



The Prince in Exile

Overview



When the Normans conquered England, they brought minstrels and stories of their own from France and southern Italy. The tale of “The Prince in Exile” came from Italy and was a great favorite in England as well as in Italy and France.

The Tale of The Prince in Exile

There was once a King of Naples who was a very obstinate and self-willed man. He always had to have his own way. When three of the noblest lords in the kingdom once even dared to disagree with him, he seized them and sentenced them to life imprisonment in a deep dungeon under the castle.

In the course of time, a little son was born to this King and his good Queen. They called him Roswal. As he grew up and began to play around the castle and courtyard, his games were disturbed by awful moans and cries, which seemed to come from beneath the castle. He asked a servant what the noise was, and the servant told him of three men in the dungeon who would have to stay there all their lives. After that the boy could not be happy playing in the fresh air and sunshine, for he was always thinking of the poor men in the dark, damp dungeon below. He made up his mind to set them free.

Now the King wore all the keys of the castle on a chain around his waist, and at night he kept them under his pillow. Roswal knew the key to the dungeon, for it was larger and heavier than the others and was all mottled with rust and mold.

One night when the King was sleeping soundly, Roswal crept into his room very softly and took the keys from under the pillow. Then he went down to the dungeon and set free the three prisoners. They fled forth into the night so as to be far from the castle by morning. Roswal quietly put the keys back and returned to his own room without being noticed by anyone.

The next day when the guard took the daily meal of black bread and water to the dungeon, he found the prisoners gone and reported the matter to the King. The King was mad with rage. “If ever I find the one who set them free, I shall have him punished severely, perhaps with death, even though he should be my own son,” he swore.

Roswal was standing by, and when he heard those words, he was very much frightened. He thought his father suspected him, especially as the old King was looking at him with eyes black with anger.

“Father, I did it,” he faltered and fell at the King’s feet begging for mercy.

The King was very much surprised. He really had had no suspicion of his son and would never have discovered who had set the prisoners free if the frightened boy had not blurted out the truth.

He began to repent of his severe promises. The boy was too young and fair to have to die. Then the Queen, too, fell at his feet weeping bitterly and begging him to pardon their child.

“No,” he slowly shook his head, “I cannot pardon him, for I have sworn to punish him. But I will not condemn him to death. I will send him into exile to the far-away land of Bealm. He will not be dead in body, but he will be forever dead to his native land.”

Then he wrote a letter to the King of Bealm entrusting Roswal to his care and gave it to Roswal together with enough gold and jewels to support him a year. As Roswal was setting out, the King sent the steward with him to care for him on the way. This steward was a surly, morose youth. An exile away from the gay court life of Naples was little to his liking. All along the way, he amused himself by devising tricks with which to tease the poor, sad, little prince. At last he thought of a fine plan. Why could he not get rid of Roswal, take the letter, money, and jewels, and pass himself off at the court of Bealm as the true Prince of Naples?

By this time they had reached the borders of Bealm. Prince Roswal was hot and faint from the long travel. So when they came to a river, they alighted from their horses and went to drink. As Roswal leaned over the river bank, the wicked steward came up behind him, seized him by the legs, and held him over the water. He threatened to throw the boy in unless he would give up the letter and money and jewels and would promise never to tell anyone that he was the Prince of Naples.

There was no way of escape. As Roswal swung dizzily by his heels, he could catch glimpses of the greenish torrent rushing by below. When they arrived on shore, the steward laid him on the bank, stripped his belongings from him, and rode swiftly away before Roswal could really see what direction he had taken.

Weary and heartsick, Roswal went on slowly through the forest. As night came on, he drew near to a little village. He stopped at a cottage to beg food and shelter for the night. A kindly old woman answered his knock. When she saw his handsome face, pale with hunger and weariness, she took him in and gave him supper. Then she asked him his name and country.

“I come from a far country and my name is Dissawar,” he replied. He could not tell his own name, for he had given his promise to the wicked

steward never to let anyone know that he was Roswal, the true Prince of Naples.

The good old woman was at once struck by this Dissawar’s resemblance to her own son. She decided to keep him as a companion for her son and let the two boys go to school together. Now Roswal had been taught in all branches of knowledge by the best teachers in Naples. So it was soon discovered that he knew more than anyone in the village, more even than the schoolmaster himself. The fame of his knowledge and beauty soon spread throughout the kingdom of Bealm.

The high steward of the court of Bealm heard of him and took him to court as a page.

The King of Bealm had a beautiful daughter named Lillian. As soon as she saw the new page, she made him her cupbearer. Now when Roswal first saw the fair princess, he knew that he loved her with all his heart. She, too, became more and more fond of her handsome cupbearer.

The wicked steward was also at the court of Bealm, playing the part of the Prince of Naples. Owing to the letter and the treasure, the King of Bealm never for a moment suspected that he was not the real prince. The wicked steward was rather startled when he recognized Roswal in the person of Dissawar, the cupbearer, but he knew that Roswal would not break his sacred promise.

He himself had tried to win the heart of Princess Lillian, but had failed. Still, he had won the consent of her father, who was eager to see his daughter married to a rich prince. Already the King of Bealm had sent ambassadors to Naples to announce the coming marriage to the old King and had sent out a summons for a grand tournament of three days for celebration.

While all the court was filled with gaiety over the coming festivities, Roswal and Lillian alone were not happy. Lillian knew that her cupbearer must be a noble in disguise, for no common man ever had such beauty or courtesy. She begged and begged him to tell her the secret of his birth, but he could not break his promise to the wicked steward. Then she asked him to enter the tournament and fight for her. This he could not do either, for he could not obtain armor and enter the lists without the knowledge of the pretended prince. So he told Lillian that he could not fight for her because he had never learned anything of

knightly prowess. He was bitter and angry, for there seemed nothing he could do to keep the false prince from marrying Lillian.

The next morning early he rode into the forest with his hounds to hunt, for he did not want to be present at the triumph of his rival. But even the excitement of the chase could not take his mind from his troubles. As he sat grieving, an old gray-bearded man approached leading a white war horse on whose back was a white suit of armor.

“Here, Sir Prince,” he said, “mount this horse, put on this armor, and ride to the tournament. When you return, you will find me here. I will take your horse and hounds and will hunt today and give you the game I take.”

Silent with wonder, Roswal obeyed, bowed to his unknown friend, and spurred the horse on toward the tournament. He rushed through the barriers and overturned all who came against him without once breaking his spear. He began to charge the false prince at full speed, but seeing him motionless with fear and astonishment, checked his horse, bowed to the assembly, and galloped back into the forest.

“By my faith,” said the King of Bealm, “I would give an earldom to know that knight in white.”

He sent his courtiers into the forest to search for the unknown knight, but though they searched far and wide, the only person they met was the cupbearer returning home unarmed and laden with venison.

When Princess Lillian saw him return, she was angry, for she thought that he had been amusing himself all day with the pleasures of the chase while her happiness was at stake. She told him of the bravery of the unknown knight in white, and of the cowardice of the false prince. She bade him go with her to the tournament the next day.

He bowed, but made no promise. He wanted to find out whether the forest held any more kindly old gentlemen who would furnish him with the best of horses and armor and would hunt for him during the day. He knew that his strange friend was no spirit of the woods, but a fine substantial old knight of flesh and blood, who was a very good hunter.

So the next morning he again set out with his horse and hounds. This time he was met by another old man leading a gray war steed that bore a gray armor. Again he armed himself and set forth for the lists.¹ The false prince, who was rejoicing that the white knight had not come back, rushed forward to meet the new knight in gray. He was soon knocked from his horse and lay senseless on the ground among a number of other knights who had all been unhorsed by the gray knight. Then the knight in gray vanished as suddenly as the knight in white had done.

Now Lillian thought that the gray knight looked very much like her beloved cupbearer. He was of the same height and weight and had the same quick, sure movements. Yet later she saw Roswal coming from the forest with such a heavy load of venison as only the best of hunters could have got in one day. So she thought that he surely could not have been the gray knight.

On the third day when Roswal went to the forest, a third old man supplied him with a bay horse, a red shield, green armor and a golden helmet.

When he reached the tournament, he found the false prince all recovered from his fall of the day before. Roswal charged him again and threw him to the ground with so much force that two of his ribs were broken. Then he rode up to the royal pavilion,² tossed a gold ring in Lillian’s lap, and sped back into the forest. He found all three of the old men waiting for him.

“We are the three men whom you freed from your father’s dungeon,” said one. “It was on our account that you were sent into exile and we want to do everything in our power to help you.” “I fear that there is nothing more you can do for me,” answered Roswal sadly. “Even tomorrow is the marriage of Princess Lillian to my enemy, the false prince. Ah! if only I were not bound by promise not to tell who I really am. For the King of Bealm would never wish his daughter to marry a steward, and a thieving, treacherous one at that.”

“Trouble yourself no more,” said his three friends. “The Princess Lillian will never marry the false prince and you need worry no more about your promise. Just go home and rest in peace and see what the morrow brings forth.”

Much puzzled, Roswal took the load of venison they gave him and went back to the palace.

Though the false prince had been hurt by his fall in the tournament, his wounds were not bad enough to postpone the wedding. Lillian cried and protested that she could not marry such a coward as he, but it was of no use. The stubborn old King was determined that his daughter should marry the Prince of Naples next day without fail. For Lillian's great surprise, Roswal showed no worry or concern at all at this state of affairs.

The following day when all were seated at the wedding feast, three strange old men entered. They went up to the table and saluted the King and Lillian, but paid no attention to the false prince who was seated by her side.

"We are men of Naples," they said, "and have come to compliment the Princess upon her marriage to our Prince."

"If you are men of Naples," said the King of Bealm, it seems to me that you pay scant courtesy to your Prince, who is sitting right here at table."

The three old men looked long and carefully at every face at the table. When they reached the false prince, they looked at him even longer and more carefully than at the others. Then they turned to the King.

"We do not see our Prince here," they said. Just then the cupbearer entered the hall with a goblet of wine. As soon as the three old men saw him, they ran and knelt down before him and hailed him as their Prince. The King of Bealm was astounded and asked what it all meant.

Then they told how Dissawar, the cupbearer, was Roswal, the real Prince of Naples, and disclosed the treachery of the wicked steward who would make himself prince. The steward was taken out and hanged, and Roswal was married to Lillian. There followed a splendid feast of twenty days during which Roswal gave rich gifts to the good old woman who had first sheltered him in Bealm and to her son and the village schoolmaster and to all who had been good to him during his exile.

¹ Lists was the name for the field enclosed for a tournament.

² A pavilion is a large open tent raised on posts.