

The Magic Mask

Adapted by Mrs. Charles A. Lane

There was once a great and powerful prince. He had hundreds of soldiers in his army, and with their help he had conquered vast strips of country, over which he ruled. He was wise as well as brave. But, though all men feared his iron will and respected his strong purpose, no one loved him. As he grew older, he became lonely and unhappy; and this made him sterner and colder and more severe than ever. The lines about his mouth were hard and grim, there was a deep frown on his forehead, and his lips rarely smiled.

Now it happened that in one of the cities over which he had come to rule was a beautiful princess whom he wished to have for his wife. He had watched her for many months as she went about among the people, and he knew that she was as good and kind as she was beautiful. But, because he always wore his armor and his heavy helmet when he rode through his dominions, she had never seen his face.

The day came when he made up his mind that he would ask the lovely princess to come and live in his palace. He put on his royal robes and his golden coronet. But when he looked at his reflection in the glass, he could see nothing but what would cause fear and dislike. His face looked hard and cruel and stern. He tried to smile, but it seemed an unnatural effort. He quickly gave it up.

Then a happy notion came to him. Sending for the court magician, he said to him: "Make for me a mask of the thinnest wax so that it will follow every line of my features, but paint it with your magic paints so that it will look kind and pleasant instead of fierce and stern. Fasten it upon my face so that I shall never have to take it off. Make it as handsome and attractive as your skill can suggest, and I will pay for it any price you choose to ask."

"This I can do," said the court magician, "on one condition only. You must keep your own face in the same lines that I shall paint, or the mask will be ruined. One angry frown, one cruel smile will crack the mask and ruin it forever; nor can I replace it. Will you agree to this? "

The prince had a strong will, and never in his life had he wanted anything so much as he now wanted the princess for his wife. "Yes," he said, "I agree. Tell me how I may keep the mask from cracking."

"You must train yourself to think kindly thoughts," said the magician. "To do this, you must do kindly deeds. You must try to make your kingdom happy rather than great. Whenever you are angry, keep absolutely still until the feeling has gone away. Try to think of ways to make your subjects happier and better. Build schools instead of forts, and hospitals instead of battleships. Be gracious and courteous to all men."

So the wonderful mask was made; and when the prince put it on, no one would have guessed that it was not his true face. The lovely princess, indeed, could find no fault with it, and she came willingly to be his bride in his splendid palace. The months went on; and, though at first the magic mask was often in danger of being destroyed, the prince had been as good as his word. No one had ever discovered that it was false. His subjects, it is true, wondered at his new gentleness and thoughtfulness. But they said, "It is the princess who has made him like herself."

The prince, however, was not quite happy. When the princess smiled her approval of his forbearance and goodness, he used to wish that he had never deceived her with the magic mask. At last he could bear it no longer, and, summoning the magician, he bade him remove the false face.

"If I do, Your Royal Highness," protested the magician, "I can never make another. You must wear your own face as long as you live."

"Better so," cried the prince, "than to deceive one whose love and trust I value so greatly. Better even that she should despise me than that I should go on doing what is unworthy for her sake."

Then the magician took off the mask, and the prince in fear and anguish of heart sought his reflection in the glass. As he looked, his eyes brightened and his lips curved into a radiant smile. The ugly lines were gone, the frown had disappeared, and his face was molded in the exact likeness of the mask he had worn so long. And, when he came into the presence of his wife, she saw only the familiar features of the prince she loved.