

Paloma The Strange Princess

Once upon a time, in a country just as beautiful as the one where you live, there was a king who had a wife and a little daughter. I am not sure whether it was really **true**, but the inhabitants of that country thought that their King was the most intelligent, their bread and wine the most delicious, their springs the coldest, their sun the warmest, their sky the bluest and their land the richest in greenery. That country was called The Greenest.

The Greenest was small, but it had an illustrious past. The King craved for a son, an heir to the throne who would reign and look after his country in succession to his father. They tried every possible method to achieve this: they ate a magic apple, prayed in holy places, invited the most famous fortunetellers, but all in vain — the Queen could not have a baby. She didn't worry about it though, as she had lots of other things to think about or to occupy herself with: she browsed through the fashion magazines, gave directions to cloth merchants and seamstresses and ordered the cooks to make special meals. She had a massage twice a day, weighed herself on the scales three times a day and changed her dress four times a day. Her seamstress, her cook, her masseuse and several maids accompanied her everywhere as they didn't know beforehand what the Queen would like and when. Even if they left her, she would call them back in five minutes, so they preferred staying with her to interminably racing back and forth.

The King, it is true, was longing for a son, but he was very fond of his wife too. He couldn't bring himself to divorce her and marry again; so he was gradually coming to terms with his fate and tried not to think about his problem.

The King was a real King and the Queen a real Queen. He was imposing and magnificent, and she was beautiful and graceful, but the little princess was not pretty at all. Moreover, she was, well, not quite ugly but... in a nutshell she was just an ordinary child. The palace historian, whose father and grandfather had been historians too, repeated over and over again that such an ordinary child had never ever before been born in the palace. "The princesses of The Greenest have always been beautiful and full of pride," he used to say, carrying a thick handwritten book to confirm what he said. "Such a child may be found in every family in our town," he often whispered to the noblemen, shaking his head regretfully.

The behaviour of the little princess was considered weird because she didn't like playing with toys adorned with jewels or observing the spick-and-span guests. She never rejected her food and never demanded the preparation of another dish. She never cried without reason, asking for something or someone in particular. When she was a baby she used to play in the sand with a small spade, or water flowers and play with puppies. Ultimately she would return home filthy, and when her parents saw her, they would utter: "Oh God, who does this child take after!" Oh, by the way, the princess had a rather strange name too. When she was born and they asked the Queen "Your Majesty, what would you like to call the child?" she thought for a while and then suddenly remembered the new perfume that she had got from abroad and so called the girl by its name, the name that nobody else in the country had — Paloma.

Time passed. Everyone had their own problems. The Queen's duties kept increasing. She paid daily visits to the noble families, and sometimes she went to the parties held in the neighbouring kingdoms. She always looked ravishing and drew everyone's admiration. Even when she was at home she didn't have time for her daughter; she read in her magazines how to look after her skin so that she wouldn't develop wrinkles and she also read what colour and style of clothes were coming into fashion. Her seamstresses worked all day long as it wouldn't become the Queen to wear the same dress more than once. So every second of her life was occupied.

The King had his business too. The Greenest had a large neighbouring country that had won the war which had occurred between them long ago. Since then The Greenest had loaded carriages and carts with various foodstuffs and valuables and sent them to the victorious King. This was repeated every year, and although the King of the Greenest — Demetrius — called this a gift, it actually had a very sad name: "tribute". Paloma's great granddad had ceased paying the tribute to that country, because he had had a strong army and wasn't afraid of anything. His portraits were in almost every room in the palace. The king admired him and swore **by** his name.

Like any other princess, Paloma had a nanny, who was very kind and caring. She went for walks with Paloma, fed her, put her to bed, told her fairy-tales and about everything that happened beyond the palace garden. As the cooks had to prepare special dishes for the Queen the whole day, nanny cooked for the child. One day, when she was carrying Paloma's meal on a tray to her bedroom, she quite by chance collided with the Queen in one of the turnings of the hall

and spilt the soup on her dress; and of course the dress was new. The Queen was furious and she screamed that she didn't want to see that woman in the palace again. One of the maids accompanying the Queen reminded her humbly that the woman was Paloma's nanny, but the queen frowned and repeated that the woman should leave the palace.

So Paloma was left without a nanny. Although the servants cleaned for her, bathed her and washed her clothes, she was still alone and often cried. After the nanny the old gardener was the person who cared about Paloma's fate the most. The princess spent most of the day with him. She watered the flowers, looked after them, and dug out the weeds. The gardener even joked with her that she would soon take that business from him and leave him unemployed. Paloma knew the names of every plant in the garden and how to look after them. Every morning she made beautiful bouquets from roses and wild flowers and put them in a vase in her mother's room. The flowers had an amazing scent and the colours were chosen in such a way that they would surprise anyone who saw them, but the Queen took it for granted and never ever praised her daughter or thanked her.

Yet Paloma loved her mother very much. She constantly saw her in her dreams. They walked and talked together, and her mother held her in her arms and kissed her. Her mother was smiling at her, only at her, and was thinking about nothing else. The saddest thing was that Paloma's dreams never came true. If by accident her mother passed by her and noticed her, she would exclaim "My God, why do you stick to that dress!" and before the daughter could answer, she was already going towards the door, accompanied by her **entourage**, to where the harnessed carriage awaited her.

Time passed. The King was becoming more and more used to the idea of never having a son and of not being able to solve a lot of problems. More and more often he used to sigh and look at the portrait of the great King.

The princess studied a lot, read a lot, painted and played the piano beautifully. All her teachers were content with her. They came to see Paloma in the palace every day and once a month they would talk to the King about Paloma's progress. At such times the King was checking the palace accounts or was working on a map of the country, so he didn't listen to the teachers very attentively. He just smiled and nodded his head as a sign of approval and half an hour later he couldn't remember a word they had told him. He didn't do this because he didn't love his daughter, he was just too busy.

Meanwhile Paloma was growing up. You wouldn't say she wasn't pretty, but her behaviour never resembled that of other princesses. She never appeared at the parties given in the palace. The people didn't know her, as at celebrations she was always standing somewhere in the background where nobody could see her. Whenever the Queen was asked about her daughter she would say one or two meaningless general phrases and then would change the topic of conversation.

The historian wrote: "God must be angry with our kingdom. The only princess and such a weird one! Sometimes she greets and talks to the servants so amicably... Well, well, this is certainly the wrath of God". Once he left the book near the grand piano open at this very page. It happened that the old man carried the book and a pen with him all the time, so whenever he thought of something he would open it and continue writing. He had to record everything: what was standing where, whose picture was on which wall, the description of the palace, so that the following generations would know **every detail**. His father had done the same job, his grandfather had done it, and, if I'm not mistaken, his great grandfather too. So he left the book in the very room where Paloma went every day. When she finished playing the grand piano and stood up, she saw the open book. "Maybe I left it here," she thought, and went to it. She caught a glimpse of the beautifully written lines. She read just one paragraph and sat down. No, she wasn't hurt, on the contrary, she felt guilty **because** she wasn't up to their expectations. Suddenly she wanted to go somewhere far away, but Paloma was very **considerate** and didn't want to hurt her parents' feelings. So she ran to the kitchen, took some food and went to the top floor of the palace. Then she went up the little winding staircase that led to the attic. Here Paloma used to play when she was a child. When the servants decided that the princess didn't need some old dolls, they took them to the attic and put them in a big chest in the corner. But Paloma often used to visit her dolls and had a good time playing with them until someone remembered her and started calling her.

From the attic window there was a wonderful view of the courtyard, the garden, and a bit further off the streets of the town and the houses. That night Paloma stayed in the attic. She spent the next day and night there too. In the courtyard the servants were pottering about as usual. They were bringing in food **on** carts and were emptying them right at the kitchen door. An ornate royal carriage passed through the gate and then returned. The gardener was dotting over the flowers. In short, everything was **the same** as usual. At the time the princess was on holiday, so her teachers didn't come.

Paloma's absence wasn't noticed by the servants either: for quite a long time now she hadn't admitted them to her room. She didn't like it when someone else tidied her things.

She waited for three days like that. Then she thought that her presence wasn't of any importance and on the fourth day she donned an ordinary dress that she'd found in an old trunk, put a hat on, went into the yard unnoticed, passed from the yard to the garden, from the garden to the road, and then set off along that road.

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I no longer know how many days passed after that. Everything was as usual in the palace. The Queen must have run out of things to do because she started redecorating the rooms. She made her servant hang up garlands made of bows and artificial flowers everywhere. As always, she overdid it. Her servants accompanied her with a ladder and nodded their heads obediently. She "adorned" everything with multi-coloured bows and little bells, even the portraits of great predecessors, painted upon their horses with lances or swords and shields. And from time to time she peeped into the magazines to make sure she did everything according to the rules.

Meanwhile the holidays came to an end and the teachers came to Paloma, but the servants couldn't find her in her room and started looking for her. First they looked in the palace, then in the courtyard and the garden. They went up to the attic as well, but they couldn't find the princess anywhere. When their last hope died they went to the Queen and asked her: "**Ma'am**, we're looking for your daughter, do you know where she is?" The Queen was very much surprised: "How should I know?" she said, "She might be pottering in the garden or reading a book somewhere by the hedge."

The servants went on looking for the princess and the Queen put aside her magazine and went into the bedroom to tidy her hairdo. While she was fixing her hair she suddenly saw the reflection of withered flowers in a vase in the mirror and froze. She suddenly remembered that for years a new bouquet of flowers had awaited her there every day and that her daughter had picked those flowers for her. She guessed that Paloma would be neither in the garden, nor anywhere else in the neighbourhood, as she had told the servants, and she hurried to see the King. She didn't even know what to think. She was just very, very angry that they caused her so much trouble.

The King was astonished. He dropped all his accounts and called his subjects. Everyone started looking for Paloma, calling her name. The King himself raced from room to room in despair. Once he noticed the multi-coloured laces fixed to the frame of his adorned ancestor's portrait. He stood there for a while, shook his head regretfully and then went on looking for his daughter.

Soon the whole town was in uproar, then the whole kingdom, but the princess seemed to have vanished into thin air. Nobody could find her.

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Her daughter's disappearance altered the Queen very much. She went back and forth between the rooms aimlessly. Although she was as beautiful as before, her eyes became very sad. She went and looked at the door of her daughter's room with apprehension. Finally she gathered up all her courage and opened it. My God, she couldn't even remember when she had last been there. Everything was so strange: a simply furnished room, a lot of books, dolls, Paloma's drawings when she was a child. Here, in a drawing, a lady and a child were walking hand in hand, holding flowers. In another drawing a lady and a child were sleeping in bed together. "Oh, God, **I** am probably that lady, **I should have been** that lady," she thought and tears welled in her eyes. She ran out of the room crying: "She'll never forgive me, she'll never come back." On thinking this her heart sank. When she remembered what she had been doing and occupying herself with all that time she hated herself.

Suddenly, as if she had found the solution, she rushed through all the halls of the palace like a madwoman, tore down all the colourful decorations from the walls, gathered them in the yard, added all her fashion magazines to **the** pile and made a huge bonfire. Then she put on a very simple dress and handed all her clothes to her maid-servants to give them to poor people. So everyone got a couple of posh dresses and the wives of craftsmen and peasants marched through the streets of the town dressed so beautifully that all the noblemen's wives went green with envy.

But the palace was very quiet. The servants tried to move without making a noise and to whisper. The royal carriage that used to race back and forth was now forgotten by everyone and stood useless somewhere. Lazy horses dozed through the whole day. The King forgot his study for quite a long time. He tried to be at his wife's side most of the time. He was fond of her and feared that something bad could happen to her as a consequence of her sorrow.

The country either lagged behind a little bit in development or maybe it was a little bit old-fashioned. There were no photographers, so if you wanted someone's portrait an artist had to paint it. The King and the Queen wanted at least to have their daughter's portrait, so they invited the most famous painter in The Greenest. They wanted to explain to him what kind of nose, eyes, and lips Paloma had. They tried hard, but could remember nothing much about their daughter. Then they called the gardener and all the servants who often saw the princess. The poor painter was confused. "You all describe her in a different way," he said. "I suppose the princess is beautiful so I'll try. Something might come out of it."

I cannot help telling you beforehand that years later this very painter and many others too will paint real portraits of Paloma. Time will pass and they will hang those pictures up on the walls of the palace. They will look at them and say: "The most intelligent, the kindest and the most beautiful princess." But so far the Queen has been crying all the time. She walks deep in thought or sits in the garden and sometimes she mutters "Oh God, oh God..."

One day God was bothered. "These ladies and gentlemen call my name too often," he said. "I wonder what they want from me?" he said to an angel standing on his right. The angel answered that those people had been craving an heir to the throne and had been asking God for a son. So God nodded his head and decided to make their wish come true.

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The town where Paloma found herself didn't resemble her hometown at all. She had come to this country quite by chance. As she was passing through the familiar countryside a coach passed by which took the girl to the seaside. And there a small boat was about to sail from the harbour. So there she was on that boat, for the first time, among complete strangers. Nobody paid attention to the princess, but she observed everything as if she had been born the previous day. This evident surprise and **her** curious eyes made her conspicuous, but no one had time for her. Even if someone caught a glimpse of a strangely dressed girl they probably thought she was a foreigner from a remote country. The passengers potted about and talked about trade, new **laws** and their town of destination. Paloma guessed that it wouldn't be as small and cosy as her hometown. She turned out to be right. Seven days later the boat sailed into a harbour. Although it was still dawn when she disembarked from the boat she felt that a completely different world was awaiting her. Carriages were racing **along** the streets. When the sun shone the town was already wide awake. Numerous small kiosks and inns were open in the central street. You could buy anything here — from flowers to jewels. Paloma went everywhere and observed everything. She felt unusual, as if she had suddenly entered the world of her books. In the end her ears buzzed, she felt giddy, she couldn't see anything and she turned away from that noisy place.

There were a lot of houses in the narrow paved street, some of them big and beautiful, some small and pretty, some decrepit. Here, next to a rich house there could be a poor hut. This surprised Paloma very much, as in her town the rich lived separately, quite far from the poor. In the end, when she got very tired (she wasn't used to walking so much), she stopped at one house. It was a beautiful two-storey building surrounded by a garden. The house looked well-kept but the garden was something awful. Weeds had covered everything. Here and there one could notice forlorn bushes of roses and dahlias. The trees and fence were covered in thorns. Paloma didn't think twice. She opened the gate, went along the path leading to the house and knocked at the door. After a while a **fine-looking woman** opened the door and smiled at her: —You can come in, but the doctor's not at home. Paloma was a little confused.

— I haven't come to see the doctor — she said and decided to go back, but then changed her mind — I think you need a gardener.

— No — said the lady uneasily — Well, maybe we do, but we aren't rich...

— You've misunderstood me, I don't need any money. But I have nowhere to live in this town and if you let me live with you I'll do my best to turn your garden into a real one.

— Are you a gardener? — the lady couldn't hide her surprise.

— Yes, **well**, almost. I'm the daughter of a gardener and over the years I have learnt a lot from my father. Well, what do you say?

— Well, yes, of course! It's a miracle. God must have sent you to us — and the lady led Paloma into the house.

A doctor lived in this house with his family. This lady was his wife. She had a plump pink face and you could tell at first sight that she was very kind. The doctor was of the type that probably every doctor should be. He spent all his time at the hospital and as he had been appointed the head of it, he was the busiest person there. The small building had five rooms — four for patients and one for the doctor. The town was large but people seldom went to the hospital, so the rooms were enough. The doctor pored over his old medical books all the time or went to people's homes to treat them, and every evening he returned home exhausted. He spent most of his time with poor people. Those who didn't have money to buy medicine never called the doctor, so whenever he learnt that someone was ill he ran there with a bag full of medicines. On entering he would reproach them for not calling him. That is why everyone loved and respected him. Although the rich often complained that it was unfair and shameful that they and the poor had the same doctor, they had to get accustomed to this, as not even in the neighbouring cities was there such a knowledgeable **physician**.

This town differed from others in many other ways too. Here there was a theatre, a circus, and a big amusement park with a photographer and fountains. Here books were published, newspapers were printed and fancy-dress balls were arranged. Here people came to trade from all over the world. Whoever intended to travel wanted to see this town. That's why it always had a lot of guests and the hotel was always full.

On the day of Paloma's arrival the doctor returned home a bit earlier. Hardly had he entered the house than his wife informed him happily that they had a gardener who would live with them and look after the garden without any payment. With these words she went to fetch Paloma and reappeared with her before the doctor could realize what she had told him. The doctor looked dumbfounded and then he declared that he couldn't understand **any of it**. Paloma told him that she was the daughter of a gardener, that she had read a lot of books on travelling and had wanted to see a little bit with her own eyes and to work. The princess had made up this story quite well but the doctor was a clever man. He looked at the girl carefully. I don't know what he thought, but he didn't say anything, then he laughed and said, "I thought I was the only one who worked for free".

So they gave Paloma a room on the ground floor, told her that she would have meals with them and gave her the gardening tools. The doctor observed her as if asking himself how this girl could have come to this town and specifically to their house. Before going to bed he told his wife "How can she be a gardener? Look at her hands! They are so fragile and well-groomed."

The couple became more and more convinced that the girl couldn't be a gardener. She behaved and talked in such a manner that she must have had a very good education. But it was too late to turn her away. Paloma started work the very next morning. It turned out to be very difficult to put things right in the garden. No one had done anything there for a long time. The princess started rooting out the thorny bushes, trying to remember what the old gardener used to do in such situations. But the Royal garden had always been well-kept, so she couldn't remember such a case. By the end of the day her hands were bleeding. As soon as the doctor saw her he made her sit on a chair, and started putting some ointment on her wounds, looking into her eyes. "Everyone should do his job," he said. "Playing a piano would probably be more suitable for you." Paloma tried to reassure him. "No, the thing is that my brothers have been helping my father recently, so my hands have got out of the habit of working."

The next day she carried on working again. It was very hard, but she was determined not to give in. While she was pulling out the thorny bushes she tried to think of something very nice. The doctor put ointment on her hands the next day too, and the next day. He was getting worried about Paloma. Once he didn't go out, but stayed and helped her. In this way the first and most difficult week of the princess's gardening career passed.

The hostess turned out to be a cheerful woman. When Paloma finished her work she would sit next to her and tell her thousands of funny and interesting stories from their town's life. She made her laugh and patted her on the head. Her three plump children played around them — two boys and a girl. They would give their gardener a sweet, or some fruit or a book, so that she could read to them. Paloma was happy: she felt that everyone loved her here and everyone was interested in talking to her. The doctor asked her all the time if she was cold, if she had a pain... He had guessed that the story of Paloma's being a gardener was made up and feared that she could become ill from working so hard. After a while our clever doctor developed some suspicions though, as Paloma did so well that it was evident she knew a lot about gardening. When she had cleaned the garden of thorns and weeds and her hands had healed she clipped the old bushes, planted new ones, and made a winding path with pebbles between **them**. In several places she put benches, and she painted the fence. In a few weeks the newly planted flowers blossomed and the old bushes grew. Nobody had believed that the gloomy garden could turn into such a marvel. Passers-by couldn't help peeping into the garden and saying in surprise that it was a miracle. Now it was summer and the children spent all day in the garden. They watered the flowers with their small watering-cans and were happy to help Paloma. The couple also sat on the bench whenever they had some spare time.

— It is a miracle — the woman used to say — I couldn't appreciate it at first, but now I see that she's very beautiful. I like her more and more. What will become of us if she gets bored and wants to leave? We love her so much that we won't manage without her—neither the children nor I.

The doctor smiled sadly.

— I don't think she will stay here all her life. She has such subtlety, such grandeur in her appearance that I think she could be of noble origin, the daughter of a count or a marquis. So sooner or later she will have to return home. You will have to come to terms with this idea. But how could she learn to garden? I cannot understand it.

So the days passed. Paloma didn't have much work any more. She had time for books, for walking with the children and sightseeing in the town. But in the mornings she was always in the garden. Once she noticed a withered branch on a tree near the fence. She stood on the tips of her toes and tried to reach the branch, but in vain. Suddenly someone from the street held the branch, bowed it down towards Paloma and peeped inquisitively over the fence.

— Is this the doctor's house? — he asked. Paloma nodded her head. The stranger opened the gate and went into the garden, then he smiled at Paloma as if he had known her for a long time. It was a very well-dressed handsome... "prince," — Paloma thought. "He is just like a prince... in a fairy tale." Then she tried to remember if she had seen any princes at her palace and if so what they had looked like.

The guest went into the house, and after a while came back accompanied by the doctor who saw him to the gate. When saying goodbye the host bowed, turned round with satisfaction and asked Paloma:

— Did you like him?

- Well I don't mind him. He's a little bit too posh. He must like himself too much — said the gardener.
- It's true, my dear, but what can he do? He's a prince, the only son of the King of Valunia. Have you heard about it? It's the big country to our east.

Although Paloma knew quite well which country it was, she shook her head, shrugged her shoulders and went on looking after the flowers.

Well, to tell you the truth the princess didn't know much, but I do and now I'm going to tell you everything.

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Valunia bordered The Greenest. This was the country to whose King Paloma's father sent yearly tributes, or, as he called them, "the gift". Although it had vast lands, the soil was barren, dry, and full of stones. For example, you could plant something like cucumbers or tomatoes and then wait **in vain** for the harvest. Even if you found good soil, the sun wouldn't shine for months, so your cucumbers and tomatoes would freeze to death. Of course there were a lot of good things too in this country, but the people still envied their neighbours. Legends were afloat about The Greenest, what mountains, what waterfalls, what meadows, what sunshine... you could grow whatever you wished. They talked about what King Demetrius had sent to their King as a "gift" for the whole year. Otherwise they were not bad people, they worked as best they could.

The Kings of Valunia had kept an eye on The Greenest for centuries. They had tried to snatch this country by force or slyness and as they had a bigger army they had often defeated The Greenest. As you know, the last **victor** a long time ago had been Valunia, so it legalized the “tribute.” The current King of Valunia — Shpuntikos — was an obese man fond of eating and drinking. His wonderful palace was full of countless riches and innumerable servants. His wife had died prematurely and he was left with his only son — Andrios. As a rule all princes are brought up in luxury and idleness, but as he didn’t have a mother Andrios was twice as spoilt as other princes: everyone danced to his tune and fulfilled his every stupid whim. When he grew up he was taken to the famous school for noblemen and when he finished that school he was already an adult used to the fact that at his every appearance in public people would whisper how handsome he was, how beautifully he danced and how well he rode his horse. He was fond of pretty girls, hunting and having fun. In short he was a very restless person. Shpuntikos liked his son very much, praising him and repeatedly telling him from his childhood on: “Don’t forget that you’re a prince and that you’re going to be the King after me.”

Once, when he finally got hold of him at home, he sat his son in an armchair by the fireplace, sat down near him and decided to talk to him seriously.

— My son — he began, putting his hands on his belly. Being a king is of course nice, but if people think that a king can do anything it’s not true. Sometimes a simple peasant is happier and freer than we are. He is never worried about what his sons and grandsons are going to think about him. But I’m always worried about what people will say when they look at my portrait after I’m dead, whether I was a “fat fool” or a “clever good-looking man”—the king smiled — it would be better if I told the truth. I didn’t **choose** the Queen, your mother, to be my bride. She was a beautiful woman, but at first I didn’t love her. Both of us behaved as our parents had decided when we were still children. What I want to say is that you’re a prince and you have to get married soon. I have been thinking for a long time about what would be best for our country and I think I have taken the right decision.

You have surely heard about The Greenest. Your great-granddad dreamt of that country. We have fought a lot but what have we got? That tribute is nothing compared to what they could give us. So now is the perfect time. King Demetrius doesn’t have a son — an heir to the throne. You will marry his only daughter and that will be that. He cannot refuse me. Moreover, when we become one family I will not take that tribute from him anymore. What else do they want? While he’s alive he can reign happily over them, later you will become their King too, so our dream will come true. They say his daughter is ugly and a little stupid, P... P... P... I’ve forgotten her name, but I know that you won’t be deprived of anything. We can lock her up in this palace and let her do whatever she wants here.

Of course the prince didn’t like this, but he had known from childhood that he was going to become a king and that he should behave according to the needs of his country. So he agreed with his father, and as that “P” was too young to get married so far, he almost forgot the matter. He began travelling, went everywhere, all over the world. He stayed at home about two months a year, he amused himself as he well as he could and had a nice time.

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Everyone **had** heard about the doctor’s garden. It was even written about in the local newspaper. The garden was becoming more and more beautiful. The scent of the flowers spread over the whole street. The doctor's day was hectic from morning till night, but he couldn’t help noticing that their life had changed completely, as if the flowers’ beauty had passed over into everything else. The children became more intelligent and sensitive, and his wife happier and warmer. He also noticed that whenever Paloma passed the rose bushes with her hand on them the flowers straightened up, raising their heads and following her hand.

— You have an amazing talent, you revive everything. You should be a doctor. Someone who looks after plants so well can cure sick people too. If I need help I will certainly call you — the doctor told her.

Paloma agreed happily.

Then the winter came. The snow covered everything. There was nothing to be done in the garden so the gardener accompanied the doctor to the hospital and then they went to the patients’ homes. Paloma could see that the doctor treated the rich and poor patients equally. The poor got ill more often, as they were cold, lacking in food or doing very

hard physical labour. Paloma couldn't imagine how she could have sat in her palace for so long and not seen or heard all this.

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I've completely forgotten to tell you what was happening in The Greenest meanwhile. The Queen had had a tiny baby son. Like many other new-born children he had blue eyes and fair hair. Of course, everyone was happy but they didn't have a great celebration. The people just hung out multi-coloured flags from the windows. In the palace, as if nothing had happened, they didn't have a feast or invite guests, though the Queen decided not to cry anymore as the King warned her that the baby would be in bad mood all the time and grow up to be a cry-baby. How could a King be a cry-baby? The King and the Queen never talked about their daughter but they thought about her all the time. Neither of them could understand why Paloma's disappearance had been necessary for them to have the second child. The Queen decided to bring her child up herself. Of course she didn't wash the baby's nappies as your mother did, but she fed the baby, walked with him and slept by his side at night.

As for the historian, he felt that he was also to blame for the princess's disappearance and he broke down completely. He tore out the pages where he had written about Paloma less than favourably. He didn't march smartly everywhere with his book anymore and **he** spent most of his time in the palace library.

The painter finished Paloma's portrait and they hung it up in the Queen's room. The picture really resembled the princess and everyone was amazed at how beautiful their little lady had been and wondered why they hadn't noticed it before.

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The winter was cold. During the day the children played snowballs in the garden or went tobogganing in the street in front of their house. They all passed the evenings by the fire. One day Paloma stayed with the children from the morning **on**. Suddenly the doctor returned, pale and frightened. You probably know that diseases spread quickly in the circus or theatre, i.e. in the places where a lot of people gather, and in this town there were a lot of such places. The guests kept coming too, bringing with them 'flu and **quinsy**, but the disease that the doctor found in five people was much more serious than ordinary 'flu or **quinsy**. As at that time vaccinations had not been invented, anyone could catch **the** disease: adults, children and old people. Doctors call it an epidemic. So the city suffered such an epidemic. The doctor didn't have time for home visits, so he put everyone in the hospital. Paloma came there the next day to look after the patients. The doctor fought with her for quite a long time. He didn't want to let her in, as she could also contract the disease, but he couldn't make her change her mind (after all she was a princess and princesses are very stubborn).

The staff of the hospital were on their feet twenty four hours a day; nobody went home. Every day they had new patients with high fever who couldn't walk or talk. The doctor and his assistants looked after the patients day and night and went around with eyes swollen from sleeplessness. However they couldn't help much — two or three people died every day. In the street at the hospital door a lot of people stood, sat or slept. As they couldn't let the families of patients in, they didn't go home. You could hear weeping and moaning everywhere. All the shops and schools were closed. They also closed the harbour and the town gate, and the once cheerful town became dead and dark. Only those who had to go to the hospital dared to go out in the street; the rest were afraid even to open the windows.

Paloma tried not to show how tired she was, and endured everything with courage, but she spent the nights weeping. Even the doctors found it difficult to stand this calamity, and what could a poor girl, a gardener, or even a princess, do? Death had settled there and it took someone's life every day. Death didn't differentiate between the old, the young or children.

The doctor didn't have time to talk to Paloma but once he told her:
— Aren't you afraid that you might contract the disease and never return home?

Paloma thought for a while and said:

— It is true I have to return home sometime, so I cannot die yet; this means that if I become ill you will have to save me, there is no other way out.

The doctor smiled, held her close, kissed her and then rushed off to his patients.

There was no more room in the building. There were beds were in the hall as well. Paloma picked a couple of patients and looked after them. She put bandages on their foreheads, gave them medicines, took their temperature. She wasn't indifferent to the other patients either, she tidied their blankets or fetched wood from the yard and made the fire. At first she looked after an old lady who reminded her of her nanny. She imagined she was caring for her nanny and never left the old lady's side until she recovered.

Once they brought in a five-year-old girl unconscious with a high fever, and Paloma started looking after her. She never slept **during** the first couple of days and sat by her side stroking her curly hair. Whenever the doctor passed, Paloma begged him without a word, with her eyes, to save her. The child had her eyes closed and could probably hear nothing, but the princess never stopped talking to her. She told her hundreds of true stories and fairy tales, told her about the dolls she had had when she was a child, about her toys, and thought of new songs. Even when someone by her side was in agony she held the girl close and whispered funny stories in her ear. Whenever she imagined that the child might die there in her presence, in her arms and that then they would have to give her lifeless body to her mother standing by the hospital door, Paloma choked with tears. She wanted to get away from there, go somewhere far off, but in reality she stood up, administered the medicines, changed the bandages on the girl's forehead, put medical solution on her throat and the palms of her hands and continued to whisper in her ears. At last, on the third day, the girl opened her eyes, looked at her nurse and whispered: "Did you have a talking parrot and a doll with auburn hair?"

Paloma was speechless with joy. She just nodded her head and ran to call the doctor. The doctor started examining the child and he repeated: "It's a miracle, a real miracle." Then he turned to Paloma: "The child is saved, but you will die if you don't go and have a proper sleep right away."

Paloma lay on the sofa in the doctor's room and fell asleep as soon as she put her head on the pillow. She saw her old dream: she was walking with her mother. She had her hand around Paloma's waist and was telling her something. Suddenly everything changed. Her mother put her face in her hands and began crying. Then Paloma disappeared and her mother was standing alone in a vast field, crying.

She woke up. How strange that her mother was crying... in fact she had never seen her tears, so how could she dream about what didn't exist? Paloma went to her little patient. The girl was lying quietly, her fever had gone down and she was feeling better. Paloma sat on her bed and kissed her plump little hand.

- Aren't you afraid of catching the disease? — asked the child.
- No.
- Why?
- Because I love you.
- But when did you start loving me? — the child was surprised.
- Probably a long time ago and I recognized you as soon as I saw you.

The girl laughed and told her that although she had seemed to be asleep she could hear every single word of the stories that Paloma had told her and she had wanted to open her eyes and see what Paloma looked like.

- That's why I woke up. You are so beautiful you look like a real princess. Did you know that?
- What?
- That you look like a princess.
- No, but now that you've told me I know.

Paloma noticed that the doctor was standing nearby listening to them.

— I wasn't mistaken — he said. I told you that you had a rare talent. People that you look after recover even if they are on their deathbed. But now you need looking after yourself, and who is going to do that? — And the doctor made Paloma go out for some fresh air. But Paloma didn't like the deserted streets and the closed shutters in the houses. She didn't walk long. She went to a toyshop. The shopkeeper lived on the first floor. Paloma hammered at the door until the shopkeeper heard the noise. She wanted to buy a doll with auburn hair. The frightened man put the doll in a basket and hung it down on a rope. The princess took the doll, put some money in the basket and went back. The little girl just loved the doll with auburn hair and put it in her bed immediately.

After a while there was a commotion in the hall. Two servants were begging the doctor to accompany them to the hotel and look after their master. But the doctor was shaking his head, explaining to them that he couldn't leave the hospital: "It would be better if you could bring the prince here," he told them. "I'll put him in my room and do my best to save him." The servants had no other way, so they went back. Soon a carriage stopped by the hospital and the men brought the prince of Valunia out on a stretcher. The doctor took him to his room and gave him a thorough examination. Andrios was feeling really bad; he could hardly breathe and his eyelids were so heavy he couldn't open his eyes. They undressed him and put him to bed. The doctor told the servants that the disease was contagious and let them go home. Then he called Paloma: "I'm going to let your little girl go tomorrow, she is safe now, but you have to help me with this, maybe we can somehow help the prince." Paloma pitied Andrios, who was lying helplessly on his bed (who wouldn't, he was so handsome), but she told the doctor that she was absolutely exhausted, and, moreover, she wasn't used to dealing with princes and to tell the truth, she didn't want to. She really thought this. She had fled from the palace, from wealth, from servants and from being a princess, so why should she be dealing with princes? But the doctor insisted.

— I can't believe you don't pity him, you're so kind — he told her — yes, he's a posh and conceited prince, so what? Can you imagine what will become of his country if it is left without an heir to the throne? Besides, he is an ordinary man. He's helpless and lonely in this strange country... His servants left him as soon as they heard they could contract the disease.

The princess was ashamed. Besides, she couldn't explain what she had against princes in general, so she agreed.

So they began looking after Andrios. The doctor piled medicines by the bed-head and left the patient in Paloma's charge. He looked in the room very often to see how he was. The prince was feeling awful, but he could still open his eyes and talk. So while the doctor was examining him he asked why the nurse had been against looking after him and why the doctor had begged her to do so much.

— She doesn't work here — smiled the doctor, — she's only helping me temporarily. She hasn't slept properly for a long time and she's very tired. She's my gardener, but if you want to know the truth, she's a real magician. I have great hopes she can cure you.

The prince thought for a while and remembered that he had already seen that girl in the doctor's garden. What was her name? Paloma. But what he said was:

— Tell her that when I talk to my father he will give her a generous reward for looking after me.

At that moment Paloma entered the room and heard everything, but she wasn't angry. On the contrary, she laughed and came up to the patient:

— I don't need any gifts, I'm just doing what the doctor has asked me. As for you, I think too much talking is bad for you.

The prince thought that no one had ever talked so rudely to him, but it was difficult for him to talk, so he preferred to be quiet and close his eyes. It is true Paloma and the doctor laughed a lot about what happened, but that night Andrios became very ill and they didn't have time for amusement. The thermometer scale was not big enough to measure his temperature. Paloma forgot completely who he was, a prince or a beggar. Nothing was important to her. Andrios kept fainting. No sooner had she put a bandage with vinegar on his forehead than it was dry. The medicines didn't seem to work. Although the doctor was worried, he couldn't spend all his time by Andrios' side, as many other patients had the same trouble that night; so he raced like mad to and fro. He was also sure that the prince was in reliable hands. And indeed Paloma didn't leave Andrios for even a second. The princess guessed herself what she had to do and when, as if someone invisible prompted her. The prince was delirious, calling his mother. Paloma changed the bandages on his forehead, gave him water and medicines, patted him on the head as if he were a child, as that "child" was dreaming of his

mother just like her. The prince probably felt that she was his saviour, as he clung to her and never let her go. He kept talking nonsense; he might have been telling her what he saw in his dreams. The doctor said:

— He's delirious, but that's OK. The main thing is that he mustn't lose consciousness completely.

They hadn't slept a wink all night. At dawn the gardener fell asleep on a chair. When she woke up she thought of her father. "Poor dad — the King of Valunia is his permanent pain and concern. If only he could see how his daughter is spending the night by the bedside of that King's son." But she forgot about those thoughts right away: "Andrios is just a patient and he is seriously ill."

For the next two days the prince didn't utter a word. He just looked for his nurse with his eyes. This girl petted him like a child. She must have got tired of being on formal terms with him. She talked to him plainly: "You'll recover and return home. Your mother will look after you — you always call your mum in your sleep. Don't fear. You are sure to get well."

"How strange," Andrios thought "at the touch of her hand pain seems to be soothed away, her voice is familiar as if I have known her for ages. What a strange person she is. A gardener? I have never seen such a gardener before. What do you mean by "such"? So beautiful. She's very beautiful, but not in the way that I have seen before. This is a beauty that doesn't strike one's eye and say — hey, look at me! This is like a fragile flower. You may not notice it and may just walk past it and then you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life. Why does she pet me like a small child? I must be dying. I must be hopeless. Why didn't she want to look after me?" The prince couldn't answer so many "whys?" He had a splitting pain in his head because of the high fever.

Suddenly he noticed that only the doctor was at his bedside. Paloma was nowhere to be seen. He got nervous: "Where has she gone? What if she doesn't come back? I will surely die then, but then I'm probably going to die anyway." The doctor guessed the cause of his worries and made him look at a sofa in the corner of the room. Paloma was asleep on the sofa. She looked exhausted, with black circles under her eyes. — I fear she **could** fall ill, I forced her to sleep. She's not accustomed to sleepless nights. It's a dangerous disease, there is no doubt about that, but everyone Paloma looked after survived. I don't think it is a simple coincidence. So you are going to survive too — whispered the doctor.

Andrios had already guessed it: he didn't know why, but he was sure to die if this girl abandoned him. What if she suddenly got fed up or too tired and left, banging the door behind her... Even more so as she didn't care a pin about the King's gifts? Well, then he would die for sure... This dawned on Andrios quite suddenly. This girl was his fate. He couldn't live without her. But now, even if he didn't die, nothing could be done, as his father had prepared a completely different fate for him, and every time he remembered that he felt a knife stabbing his heart.

The Prince had an intermittent fever that night too. One moment he shivered from cold and Paloma put more blankets on him, then suddenly he would feel hot and toss the blankets on the floor. He was delirious. The fever went up. The doctor was there, putting drops of some medicine in his mouth. Paloma rubbed ointments into his temples but he was feeling worse. Suddenly the doctor remembered the little girl's words and shouted:

— Talk, talk to him, don't stop, tell him a story or a poem, whatever, but don't stop!

At last they got through that terrible night.

— He's saved, — the doctor said the next morning, — now he'll gradually get well.

Paloma sighed with relief. Andrios was sleeping peacefully.

— You have a very handsome patient. Be careful, don't fall in love! — the doctor's assistant warned Paloma. — He is a prince. He'll get well and he'll forget you.

When Andrios opened his eyes you could see he was better. He saw Paloma, smiled at her and asked:

— Aren't you afraid at all?

— Of what?

— Of contracting the disease.

— No.

— Why?

— I don't know — Paloma shrugged her shoulders. — It's not dangerous any more, you'll be better from now on.
— I feel better, but what if I get worse again? — the Prince laughed at his words himself. — You won't leave me, will you?
— Not yet.

Andrios was still weak and needed care. He was glad about that. He observed Paloma's every move, every expression on her face; but when he remembered how short his happiness was he became very depressed. He hardly uttered a word, but thought a lot. He decided that this was true love, when one was happy and miserable at the same time.

The doctor must have noticed something and he pitied Paloma as his assistant. He went around lost in thought. Two days later he let the prince go to the hotel. He could easily be looked after there until his recovery was complete. Andrios obeyed the doctor without a word and remembered all that he was advised to do. Before leaving he thanked him, and kissed Paloma's hand without saying anything. This didn't escape the gossip columns of the newspapers and they made a scandal a bit later: "Can you imagine, the Prince of Valunia has kissed a plain gardener's hand!"

The epidemic gradually came to an end. The survivors returned home. The town came alive again, the shops and markets reopened, but the people could never be as happy as before, and one could hear the sound of weeping from many houses. The children couldn't laugh as cheerfully as before. Death had deprived everyone of someone close.

The doctor and Paloma were the last to come home. The children cheered and hung onto them. When the hostess saw their thin and exhausted gardener she was desperate. "**That** man has nearly killed the child," she exclaimed. Then she gave them both hot chocolate, put them to bed, and ordered them to stay there for at least two days. Paloma slept well. The children walked on tiptoe so as not to wake them up.

In the meantime the spring had come. A lot of work awaited the gardener so she didn't have much time to sleep. The ground needed digging, the fence needed painting, and seeds for new flowers had to be bought.

The doctor helped Paloma with the digging, and the children with painting the fence. With their **assistance** Paloma managed everything and in her free time she taught the little ones to draw. The children were surprised and once they asked her how she could know so many things. The gardener looked around and then whispered to them: "I was taught everything: dancing, singing, playing the piano, drawing... everything apart from loving people, but thank God I have learnt that myself and I love you all very much."

God heard these words and asked an angel on his left "What is this girl thanking me for?" The angel looked at Paloma and was very sorry. "That King and Queen were asking us for her return, but we made their other dream come true. Maybe we could return her now?" God looked closely at the princess, shook his head and said: "Leave her alone, she knows well enough what she has to do."

* * *

One day when the gardener was pottering around the rose bushes and the children were digging the garden nearby, the gate squeaked and Andrios came in. He didn't even ask for the doctor. He went straight up to Paloma and sat on the bench. The gardener was a little confused but was very glad to see him. The children almost **went** crazy at the sight of a real prince and looked at him with their mouths open.

After that Andrios often visited them. He accompanied Paloma to the shops, walked with her in the parks or just sat on the bench in her garden. He wasn't wearing expensive clothes like before. He probably wanted to be less noticeable, but nothing could escape the inhabitants of that town. Everyone talked about how the Prince of Valunia visited the doctor's house, not for the doctor but for his gardener. The noblemen reproached him the most but Andrios couldn't care less. He had one wish — to spend as much time at Paloma's side as possible, so that he could remember it for the rest of his life. He talked to her a lot about himself: how he had grown up without a mother, how his father had spoiled him, how he had lived at school. But Paloma never talked about herself, she just listened attentively.

The doctor's wife was worried and told her husband: "You're sure she's not a gardener, so tell the prince," but the doctor kept silent. Paloma was silent too, though anyone else in her shoes would have told the prince that she was a princess a long time ago.

One peaceful evening the prince sat the gardener by his side, took her hand and began. It was hard for him to talk, something got stuck in his throat, but he couldn't put it off any longer.

— How right my father was when he used to tell me that often peasants are freer and happier than we are... I have to marry the princess of our neighbouring country—The Greenest. I haven't heard anything nice about her, I don't even know her name, but I cannot betray the King. I'm his only son. My country needs this marriage very much. I love you, I want you to know that I'll dream about you all my life but I can't be by your side.

Paloma suddenly guessed what the King of Valunia needed this marriage for. She felt giddy, she couldn't see or hear. She muttered:

— But how can you marry someone you've never met and are not in love with, even if she's a princess? What if you don't return home?

— No, I must. I have no right to do otherwise. You can't understand this and you are never going to forgive me. — Andrios choked with tears. He kissed Paloma and went hurriedly towards the gate.

When the pale gardener went into the house the doctor and his wife were sitting by the table looking at her anxiously. They had seen from the window how hurriedly the prince had left. Paloma sat slowly down on the chair.

— He loves you — the doctor said — I know. I noticed that in the hospital. He is truly in love but he probably can't ask you to be his wife.

— Yes, he loves me, but he has to marry a princess that he hasn't even seen. He doesn't even know her name, the princess of The Greenest — her name's Paloma.

— How do you know? — asked the woman sadly.

Paloma didn't lift her head. She was staring fixedly at the ground.

— I know — she said quietly — it's me.

The doctor and his wife sat dumbstruck, staring at her. Their jaws dropped. The woman wanted to say something, she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. At last she asked:

— You... You... didn't tell that to the prince?

Paloma shook her head.

— First of all, if he really loved me he would refuse his father that planned marriage. And then that marriage would join my country with Valunia years later and it would become the domain of Valunia's Kings.

— But don't you love Andrios? — the doctor asked.

— What does it matter who I love? — Paloma said sadly. — It seems Shputnikos is very clever. I didn't know that.

The next day everyone behaved as if nothing had happened. The doctor went to work, the children played, Paloma went around the garden. The doctor's wife didn't sleep a wink all night. What a thing to imagine. They'd had a princess at home, made her work as a gardener and look after sick people during the epidemic. Tears ran down her face at the thought of all this and of the prince besides. It was noon when her husband returned. At the time Paloma was looking after a flower that had been brought from abroad. She had done what she could but the plant had turned yellow and was withering from day to day. The doctor watched for a while, then went up to her.

— Paloma, you're taking this trouble in vain. This flower is a child of its country. It cannot flourish in a strange environment. It will wither anyway — he said, handing her a newspaper.

In this newspaper, amongst other gossip and facts, it was written that the King and Queen of The Greenest had had a son after waiting such a long time. The astonished princess dropped the paper, hugged the doctor happily and whispered in his ear: “I think I have to return home.”

The doctor nodded with a smile.

* * *

The next day the whole family saw the princess off from the harbour. The children were sad. They couldn't understand why their gardener was leaving and where she was going. Paloma kissed them, assuring them that she would soon come back again. “I'm leaving the garden to you,” she said. “Look after it well, so that it is in flower when I return.” They were saying goodbye for a long time. The princess went on the same boat that had brought her there. The family stood on the dockside until the boat was lost from sight.

* * *

Spring was beautiful in The Greenest. The blossoming orchards and green meadows were a wonderful sight. Paloma breathed in the familiar scent deeply and was very happy. She didn't feel tired. “How nice it is to return home,” she thought. Her heart was full of joy, and was beating unusually quickly. Now she felt that she had been missing everything: this grass, these trees, this road that led to her town. Everything was as before there, except that the ladies in the streets were very beautifully dressed. Even the women that sold fruit and vegetables were dressed smartly. Here and there the flags were hanging out of the windows. She went to the palace gate unrecognized. There was no one in the courtyard. She went up the stairs and into her room. Everything was the same as when she had left, as if she hadn't gone out of the room. Suddenly someone passed in the hall. Paloma went to the door and looked out.

— Mother! — she called quietly.

The woman stopped as if turned to stone. She didn't move. She probably thought it was some sort of trick.

— Mother. — repeated Paloma.

Now she turned round and looked at Paloma fearfully. They looked at each other amazed, the mother changed, thin, with sad eyes, and the daughter grown up and beautiful. They sat on the floor together.

— Have you forgiven me? Have you really forgiven me? — whispered the Queen kissing her daughter on the eyes.

— I didn't leave because of that. You have nothing to be forgiven for. I don't know how to explain but I **have seen and learnt so much that I had to go** — explained Paloma hugging her mother. Suddenly they heard the baby crying. Paloma sprang to her feet.

— Where is he, in which room? — she asked beaming.

— In my room.

Paloma rushed to the room. She took off her travelling cloak, throwing it down somewhere. She ran to her mother's room, out of breath. When the baby saw her he stopped crying, frowned, and looked at her with eyes full of tears.

— What's his name?

— George. — the mother said.

— He's probably angry with you for being absent at his birth. — Paloma heard her father's voice.

— I'll tell you where I was when you grow up — Paloma said to the little one, and hugged her father.

* * *

Although he had decided not to see Paloma again Andrios couldn't help going to the doctor's house. The gardener wasn't there. He was told that Paloma had left for her home town two days before.

The prince thought for a long time and then decided to return home too. He didn't want to be in Valunia, but he didn't have **any desire** to travel either. So he packed his luggage and set off. He felt poor, unlike a prince. The nearer he went to his home the heavier his heart became. He was thin and pale after his illness, but he had changed not only in appearance but in character too, as if someone had changed his heart and his mind. The moment he entered his country there was a huge commotion. They had learnt about the prince's illness. The noblemen and his friends met him in the street and congratulated him on his recovery. Everyone noticed that Andrios didn't look as cheerful as before, but they ascribed this to tiredness. In short, they saw him to the palace triumphantly. There the happy King awaited him. However, he complained that he was already old and tired of worrying so much, and he warned Andrios that he couldn't let him out of the house again. Andrios was so exhausted he couldn't talk. Dusty from head to foot, he threw himself in an armchair and nodded his head at everything that his father said. But the King couldn't stay in the same place, he went to and fro mumbling:

— What would I do if something happened to you? No, no, never travel anymore. Ruling the country is becoming more and more difficult. There are lots of things to do, I cannot manage without help. I can't sleep at night, I hear such bad news.

Suddenly the King stopped, clapped his hands and said:

— Yes, you probably don't know what a terrible thing has happened, all our plans have fallen through: Demetrius has had a son! Can you imagine? They couldn't have a son for so long and... who would think...— The King got tired of racing back and forth and sat by his son's side. Andrios wasn't nodding. Who knows what he was thinking about, while his father went on:

— One good thing is you don't have to marry that stupid girl anymore, we'll find someone more acceptable. She's got to be really stupid. As they told me, she ran away from her house to become a doctor's gardener somewhere far away. Can you imagine? The princess... What's her name? P... P... P... Yes, Paloma.

The prince jumped up as if someone had hit him on his head.

— What? Paloma, the doctor's gardener? — he couldn't believe his ears.

— Well, I didn't believe it either, — the King went on — but reliable people have told me. We're not interested in her anymore, to hell with her.

— But... I love Paloma very much. I didn't know she was a princess, I thought she was a real gardener. — the prince clutched at his head.

— Love her! But why... when did you fall in love with her? — The King's jaw dropped — You thought she was a gardener and you still fell in love with her? No, we don't need that marriage any more. On the contrary, we won't be able to take tribute from them.

Andrios wasn't listening to his father. He rushed to the stables. The King raced after him, but of course he couldn't run as fast and lagged behind. The prince took his horse out of the stable, mounted it and galloped away.

* * *

After three days' travelling Andrios came to The Greenest. The people of the town were celebrating. They had learnt that the princess had returned and they cheered in the streets of their own accord. They arranged shows in some places and concerts in others. In short, it was a grand celebration, one could hear the sounds of music everywhere. Andrios was at last able to find his way through the crowd and, after asking directions several times, he approached the palace. The gardener, the stable-man and the servants were all in the streets of the town, so everything was quiet there. The prince left his horse in the yard and ran on. He passed a beautiful garden and went up the stairs. He met no one on his way. The halls were empty. Andrios was confused. He didn't know which way to go. He ran and called out; the halls echoed him. "Palomaaa... Palomaaa..." The echo was everywhere. The prince stopped. He could hear the sounds of a piano coming from somewhere. Suddenly the sounds ceased, then they started again. Andrios was getting nearer and nearer to that room and the sounds could be heard more and more clearly. It was a quiet and beautiful tune. At the grand piano there was sitting a creature in a lovely dress. There was a small crown on her head.

— Paloma. — the prince whispered.

The princess stood up and turned around. She was really beautiful. But Andrios didn't look like a prince at all, covered in dust and exhausted.

— Why didn't you tell me? — he asked.

— What?

— That you were a princess.

Paloma smiled.

— I'm not a real princess... because I don't want to be... I'm wearing this because dad's asked me. Today is a celebration!

Paloma took the crown off and rolled it upon the grand piano.

— Why didn't you tell me? I was so worried, I love you.

— I think you loved a gardener, but you had to marry a princess, didn't you? But if you had really loved that gardener you would have attempted to do something — Paloma went up to Andrios and put her hand on his dusty sleeve.

— Now you can tell the King of Valunia that the princess, for whose sake you left the gardener, is not going to marry you. Though... though the King can't be interested in this marriage any more, as I have a brother — Paloma laughed. — This is very funny.

But Andrios wasn't laughing. He was looking at her with his large, sad, tired eyes.

— But I love you. I won't leave you alone. I'll keep reminding you that I exist.

— I haven't forgotten anything. I remember everything quite well. — now the princess looked sad too. — It's just that I'm not going to get married yet, let alone get married to a prince and even less to the prince of Valunia. If someone falls in love with me, I would like him to ask **me** to marry him and not someone else.

The prince shook his head, decided to say something, then changed his mind, muttered something like "I knew you wouldn't forgive me," and turned away. He passed through the long hall with heavy, slow steps, went down the stairs, across the yard, took the reins of his horse and left.

Paloma stood at the window watching him go. Someone embraced her from behind. It was her mother.

— Why did you let him go? He's a prince charming, don't you like him? — whispered the Queen.

— He's nice, very nice, but... very different — Paloma shook her head. — And I am happy with you all.

* * *

So they started living in a new way. The King decided that he needed Paloma's help in ruling the country. He was very glad to discover that he had a very clever daughter. They brought the prince up together. In the evenings they gathered by the fire and talked. Probably the country now needed Paloma's marriage to the Prince of Valunia, but the King never said a word on this subject. The princess never mentioned Andrios either, but sometimes she became very sad and thoughtful...

I am going to stop here for the time being. The story of Paloma and Andrios doesn't end here though; **after all**, how could it end so simply?