

The Story of a Sugar Prince

A Tale for Children

By F. Anstey

Of course he may have been really a fairy prince, and I should be sorry to contradict any one who chose to say so. For he was only about three inches high, he had rose-pink cheeks and bright yellow curling locks, he wore a doublet and hose which fitted him perfectly, and a little cap and feather, all of delicately contrasted shades of blue—and this does seem a fair description of a fairy prince.

But then he was painted—very cleverly—but still only painted, on a slab of prepared sugar, and his back was a plain white blank; while the regular fairies all have more than one side to them, and I am obliged to say that I never before happened to come across a real fairy prince who was nothing but paint and sugar.

For all that he may, as I said before, have been a fairy prince, and whether he was or not does not matter in the least—for he at any rate quite believed he was one.

As yet there had been very little romance or enchantment in his life, which, as far as he could remember, had all been spent in a long shop, full of sweet and subtle scents, where the walls were lined with looking-glass and fitted with shelves on which stood rows of glass jars, containing pastilles and jujubes of every colour, shape, and flavour in the world—a shop where, in summer, a strange machine for making cooling drinks gurgled and sputtered all day long, and in winter, the large plate-glass windows were filled with boxes made of painted silk from Paris, so charmingly expensive and useless that rich people bought them eagerly to give to one another.

The prince generally lay on one of the counters between two beds of sugar roses and violets in a glass case, on either side of which stood a figure of highly coloured plaster.

One was a major of some unknown regiment; he had an immense head, with goggling eyes and a very red complexion, and this head would unscrew so that he could be filled with comfits, which, though it hurt him fearfully every time this was done, he was proud of, because it always astonished people.

The other figure was an old brown gipsy woman in a red cloak and a striped petticoat, with a head which, although it wouldn't take off, was always nodding and grinning mysteriously from morning to night.

It was to her that the prince (for we shall have to call him 'the prince,' as I don't know his other name—if he ever had one) owed all his notions of Fairy-land and his high birth.

'You let the old gipsy alone for knowing a prince when she sees one,' she would say, nodding at him with encouragement. 'They've kept you out of your rights all this time; but wait a while, and see if one of these clumsy giants that are always bustling in and out doesn't help you; you'll be restored to your kingdom, never fear!'

But the major used to get angry at her prophecies: 'It's all nonsense,' he used to say, 'the boy's no more a prince than I am, and he'll never be noticed by anybody, unless he learns to unscrew his head and hold comfits—like a soldier and a gentleman!'

However, the prince believed the gipsy, and every morning, as the shutters were taken down, and grey mist, brilliant sunshine, or brown fog stole into the close shop, he wondered whether the day had come which would see his restoration to his kingdom.

And at last the day really came; some one who had been buying sugar violets and roses noticed the prince in the middle of them and bought him too, to his immense delight. ‘what did the old gipsy tell you, eh?’ said the old woman, wagging her head wisely; ‘you see, it has all come true!’

Even the major was convinced now, for, before the prince had been packed up, he whispered to him that if at any time he wanted a commander-in-chief, why, he knew where to send for him. ‘Yes, I will remember,’ said the prince; ‘and you,’ he added to the gipsy, ‘you shall be my prime minister!’—for he was so ignorant of politics that he actually thought an old woman could be prime minister.

And then, before he could finish saying good-bye and hearing their congratulations, he was covered with several wrappers of white paper and plunged into complete darkness, which he did not mind at all, he was so happy.

After that he remembered no more until he was unwrapped and placed upright on the top of a dazzling white dome which stood in the very centre of a long plain, where a host of the strangest forms were scattered about in bewildering confusion.

On each side of him tall twisted trunks of sparkling glass and silver sprang high into the air, and from their tops the cool green branches swayed gently down, while round their bases velvet-petalled flowers bloomed in a bed of soft moss.

Farther away, an exquisite temple, made of a sort of delicate gold-coloured crystal, rose out of the crowd of gorgeous things that surrounded it, and this crowd, as the prince’s eyes became accustomed to the splendour, gradually separated itself into various forms of loveliness.

He saw high curiously moulded masses of transparent amber, within which ruby and emerald gems glowed dimly; mounds of rose-flushed snow, and blocks of creamy marble; and in the space between these were huge platforms of silver and porcelain, on which were piled heaps of treasures that he knew must be priceless, though he could not guess what they were all used for.

But amidst all these were certain grim shapes; some seemed to be the carcasses of fearful beasts, whose heads had all been struck off, but who had evidently shown such courage in death that they had earned the respect of the brave hunters who had vanquished them—for rosettes had been pinned on their rough breasts, and their stiffened limbs were bound together by bright-hued ribbons.

Then there was one monstrous head of some brute larger still, which could not have been quite killed even then, for its tawny eyes were still glaring with fury—the prince could easily have stood upright between its grinning jaws if he had wanted to do so; but he had no intention of doing any such thing, for though he was quite as brave as most fairy princes he was not foolhardy.

And there were big enchanted castles with no doors nor windows in them, and inhabited by restless monsters—dragons most likely—who had thrust their scaly black claws through the roofs.

Perhaps he was a little frightened by some of the ugliest shapes at first, but he soon grew used to them, and had no room for any other feelings than pride and joy. For this was Fairyland at last, stranger and more beautiful than anything he could have dreamed of—he had come into his kingdom!

He was going to live in that lacework palace; those dragons would come fawning out of their lairs presently, and do homage to him; these formidable dead creatures had been slain to do him honour; and he was the rightful owner of all these treasures of gold, and silk, and gems.

He must not forget, he thought, that he owed it all to the good-natured giants who had brought him here: no, when they came in—as of course they would—to pay their respects, he would thank them graciously and reward them liberally out of his new wealth.

There was a silver giraffe, stiff and old-fashioned, under a palm tree hard by, which must have guessed from the prince's proud gay smile that he was deceiving himself and had no idea of his real position.

But the giraffe did not make any attempt to warn him, either because it had seen so many things all round it consumed in its day that the selfish fear that it too would be cut up and handed round some evening kept it preoccupied and silent, or else because, being only electro-plated and hollow inside, it had no feelings of any kind.

By-and-by the doors opened, and delicious bursts of music floated into the room, mingled with scraps of conversation and ripples of fresh laughter; servants came noiselessly in and increased the glare of a kind of sun that hung above the plain, and a host of smaller lights suddenly started up and shone softly through shades of silk and paper.

The music stopped, the laughter and voices grew louder and came nearer, there was the sound of approaching feet—and then a whole army of mortals surrounded the prince's kingdom.

They were a far smaller and finer race than the giants he had seen hitherto, with pretty fresh complexions, and wearing, some of them, soft shimmering dresses that he thought only fairies ever wore. After a little confusion, they ranged themselves in one long line completely round the plain; the taller beings glided softly about behind, and the prince prepared himself to receive their congratulations with proper dignity and modesty.

But these giants certainly had very odd ways of showing their loyalty, for they saluted him with a clinking and clattering so deafening that they would have drowned the noise of a million gnomes forging fairy armour, while every now and then came a loud report, after which a golden sparkling cascade fell creaming and bubbling from somewhere above into the crystal reservoirs prepared for it.

It was all very gratifying, no doubt—and yet, though they all pretended to be honouring him, no one seemed to pay him any more particular attention; he thought perhaps they might be feeling abashed in his presence, and that he must manage to reassure them.

But while he was thinking how he could best do this, he began to be aware that along the whole of that glittering plain things were being done without his permission which were scandalous and insulting—he saw the grisly carcasses cut swiftly into pieces with flashing blades, or torn limb from limb deliberately; all the dragons were attacked and overpowered, and hauled out unresisting from their strongholds; even the fierce head was gashed hideously behind the ears!

He tried to speak and ask them what they meant by such audacity, but he could not make them hear as he could the major and the old gipsy; so he was obliged to look on while one by one the trophies dedicated to his glory were changed to shapeless heaps of ruin.

And, unless he was mistaken, the greater part of them were actually disappearing from sight altogether! It seemed impossible, for where could they all go to? and yet nothing now remained of the huge carcasses but a meagre framework of bone, hanging together by shreds of skin; the strong castles were roofless walls with gaping breaches in them; and could it be that the more attractive objects were beginning to melt away in the same mysterious manner? Was it enchantment, or how—how on earth did they manage to do it?

He was no happier when he found out—for though, of course, to us eating is quite an ordinary everyday affair, only think what a shock the first sight of it must have been to a delicate fairy prince, whose mouth was simply a cherry-coloured curve, and not made to open on any terms!

He saw all the treasures he had looked upon as his very own being lifted to a long line of mouths of all sizes and shapes; the mouths opened to various widths, and—the treasures vanished, he could not tell how or where.

The mellow amber tottered and quivered for a while and was gone; even the solid creamy marble was hacked in pieces and absorbed; nothing, however beautiful or fantastic, escaped instant annihilation between those terrible bars of scarlet and flashing ivory.

Could this be Fairyland, this plain where all things beautiful were doomed—or had they brought him back to his kingdom only to make this cruel fun of him, and destroy his riches one by one before his eyes?

But before he could find any answers to these sad questions he chanced to look straight in front of him, and there he saw a face which made his little sugar heart almost melt within him, with a curious feeling, half pleasure, half pain, that was quite new to him.

It was a girl's face, of course, and the prince had not looked at her very long before he forgot all about his kingdom.

He was relieved to see that she at least was too generous to join in the work of destruction that was going on all around her—indeed, she seemed to dislike it as much as he did himself, for only a little of the tinted snow passed her soft lips.

Now and then she laughed a little silvery laugh, and shook out her rippling gold-brown hair at something the being next to her said—a great boy-mortal, with a red face, bold eyes, and grasping brown hands, which were fatal to everything within their range.

How the prince did hate that boy!—he found to his joy that he could understand what they said, and began to listen jealously to their conversation.

'I say,' the boy (whose name, it seemed, was Bertie) was saying, as he received a plateful of floating fragments of the lacework palace, 'you aren't eating anything, Mabel. Don't you care about suppers? I do.'

'I'm not hungry,' she said, evidently feeling this a distinction; 'I've been out so much this fortnight.'

'How jolly!' he observed, 'I only wish I had. But I say,' he added confidentially, 'won't they make you take a grey powder soon? They would me.'

'I'm never made to take anything at all nasty,' she said—and the prince was indignant that any one should have dared to think otherwise.

'I suppose,' continued the boy, 'you didn't manage to get any of that cake the conjurer made in Uncle John's hat, did you?'

'No, indeed,' she said, and made a little face; 'I don't think I should like cake that came out of anybody's hat!'

'It was very decent cake,' he said; 'I got a lot of it. I was afraid it might spoil my appetite for supper—but it hasn't.'

'What a very greedy boy you are, Bertie,' she remarked; 'I suppose you could eat *anything*?'

'At home I think I could, pretty nearly,' he said, with a proud confidence, 'hut not at old Tokoe's, I can't. Tokoe's is where I go to school, you know. I can't stand the resurrection-pie on Saturdays—all the week they save up the bones and rags and things, and when it comes up—'

'I don't want to hear,' she interrupted; 'you talk about nothing but horrid things to eat, and it isn't a bit interesting.'

Bertie allowed himself a brief interval for refreshment unalloyed by conversation, after which he began again: 'Mabel, if they have dancing after supper, dance with me.'

'Are you sure you know how to dance?' she inquired rather fastidiously.

'Oh, I can get through all right,' he replied. 'I've learnt. It's not harder than drilling. I can dance the Highland Schottische and the Swedish dance, anyway.'

'Any one can dance those. I don't call that dancing,' she said.

'Well, but try me once, Mabel; say you will,' said he.

'I don't believe they will have dancing,' she said 'there are so many very young children here and they get in the way so. But I hope there won't be any more games—games are stupid.'

'Only to girls,' said Bertie; 'girls never care about any fun.'

'Not your kind of fun,' she said, a little vaguely. 'I don't mind hide-and-seek in a nice old house with long passages and dark corners and secret panels—and ghosts even—that's jolly; but I don't care much about running round and round a row of silly chairs, trying to sit down when the music stops and keep other people out—I call it rude.'

'You didn't seem to think it so rude just now,' he retorted; 'you were laughing quite as much as any one; and I saw you push young Bobby Meekin off the last chair of all, and sit on it yourself, anyhow.'

'Bertie, you didn't,' she cried, flushing angrily.

'I did though.'

'But I tell you I didn't!'

'And I say you did!'

'If you will go on saying I did, when I'm quite sure I never did anything of the sort,' she said, 'please don't speak to me again; I shan't answer if you do. And I think you're a particularly ill-bred boy—not polite, like my brothers.'

'Your brothers are every bit as rude as I am. If they aren't, they're milksops—I should be sorry to be a milksop.'

'My brothers are not milksops—they could fight you!' she cried, with a little defiant ring in her voice that the prince thought perfectly charming.

'As if a girl knew anything about fighting,' said Bertie; 'why, I could fight your brothers all stuck in a row!'

That you couldn't,' from Mabel, and 'I could then, so now!' from Bertie, until at last Mabel refused to answer any more of Bertie's taunts, as they grew decidedly offensive; and, finding that she took refuge in disdainful silence, he consumed tart after tart with gloomy determination.

And then all at once, Mabel, having nothing to do, chanced to look across to the white dome on which the prince was standing, and she opened her beautiful grey eyes with a pleased surprise as she saw him.

All this time the prince had been falling deeper and deeper in love with her; at first he had felt almost certain that she was a princess and his destined bride; he was rather small for her, certainly, though he did not know how *very* much smaller he was; but Fairyland, he had always been told, was full of resources—he could easily be filled out to her size, or, better still, she might be brought down to his.

But he had begun to give up these wild fancies already, and even to fear that she would go away without having once noticed him; and now she was looking at him as if she found him pleasant to look at, as if she would like to know him.

At last, evidently after some struggle, she turned to the offending Bertie, and spoke his name softly; but Bertie could not give up the luxury of sulking with her all at once, and so he looked another way.

‘Is it *Pax*, Bertie?’ she asked. (She had not had brothers for nothing.)

‘No, it isn’t,’ said Bertie.

‘Oh, you want to sulk? I thought only girls sulked,’ she said; ‘but it doesn’t matter, I only wanted to tell you something.’

His curiosity was too much for his dignity. ‘Well—what?’ he asked, gruffly enough.

‘Only,’ she said, ‘that I’ve been thinking over things, and I dare say you *could* fight my brothers—only not all together—and I’m not sure that Charlie wouldn’t beat you.’

‘Charlie! I could settle him in five minutes,’ muttered Bertie, only half appeased.

‘Oh, not in five, Bertie,’ cried Mabel, ‘ten, perhaps; but you’d never want to, would you, when he’s my brother? And now,’ she added, ‘we’re friends again, aren’t we, Bertie?’

He was a cynic in his way—‘I see,’ he said, ‘you want something out of me; you should have thought of that before you quarrelled, you know!’

Mabel contracted her eyebrows and bit her lip for a moment, then she said meekly— ‘I know I should, Bertie; but I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind doing this for me. I can ask the boy on my other side—he’s a stupid-looking boy, and I don’t care about knowing him—still, if *you* wont do it—’

‘Oh, well, I don’t mind,’ he said, softened at once. ‘What is it you want?’

‘Bertie,’ she whispered breathlessly, ‘you’ll be quite a nice boy if you’ll only get me that dear little sugar prince off the cake there; you can reach him better than I can, and—and I don’t quite like to—only, be quick, or some one else will get him first.’

And in another second the enraptured prince found himself lying on her plate!

‘Isn’t he lovely?’ she cried.

‘Not bad,’ said Bertie; ‘give us a bit—I got him for you, you know.’

‘*Give you a bit!*’ she cried, with the keenest horror and disgust. ‘Bertie! you don’t really think I wanted him to—to eat.’

‘Oh, the paint doesn’t matter,’ he said; ‘I’ve eaten lots of them.’

‘You really are too horrid,’ she said; ‘all you think about is eating things. I can’t bear greedy boys. I won’t have anything to do with you any more; after this we’ll be perfect strangers.’

He stared helplessly at her; he had made friends and done all she asked of him, and, just because he begged for a share in the spoil, she had treated him like this! It was too bad of her — it served him right for bothering about a girl.

He would have told her what he thought about it, only just then there was a general rising. The prince was carried tenderly upstairs, entrusted with many cautions to a trim maid, and laid to rest wrapped in a soft lace handkerchief upon a dressing-table, to dream of the new life in store for him to the accompaniment of faintly heard music and laughter from below.

He had given up all his old ideas of recovering his kingdom and marrying a princess—very likely he might not be a fairy prince after all, and he felt now that he did not very much care if he wasn’t.

He was going to be Mabel’s for evermore, and that was worth all Fairyland to him. How bewitching her anger had been when Bertie suspected her of wanting the prince for her own eating. (The prince had already found out that eating meant the way in which these ruthless mortals made everything beautiful pass away between their sharp teeth.)

She had pitied and protected him; might she not some day come to love him? If he had only known what a little sugar fool he was making of himself, I think he would certainly have dissolved into syrup for very shame.

Mabel came up to fetch him at last; they had fastened something white and fleecy round her head and shoulders, and her face was flushed and her eyes seemed a darker grey as she took him out of the handkerchief, with a cry of delight at finding him quite safe, and hurried downstairs with him.

While she was waiting in the hall for her carriage, the prince heard the last of Bertie; he came up to her and whispered spitefully, 'Well, you've kept your word, you've not looked at me since supper, all because I thought you meant to eat that sugar thing off the cake! Now I just tell you this—you needn't pretend you don't like sweets—I wouldn't give much for that figure's lasting a week, *now!*'

She only glanced at him with calm disdain, and passed on under the awning to her carriage, where her brothers were waiting for her, and Bertie was left with a recollection that would make his first fortnight under old Tokoe's roof even bitterer than usual to him.

What a deliciously dreamy drive home that was for the prince; he lay couched on Mabel's soft palm, thinking how cool and satiny it was, and how different from the hot coarse hands which had touched him hitherto.

She said nothing to her brothers, who were curled up, grey indistinct forms, opposite; she sat quietly at the side of the servant who had come to fetch them, and now and then in the faint light the prince could see her smiling with half-shut sleepy eyes at some pleasant recollection.

If that drive could only have gone on for ever! but it came to an end soon, very soon.

A little later his tired little protectress placed him where she could see him when first she awoke the next day, and all that night the prince stood on guard upon the high mantelpiece in the night nursery, thinking of the kiss, half-childish and half-playful, she had given him just before she left him at his post.

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The next morning Mabel woke up tired, and, if it must be confessed, a little cross; but the prince thought she looked lovelier than even on the night before, in her plain dark dress and fresh white pinafore and crossbands.

She took him down with her to breakfast, and stationed him near her plate—and then he made a discovery.

She, too, could make the solid things around her vanish in the very way of which he thought she disapproved so strongly!

It was done, as she seemed to do everything, very daintily and prettily—but still the things did disappear, somehow, and it was a shock.

She called the attention of her governess—who was a pale lady, with a very prominent forehead and round spectacles to the prince's good looks, and the governess admitted that he was pretty, but cautioned Mabel not to eat him, as these highly-coloured confections invariably contained deleterious matter, and were therefore unwholesome.

'Oh,' said Mabel, defending her favourite with great animation, 'but not this one, Miss Pringle. Because I heard Mrs. Goodchild tell somebody last night that she was always so careful to get only sweets painted with "pure vegetable colours," she called it. But that wouldn't matter—for of course I shall never want to *eat* this little man!'

‘Oh, of course not,’ said the governess, with a smile that struck the prince as being unpleasant—though he did not know exactly why, and he was glad to forget it in watching the play of Mabel’s pretty restless fingers on the table-cloth.

By-and-by the nurse came in, carrying something which he had never seen anything at all like before, and which frightened him very much. It was called as he soon found, a ‘Baby,’ and it goggled round it with glassy, meaningless eyes, and clucked fearfully somewhere deep down in its throat, while it stretched out feeble little wrinkled hands, exactly like yellow starfish.

‘There, *there*, then!’ said the nurse (which seems to be the right thing to say to a baby). ‘See, Miss Mabel, he’s asking for that to play with.’

Now *that* happened to be the sugar prince.

Mabel seemed completely in the power of this monster, for she dared not refuse it anything; she crossed almost timidly to it now, and laid the prince in one of its starfish, only entreating that nurse would not allow it to put him in its mouth.

But the baby did not try to do this; its vacant countenance only creased into an idiotic grin, as it began to take a great deal of notice of him; and its way of taking notice was to shake the prince violently up and down, till he was quite giddy.

After doing this several times, it ducked him quite suddenly down, head-foremost, into the nearest cup of tea.

The poor prince felt as if he were all softening and crumbling away into nothing, but it was only some of the paint coming off; and before he could be ducked a second time, Mabel, with a cry of dismay, rescued him from the indignant baby, which howled in a dreadful manner.

She dried him tenderly on her handkerchief, and then, as she saw the result, suddenly began to weep inconsolably herself. ‘Oh, see what Baby’s done!’ she gasped between her sobs; ‘all his lovely complexion ruined, spoilt . . . I wish somebody would just spoil Baby’s face for him, and see how *he* likes it . . . If he isn’t slapped at once—I’ll never love him again!’

But nobody slapped the baby—it was soothed; and, besides, all the slaps hand could bestow would not bring back the prince’s lost beauty.

His face was all the colours of the rainbow now; the yellow of his curls had run into his forehead, his brown eyes were smudged across his nose, and his cherry lips smeared upon his cheeks, while all the blue of his doublet had spread up to his chin.

He knew from what they were all saying that this had happened to him, but he did not mind it much, except at first; he had never been vain of his beauty, and it was delightful to hear Mabel’s little tender laments over his misfortune; so long as she cared for him as he was—what did anything else matter?

In the schoolroom that morning he leaned against her writing-desk, and watched her turning fat books lazily over and inking her fair little hands, until she shut them all up with an impatient bang and yawned.

Why was it that at that precise moment the prince began to feel uncomfortable?

‘Is it near dinner-time, Miss Pringle?’ she asked. ‘I’m so awfully hungry!’

The governess’s watch showed an hour more to wait.

‘I wonder if Comfitt would give me some cake if I ran down and asked her!’ said Mabel next.

The governess thought Mabel had much better wait patiently till dinner-time without spoiling her appetite.

‘Oh, very well,’ said Mabel; ‘what a bore it is to be hungry too soon, isn’t it?’

Then she took the faded prince up and looked at him mournfully. ‘What a shame of Baby!’ she said; ‘I wanted to keep him always to look at—but I don’t see how I can very well now, do you, Miss Pringle? Do they make these things only for ornament, should you think?’

‘I think it is time you finished that exercise,’ was all the governess replied.

‘Oh, I’ve almost done it,’ said Mabel, ‘and I want just to ask this question (it comes under “general information,” you know)—aren’t vegetable colours “dilly-whatever-it-is” colours I mean—harmless? And Dr. Harley said vegetables were so very good for me. I wonder if I might just *taste* him.’

Here the prince’s dream ended: he saw it all at last—how she had petted and praised him only while he was pleasant to look at; and now that was over—he was nothing more to her than something to eat.

Presently he was lifted gently between her slim finger and thumb to her lips, and touched caressingly by something red and moist and warm behind them. It was not unpleasant exactly, so far, but he knew that worse was coming, and longed for her to make haste and get it over.

‘Vanilla!’ reported Mabel, ‘that *must* be all right, Miss Pringle. Cook flavours corn-flour with it!’

Miss Pringle shrugged her sharp shoulders: ‘You must use your own judgment, my dear,’ was all she said.

And then—I am sorry to have to tell what happened next, but this is a true story and I must go on—then the prince saw Mabel’s grey eyes looking at him from under their long lashes with interest for the last time, he saw two gleaming pearly rows closing upon him, he felt a sharp pang, of grief as well as pain, as they crunched him up into small pieces, and he slowly melted away and there was an end of him.

There is a beautiful moral belonging to this story, but it is of no use to print it here, because it only applies to sugar princes—until Mabel is quite grown up.