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Ririro

IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

The runaway princess of winter sleep town

Once upon a time, on the banks of a river that flowed through a plain surrounded by mountains to the sea, there was a town of the wisest people in the world. Instead of spending the winter like others did, huddled around smoky fires, freezing ears and noses, piling up in a tangle of clothes, and grumpy at breakfast, these wise people simply retired to their homes, closed their doors, drew their curtains, put on their nightcaps, crawled into bed, and slept the winter away. The north wind howled around their houses and didn't wake a single citizen from their dreams; the snow lay untrodden on the empty market square and quiet streets. But when the leaves were the size of a mouse's ear and the singing birds had returned from their winter pilgrimage, the sleepy citizens woke up, rubbed their eyes, stretched their arms, and came yawning to open their windows to the sun and spring.

The king of this remarkable town had three children, two sons and a daughter, the youngest named Princess Theolette, who was as headstrong and lively as a mountain bird.

One day, late in autumn, Theolette, who had nothing to do, decided to visit the royal library. It was very quiet there, the red autumn sun shone through the large

windows, a million dust particles danced in the broad, ruddy beam, and Theolette, curled up in a huge red leather armchair, had a hard time staying awake. But then her eyes fell on a large green book titled Wintertime. She took the book on her lap.

To her disappointment, the book was written in a different language, but the pictures – they would have kept anyone awake! There were pictures of snowy mountain peaks, of clear, frozen lakes with people skating, of attacks on snow forts, of snowstorms. And although Theolette had never seen winter or snow or ice, and didn't understand some of the pictures, she understood that it was something strange, new, and wonderful. And then she decided to run away during the winter sleep, to see the winter world and return before the city woke up for the arrival of spring!

The days grew shorter and the cold nights longer, and soon the great day of the winter sleep was near. A trumpeter, placed in the tower of dreams, called the city to life at sunrise for the last morning; and soon a murmur of bustle and preparations rose from every household in the town.

At sunset, as always, the sleep law was read to the people from a balcony of the palace. This law called all citizens to go to sleep, and recited the terrible punishments you could get if you dared to stay awake. When the meeting was over and the streets were empty, except for a hasty citizen or two who had done a late errand, the gates were closed and the river's water became a moat around the town.

The enchanted bells of sleep would ring at midnight.

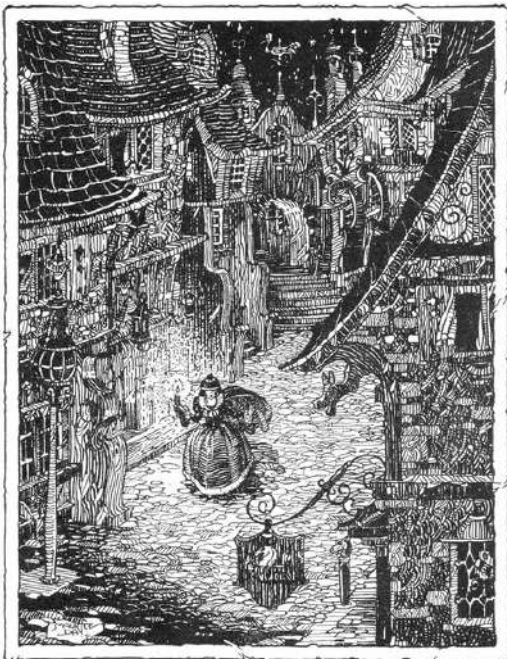
After attending the ceremonial goodnight of the royal family, Theolette hurried to her own room. "I must not fall asleep now," she said, "because if I do, I will sleep until spring!" And with a heart pounding in the darkness, she waited until midnight.

Suddenly the first warning bell rang. Nightcap on! And, after a pause, the second bell rang. Lights out! Theolette sat in a large chair, stood up, walked around, sat down again, and stood up again. Would the third bell never ring?

Everyone to bed! – boomed the third bell. Theolette put her fingers in her ears.

When the clock chimes finally stopped, Theolette went to her window, drew the curtain aside, and looked out over the city, sleeping in starlight. How strange and still were those dark streets. Suddenly the princess uttered a little cry of amazement!

Far away on the other side of the sleeping city, in a



cottage by the wall, there shone a yellow light! And now the light moved, went from window to window, vanished, reappeared, and vanished again. Someone else was still awake in the city! Who could it be?

Amazed but not afraid, the princess went to her wardrobe and put on a red hunting dress and a cap. Then she threw her warmest cloak over her

shoulders, took a burning candle with her, and walked down the great staircase to the palace door. Theolette cautiously opened the door and stepped into the dark street.

Everything seemed in order; the gates were locked and the drawbridge over the moat was up. Theolette listened for a footstep or a sound but heard only the sighing of the night wind and the rippling of water in the moat. Reassured by the silence, the princess lowered the drawbridge, opened the great gate with her father's own key, and closed it behind her. The runaway princess bravely walked into the dark and lonely land.

The next morning, the princess arrived in a rural town just across the border of her father's kingdom, and there she sought out an inn and made preparations for her journey. From the host, she bought a small white horse and a warm cloak of peasant wool. The adventurous Theolette galloped into the winter world. And what happened to her, you will hear soon.

What a beautiful journey through the world of ice and snow! I wish I had time to tell you about everything she saw and did, about how the first snowstorm pleased her so much that she almost lost her way in the whirling of the flakes, about her first glimpse of a piece of ice, about her visit to the winter festival of the Snow Fairy, how she danced the minuet at the polar bear ball, and how she rode Aldebaran, the skating horse, up and down the ice lakes of the wilderness. This wondrous animal was white as snow, and his saddle and bridle were made of blue leather with a white border.

You should have seen him skating over the lakes, now pulling with this hoof, then with that; he held his head high, his long silky tail fluttered in the wind. And Theolette thought, as she rode, of the old book in the royal library and of the City of Winter Sleep far away. But winter was beginning to come to an end, and Theolette knew she had to return immediately. As she approached the border of her father's land, a band of robbers suddenly sprang out of a forest and tightly bound her, hurrying her to their castle with the intention of demanding ransom. Arriving there, they pushed the princess into a tower room and slammed and locked the heavy oak door behind them.

From her window in the tower, Theolette could see the main road that led through the wooded lowlands to the castle, and the stream of a river –



indeed the river that flowed along the walls of the City of Winter Sleep. With each warm and sunny hour, spring dispelled the old winter from the land, buds opened, frogs poured out in small triumph from every swamp, and there were delicious scents in the air.

"The awakening of spring is near," thought Theolette. "What shall I do?"

But then one day, the desolate princess heard a voice singing a song from her own land on the road below. It was a song about a soldier who had fought in wars and

returned in the spring to plow the earth he had loved and defended. Upon hearing the song, Theolette let out a cry of joy and ran to the window. A boy stood on the main road directly beneath the window; he had heard the cry and was looking up at the wall.

"Tell me who you are," cried Theolette.

To which the boy replied that he was only a student who had run away from the city of winter sleep. And Theolette remembered the light she had seen in the old house by the city wall.

Theolette told the boy about her adventures and begged him to help her. Because he was a smart and brave boy, he managed to lure the robbers away from the castle that same evening and threw a coiled rope to the princess. And so the adventurous Theolette came down.

Together they ran to the river where a boat was waiting. But the boat was only big enough for one passenger!

"Get in," said the boy. "And you will soon be in the city."

"But what about you?" said Theolette. "You are coming back too late, and it will be known that you were away."

"Do not be afraid, Princess," the student replied with a smile. "There is still time, and I will hurry. To be honest, I never felt at home in the city anyway. Hurry, for the robbers will soon return."

Just as dawn was breaking pink and gray over the east, the princess caught sight of her father's city. The

drawbridge was still lowered over the moat, the city was still sealed in its winter dream.

Theolette ran to the palace and went to her room. She quickly put on her pajamas and crawled into bed. She was so exhausted that her head had barely touched the pillow before she was in deep sleep.

When she opened her eyes again, a whole day and night had passed, the city had awakened from its winter sleep, and her mother was bending over her with an amused smile. The silver bells of the awakening of spring rang loudly and clearly over the city.

"Goodness, Theolette," said her mother, "but you are a sleepyhead! I've been shaking you for the last ten minutes. Get up and wear your rose dress to the big spring breakfast."

A little later, Theolette, feeling a bit bewildered, sat at breakfast with her father, mother, and brothers. And there the princess told them the whole story of her runaway adventures. To her surprise, they did not believe her!

"You have dreamed, Theolette," said her father, shaking his head.

Weeks went by and Theolette could not find anyone who believed her story. Tired of insisting and shocked by the disbelief of those around her, the princess began to wonder in her own heart if it was all a dream. There was nothing left of it, and it seemed like a dream!

The parents of Theolette began to worry. She held her head low, her eyes were full of doubt and memories, she daydreamed all day, and became very pale. The wise men of the king advised sending her on a long visit

to her aunt, the queen of the Golden Mountain. On the morning of her departure, Theolette walked to the great state room to say goodbye.

"A dream; was it just a dream?" thought Theolette. And she saw again the winter world, and the polar bear ball, with candles burning in chandeliers made of icicles, and the skating horse, and the boy who had saved her from the robbers. Was it perhaps just a dream?

Suddenly, everyone in the state hall heard a voice singing. And the voice sang a song of a soldier who had fought in wars and returned in the spring to plow the beloved earth he had defended. A silence fell over the astonished people.

"Quick!" cried Theolette, pale as snow. "Bring the singer here to me!"

A group of guards ran through the door to carry out her order. They came back a moment later with the student who had saved Theolette from the robbers! He was very pale, there were handcuffs on his wrists, and two sturdy guards stood beside him. And as he looked at Theolette, the boy held his breath with a shock and met her gaze with strange eyes.

"Speak! What does this mean? Who is this fellow?" the king shouted, rising from his throne.

"This boy is a student from the University of Dreams who did not obey the law of sleep and ran away from the city. He was captured when he tried to return after awakening in the spring, brought before the Court of Dreams and sentenced to pay a fine. We were taking him to the dungeons under the river when the royal

guard surrounded us and led us here. What do you want, king?"

"My will is that the judgment be obeyed," the king replied. "Take him to the dungeons!"

"No, father!" Theolette cried. "If he is guilty, then so am I! I too disobeyed the law; I also ran away. This is the brave boy who saved me from the robbers. Oh, won't you believe me now? It's not a dream – it never has been!"

Suddenly, she heard a fanfare of trumpets. "A royal visitor!" exclaimed the king. "What can this mean?"

The great gates of the hall swung open and another king entered.

"King of the City of Winter Sleep," the newcomer cried, "hear me, for I have come from afar and in great haste. I am the king of the North and I seek my only son, Prince Florimond, who was stolen from his cradle twenty years ago. The Fairy of the Islands has revealed that I will find him here. He lives in a house by the city wall and is a student at the University of Dreams."

"Florimond?" exclaimed the university director, stepping forward, "there is only one Florimond in the city, and it is this young man!" And everyone immediately saw that the king and the runaway student were indeed father and son. The runaway young man was immediately granted clemency. When this happened, the king proclaimed a three-day festival.

On the last night of the festival, Florimond and Theolette walked alone to a large balcony and looked out over the city, the river, and the plain surrounded by mountains. It was midsummer evening, the warm night

was sweet with the scent of many flowers, and the music of lutes and gambas sounded faintly through the pleasant air.

"It wasn't crazy of me to run away," the prince said laughing, "since I was never born as a winter sleeper!"

"Winter – ah, how fun it all was!" Theolette replied. "I wonder if I'll ever see it again."

"You will see it every year if you agree to be Princess of the North," answered Florimond with a smile. And then and there, the two runaways swore their loyalty. When the wedding was over, Florimond returned to his own land and took Theolette with him, and they lived happily ever after!