

The Swineherd

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There was once a poor Prince who had a kingdom. It was a very small kingdom, but still large enough for him to marry on—and marry he wished to do.

It was perhaps a bit bold of him to ask the Emperor's daughter, "Will you have me?" But he did it anyway, because his name was known far and wide, and there were at least a hundred princesses who would have gladly said, "Yes!" and "Thank you very much!" But we shall see what this particular princess had to say.

Listen closely.

Now, where the Prince's father was buried, there grew a rose tree—the most beautiful rose tree imaginable. It blossomed only once every five years, and even then it bore just a single flower. But oh, what a rose it was! Its scent was so sweet that anyone who inhaled it forgot all their cares and sorrows.

The Prince also had a nightingale, who could sing as though all the beautiful melodies in the world lived in her tiny throat. He decided to give both treasures to the Princess—the rose and the nightingale—so he had them placed in large silver caskets and sent to her.

When the gifts arrived, the Emperor had them brought into a grand hall where the Princess was playing "Visiting" with her ladies-in-waiting. The moment she saw the caskets, she clapped her hands with joy.

"Oh, I hope it's a little kitten!" she cried.

But when they opened the first casket, the beautiful rose tree was revealed.

"Oh, how lovely it is!" all the ladies exclaimed.

"It is more than lovely," said the Emperor. "It's absolutely charming!"

But the Princess reached out, touched the rose, and her face fell. She looked ready to cry.

"Ugh, Papa!" she said. "It's not even made of anything—it's real!"

"Let's see what's in the other casket before we get upset," said the Emperor. So they opened it, and the nightingale flew out and sang so beautifully that for a moment, no one could say anything bad about her.

"Superb! Charming!" the ladies exclaimed—for they all tried to speak French, each one worse at it than the next.

"This bird reminds me so much of the music box that belonged to our late Empress," said an old knight. "Yes, indeed! The same tone, the same style!"

"Yes, yes," said the Emperor, and he wept like a child at the memory.

"I do hope it's not a real bird," said the Princess.

"But it is a real bird," said the messengers who had brought it.

"Fine, then let it fly away," said the Princess, and she flatly refused to see the Prince.

But the Prince refused to give up. He smeared his face with brown and black paint, pulled his cap down over his ears, and knocked on the palace door.

"Good day to you, Emperor," he said. "Do you have any work for me at the palace?"

"Well, yes, actually," said the Emperor. "I need someone to look after the pigs—we have a great many of them."

And so the Prince was hired as the Imperial Swineherd. They gave him a tiny, dirty room next to the pigsty, and there he sat all day, working. By evening, he had made a lovely little cooking pot. It had tiny bells hanging all around it, and when the pot boiled, the bells played the old melody:

"Ach! du lieber Augustin,

"Alles ist weg, weg, weg!"

But even more remarkable—if you held your finger in the steam from the pot, you could immediately smell every dish being cooked in every fireplace across the entire city. Now that, you must admit, was something far more interesting than a simple rose.

One day, the Princess happened to walk by. When she heard the melody, she stopped and listened, delighted—for it was the only tune she knew how to play on the piano, and she played it with just one finger.

"Well, that's my song!" said the Princess. "That swineherd must be quite educated! Go in and ask him how much he wants for that instrument."

So one of her ladies-in-waiting had to go inside—though she put on her wooden clogs first.

"How much for the cooking pot?" asked the lady.

"Ten kisses from the Princess," said the swineherd.

"I beg your pardon?" said the lady.

"I won't take less," replied the swineherd.

"The nerve!" said the Princess, and she walked away. But she hadn't gone far when the bells tinkled again:

"Ach! du lieber Augustin,"

"Alles ist weg, weg, weg!"

"Wait," said the Princess. "Ask him if he'll accept ten kisses from my ladies-in-waiting."

"No, thank you," said the swineherd. "Ten kisses from the Princess, or I keep the pot."

"How annoying!" said the Princess. "Fine. But all of you stand around me so nobody sees."

So the ladies gathered in a circle and spread their skirts wide. The swineherd collected his ten kisses, and the Princess got her pot.

Oh, what fun they had! The pot boiled all evening and all the next day. They knew exactly what was cooking on every stove in the city—from the Chamberlain's house to the cobbler's shop. The ladies danced and clapped.

"We know who's having soup tonight, and who's having pancakes! Who's having cutlets, and who's having eggs! How fascinating!"

"Yes, but keep it a secret—I am, after all, an Emperor's daughter."

The swineherd—who was really the Prince, though no one knew it—kept busy every day. Eventually, he created a rattle that, when spun around, played all the waltzes and folk dances ever invented since the beginning of time.

"Oh, that's superb!" said the Princess when she passed by. "I've never heard such lovely music! Go in and ask him what he wants for it—but no more kisses this time!"

"He wants a hundred kisses from the Princess," reported the lady who had gone to ask.

"Is he out of his mind?" said the Princess, and she walked away. But after a few steps, she stopped. "One must support the arts," she said. "I am the Emperor's daughter, after all. Tell him he can have ten kisses from me, like last time, and the rest from my ladies."

"Oh, but we'd really rather not," said the ladies.

"What are you muttering about?" snapped the Princess. "If I can kiss him, surely you can. Remember, you owe everything to me." So the ladies had no choice but to go along.

"A hundred kisses from the Princess," said the swineherd firmly, "or we each keep what we have."

"Form a circle!" ordered the Princess. And the ladies gathered around while the kissing began.

Now, the Emperor happened to step out onto his balcony just then. "What in the world is that crowd doing by the pigsty?" He rubbed his eyes and put on his spectacles. "Those are my ladies-in-waiting! I must go down and see what they're up to." He pulled up the heels of his slippers—he had stepped on them—and hurried down.

He crept softly into the courtyard. The ladies were so focused on counting the kisses fairly that they didn't notice him. The Emperor stood on his tiptoes and peered over their shoulders.

"And just what is going on here?" he demanded, just as the swineherd was receiving the eighty-sixth kiss. He grabbed his slipper and smacked the Princess on the head with it.

"Out! Both of you!" roared the Emperor, furious. And he banished them from the city.

There stood the Princess, crying. The rain poured down, and the swineherd scolded her.

"Oh, what a miserable creature I am!" wept the Princess. "If only I had married that handsome young Prince! How unfortunate can I be?"

The swineherd stepped behind a tree, washed the paint from his face, threw off his ragged clothes, and emerged in his princely robes. He looked so noble that the Princess couldn't help but bow before him.

"I have come to tell you that I despise you," he said. "You wouldn't have an honorable Prince. You couldn't appreciate the rose or the nightingale. But you were perfectly willing to kiss a swineherd for a silly plaything. You've gotten exactly what you deserve."

With that, he returned to his own little kingdom and shut the door in her face. And now she could truly sing:

"Ach! du lieber Augustin,"

"Alles ist weg, weg, weg!"