

A Chaparral Prince

By O. Henry

Chapter One

Lena and the Ogre's Castle

Lena was only eleven years old. She worked all day in a big, noisy hotel. It was called the Quarrymen's Hotel, where men who cut stones lived. They were rough and loud. Lena had to work hard—cleaning, cooking, washing, and carrying water. It was too much for a small girl.

She was tired every evening. Her back hurt. Her hands were red. Her eyes were sad. But every night, when her work was done, she went to her small room. There, she lit a tiny candle, sat on her wooden chair, and read her favorite book—Grimm's Fairy Tales.

The stories helped her forget the pain. In the stories, there were princes, fairies, and brave girls. She dreamed that one day, someone would come and save her too. Maybe a prince, strong and kind, would take her far away from the hotel.

Mrs. Maloney, the hotel manager, did not like books. She said, "Servants don't need to read! They need to sleep and work hard!" She took away Lena's book. Now, Lena felt even more alone.

Lena's home was in Fredericksburg, a town with many German families. Her father, Peter Hildesmuller, was a strict and serious man. He sent Lena to work thirty miles away to earn money. She made three dollars a week. He saved every cent.

At night, Lena missed her family. She wanted to go home. She wanted to see her mamma, her brothers and sisters—Gretel, Claus, Heinrich, and little Adolf. She felt very sad and very tired.

Chapter Two

A Letter Full of Tears

One night, Lena was too sad to sleep. Her hands hurt from carrying heavy wood, and her heart felt empty. She sat by the candlelight and took an old box. Inside it, she found a small piece of paper and a short pencil.

"I must write to Mamma," she whispered.

She began to write slowly. Her hand shook. She bit the wood around the pencil to make it sharp.

This is what Lena wrote:

Dearest Mamma,

I want to see you so much. And I want to see Gretel, Claus, Heinrich, and little Adolf too. I am very tired. Today, Mrs. Maloney hit me. I had no supper. My hand hurts from carrying wood. She also took away my book—Grimm's Fairy Tales. I only read it a little each night. It helped me feel strong and brave.

But now I feel weak. There is too much work, and I am only a little girl. Mamma, if you don't send for me tomorrow, I will go to a deep place in the river. I know where it is. I will go there. I want to see you. There is no one else for me.

Your respectful and loving daughter,

Lena

After writing the letter, Lena looked out the window. Her friend Tommy Ryan, who worked in the quarry, waited in the dark. He was seventeen and kind. Every night, he passed Lena's window.

Lena threw the letter to him. "Please give this to the postman at Ballinger's," she said.

Tommy nodded and hid the letter under his coat. He promised to send it.

Lena blew out her candle and lay down on her thin mattress. She didn't change her clothes. She didn't cry anymore. She was too tired to cry.

Far away, in Fredericksburg, her family sat at tables along the sidewalk. They drank beer and played cards. Her father saved money, hoping to be rich one day. But no one knew Lena's pain.

Chapter Three

The Road of Danger

Tommy Ryan held Lena's letter close to his chest. He walked through the night, climbing the steep hill to Ballinger's place. Old Mr. Ballinger was the local postmaster. He lived in a small house at the edge of town.

At 10:30, Mr. Ballinger came outside in his stocking feet, rubbing his sore toe. He waited for the mail wagon. Soon, he heard the sound of small hooves—clip-clop, clip-clop. It was Fritz Bergmann, the mail driver, with his two little black mules.

Fritz wore big glasses and had a loud voice. He loved his mules more than anything. After greeting Mr. Ballinger, he picked up the mail sack. Tommy ran to him and handed over Lena's letter.

"Please," said Tommy, "this is for Mrs. Hildesmuller in Fredericksburg. It's from her daughter."

Fritz smiled. "Of course, Tommy. I'll take good care of it."

But that night, something terrible happened.

Robbers on the Road

Fritz was halfway to Fredericksburg when bandits attacked. They came out of the woods, shouting and shooting into the air. The mules stopped in fear. The robbers laughed and told Fritz to get down.

One of the robbers was called Hondo Bill. He was tall and strong. He had a shiny gun and a big voice. Another robber, Rattlesnake Rogers, pulled hard on one mule's rope. The mule cried in pain. Fritz became angry and punched him!

"You hurt my mule!" he shouted.

The robbers tied Fritz to a tree. They took the mail sacks and looked for money. One robber said, "These people send money in the mail. Let's find it!"

They found Lena's letter and gave it to Hondo Bill. He opened it. It was written in German.

"This is just a child's letter!" shouted Hondo. "What kind of trick is this?"

Fritz begged, "Please, don't throw it away. It's from a little girl. She's tired and wants to go home."

"Translate it," said Hondo.

Fritz read it out loud. The robbers listened. The fire grew quiet. The night was still.

The letter touched their hearts.

The Decision

"She is eleven?" Hondo asked.

"Yes," said Fritz. "She's working like a servant. She writes that she might drown in the river."

Hondo's voice became angry. "These people... they send their children to work instead of letting them play. That's not right."

Then Hondo shouted, "Boys, let's do something better tonight. We're not just robbers—we're knights!"

They made a fast plan.

One robber whispered, "We'll sneak into the hotel. No one will know."

Another said, "Let's take the girl and bring her home."

So, they did.

They quietly entered the hotel. They found Lena asleep in her bed, wrapped in a thin blanket. They didn't wake her. They gently carried her out, wrapped her in warm quilts from the wagon, and placed her in the back, safe and sound.

Chapter Four

The Prince Comes at Last

The night was cold, but Lena was warm. She was wrapped in soft blankets and lay in the back of the wagon, sleeping deeply. She did not know the robbers had saved her. She did not hear the sound of the mules. She did not feel the road under the wheels.

The sun came up slowly. Fritz, the mailman, was free again. The robbers had untied him and told him, "Go home, Dutch. You've had a wild night!"

Fritz was still dizzy, but he got in the wagon, took the reins, and drove. He didn't know that Lena was in the back, sleeping under the quilts.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, Fritz reached Fredericksburg. He passed the Hildesmuller house and shouted at the gate. The whole family rushed out.

"Did you bring a letter from Lena?" asked Frau Hildesmuller, her mother.

"Yes," said Fritz. "And I must tell you a strange story..."

He told them everything—the robbers, the letter, the danger. Frau Hildesmuller began to cry. "My poor little Lena! Why did we send her away?"

Peter Hildesmuller dropped his pipe and shouted at his wife, "It's your fault!"

But suddenly, a soft voice called out:

"Mamma!"

Everyone turned.

There, from the back of the wagon, stood Lena! Her eyes were sleepy. Her cheeks were pale. But she was smiling. She ran to her mother.

"Lena!" cried her family. They hugged her, kissed her, and held her close.

Fritz stood there with his mouth open. "Gott in Himmel!" he shouted. "How did she get in my wagon?"

Frau Hildesmuller cried with joy, "You brought her home, Fritz! You are our hero!"

Lena looked around and said softly, "The Prince brought me."

Everyone stared.

"What?" asked her mother.

“I don’t know how I got in the wagon,” said Lena. “But I know how I got away from the hotel. Last night, the Prince came.”

Lena sat on the steps and told her story.

“Last night,” she said, “the Prince came with his knights. They broke the doors. They scared Mrs. Maloney and threw flour on her. They put Mr. Maloney in a big barrel of water!”

Everyone laughed.

“They came up to my room,” Lena said, smiling. “The Prince picked me up and wrapped me in warm blankets. He was tall and strong. His face was rough like a scrubbing brush, but he smelled sweet, like schnapps. He put me on his horse and held me close. I fell asleep.”

Fritz scratched his head. “Fairy tales! That’s not how she got here!”

But Lena looked up and said again, “The Prince brought me.”

And to this day, no one in Fredericksburg has ever made her say anything else.

— THE END —