness. Florian felt that his senses were leaving him. He staggered forward a few paces, and then fell unconscious to the ground. When he came to himself he found that he was lying in the midst of a broad, green meadow. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and his head rested in the lap of the most charming maiden he had ever seen—it was Princess Pearl.

"Where is the witch's cottage? How did we come here?" he asked.

"I do not know," replied Pearl. "After you cut off the witch's head, I remember nothing; but I think that we are free."

"I am sure we are," said Florian. "But, beautiful maiden, what are we to do?"

"Alas! I cannot say," answered Pearl. "I know not how far we are from my father's kingdom, and if we were to return there, I fear no one would recognise me after all these years."

"Never mind," said Florian, "I will protect you.

We will return to

my home, and I will give you into my father's care."

While they were talking, the white dove which had guided Florian through the forest came fluttering round, and to Pearl's delight settled on the Prince's shoulder.

"Oh, what a lovely bird," she cried; "I am sure it will bring us good luck."

"Yes," replied Florian, "this bird is a friend of mine. We will follow where it leads us, and be sure we shall not go astray."



"PEARL SAW HIM, AND GAVE A LOUD CRY."



"WITH A GREAT SWEEP OF HIS FAIRY SWORD, HE CUT OFF HER HIDEOUS HEAD."

Then the bird spread its snowy wings and flew in front of them, and they followed its guidance until they came to the outskirts of the forest.

Before them lay a wide plain, dotted with farms, and smiling in the sunshine, while in the distance they saw the smoke of a city.

"Why, that is my father's city," cried Pearl, "and there is the castle on the top of that great hill."

Wonderingly they followed the dove over the plain, and through the gate of the city. Crowds of people thronged the streets, all with sad and weary faces.

Pearl and Florian excited much comment by reason of their radiant youth and beauty, and many persons turned round to look at them.

An old woman stopped them as they went up the hill to the castle.

"Where are you going, my children?" she asked.

"To the castle, good dame," answered Florian, "whither this white dove appears to be leading us."

"Do not go," said the woman; "the dove

may be one of the Queen's evil messengers. She hates youth and beauty, and will most likely throw you into prison, or lay you under some frightful enchantment."

Nevertheless, they went on until they came to the palace gate, where a tall soldier stopped them.

"Who are you?" he asked, "and what do you want?"

"We desire to see the Queen," answered Florian.

"Pass on," said the soldier, laughing. "You are the first to make such a request since I came here."

They passed into the courtyard—the dove leading the way. Up magnificent flights of stairs, through marble corridors and gleaming courts they went, until they came to the great chamber where the Queen held her Court.

Ladies and gentlemen in silks and satins, with dark, evil faces, leered at them and whispered, but no one stopped them, and at length they stood before the throne.

There sat Queen Grizzle, dressed in robes of state, blazing with jewels, and holding in her hand a golden sceptre. She was a tall, dark woman, with black, frowning brows, and as Florian led Pearl up to the throne, she looked at him with a terrible glance.

"What are these?" she asked, in a deep voice.

No one answered.

"I am Florian, youngest son of the King of Cosmogon," said the Prince, "and I demand protection for this young lady."

"Demand protection!" echoed the Queen. "Aye, we will protect you. What, ho, my guards! Away with these malaperts. Lock them up in the highest towers of the castle, and to-morrow we will have their heads off."

Princess Pearl, hearing these dreadful words, threw herself on her knees before the Queen.

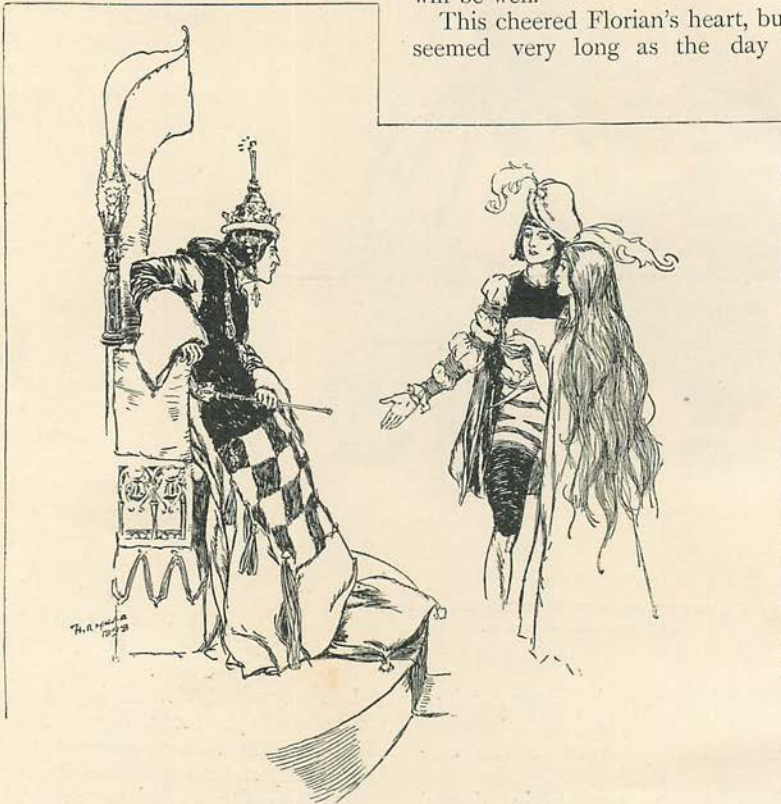
"Oh, please, please, do not cut off Florian's head," she cried. "I am Princess Pearl, King Greybeard's daughter, and he has

rescued me from the dreadful witch of the forest. Kill me if you like, but do not harm him."

"Princess Pearl!" shrieked the Queen.

While his head was bowed in despair a sunbeam glanced into the gloomy chamber, and with it came the same tremulous music that had sounded in the forest; while a soft voice seemed to murmur, "Be brave; all will be well."

This cheered Florian's heart, but the hours seemed very long as the day wore into



"I DEMAND PROTECTION FOR THIS YOUNG LADY."

"Oh, you little viper. I wish you had two heads apiece, and then I could chop them all off. Away with them. Build up the scaffold at once, and see that they don't get a chance of speaking to one another."

At these words the guards seized Florian and Pearl, and, binding them with ropes, led them away in different directions.

"Oh," thought Florian, "is it possible that the fairy deceived me?" The guards hurried him up a long flight of stairs that went round and round, and flung him into a little room at the top of a high tower.

He sat down on a stool, and felt very miserable as he thought of Princess Pearl.

"Why did we follow the dove?" he murmured. "I ought to have known better than to take her into the midst of such danger."

twilight, and no one came near him. When night fell he said his prayers, and sank into an uneasy slumber, from which he was awakened by hearing the key turn in the rusty lock on the door of the prison.

It was early morning. The rough soldiers bade him get up and follow them. He felt sore and weary. The ropes with which he was bound seemed to cut into his flesh, but he kept up a brave heart.

They led him into the great courtyard of the castle, and there a scene met his eyes that was enough to make the boldest tremble. All the balconies and windows round the courtyard were crowded with courtiers and servants, who hooted when Florian appeared. A high scaffold was erected in the centre, and round it were drawn up troops of soldiers, who stood quite still, and looked

very fierce. Queen Grizzle sat in a special balcony, where she could see everything and give her orders.

As Florian crossed the courtyard from one side, Pearl was brought in from the other, and at the foot of the scaffold they met.

"Unfasten their bonds," shouted the Queen, and in another moment Pearl and Florian were clasped in each other's arms.

A maid-of-honour behind the Queen burst into tears.

"What is all that noise?" asked Grizzle.

"They are so young, your Majesty," wept the lady.

"Take her away," said the Queen, "and when those two youngsters are dispatched, off with her head as well." And the poor maid-of-honour was carried fainting away.

Meanwhile the Prince and Princess had gone, hand-in-hand, up the steps of the scaffold.

"Do not be afraid, little Pearl," whispered Florian. "It will soon be over, and then we shall go away to a land where no one can part us."

"No, I am not afraid," replied Pearl; "but I know they will hurt you."

Then the guards seized Florian, and forced him on his knees, and a tall man, dressed in black, drew out a long, shining sword. Pearl shuddered, and shut her eyes.

Suddenly a wonderful thing happened. The air was filled with the sound of

voices singing triumphantly. Rosy clouds floated into the courtyard. The executioner's hand was stayed as if by magic, and a cascade of flowers fell all over the scaffold. Queen Grizzle stood up, pale and dreadful, but her voice was frozen in her throat, for Fairy Echo, tall and splendid now, stood before her.

"Oh, cruel and wicked Queen," she cried, "you who have abused your power and been a scourge to the land, take now the reward of your evil deeds. Your kingdom is taken from you, and you, deprived of your reason, must wander over the earth until your heart becomes soft and mild. As for this brave youth, whose life you would so lightly have taken, he has shown himself well worthy of the hand of the rightful heir to this throne, and I here proclaim Prince Florian and Princess Pearl King and Queen of Bombaloo."

Here she waved her wand, and Queen Grizzle, with wild looks, came down from the balcony, and walked across the courtyard and out of the castle; and she has never been heard of from that day to this.

Most of the Court followed her example, when they found the turn matters were taking, and there were great rejoicings all over the country. The maid-of-honour who wept became Queen Pearl's favourite lady, which shows that kind thoughts are never wasted. Florian made a very good King, and, as Fairy Echo kept an eye on things, no one had much cause to grumble.



"A TALL MAN, DRESSED IN BLACK, DREW OUT A LONG, SHINING SWORD."