

Perdita by Lydia Penn

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Painting: Oil on Canvas by Margaret Cooper.

Joshua rarely travelled to the city; he much preferred the peace and tranquillity surrounding the country estate which had been in his family for generations.

But business had now made it imperative for him to spend a few days in the busy bustling metropolis. Having a little free time, he began to meander around the familiar affluent areas. Lost in thought, he wandered eastward into an area of small cheap shops and street markets.

He walked down a little narrow thoroughfare and found himself in front of a small dingy looking shop with a large weather-beaten sign indicating, “Antiques” – probably “junk” would have been a more apt description. There was always the chance of finding some valuable object lying undiscovered, under a heap of junk. So Joshua pushed open the creaky dirty door and went inside.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom from the brilliant sunshine outside, he saw a middle-aged, swarthy looking man, smelling strongly of garlic, had emerged from some dark area at the rear of the shop and was advancing towards him.

“Just Looking round,” said Joshua sheepishly, as he studied a chipped and cracked bowl which had probably once been beautiful.

The man turned away and barked an order towards the rear from which he had come. A young girl appeared, smiling slightly. But as Joshua looked into her large deep blue eyes something happened.

He saw before him, not an emaciated thin girl with untidy looking shoulder length brown hair wearing a stained cotton dress on which she wiped her grubby hands, but a beautiful slim young woman well dressed in expensive clothes and adorned with glittering jewels which he had bestowed upon her.

He was speechless. "Have I gone mad", he asked himself. What has happened to me? He could only stare, then, pulling himself together, he muttered, "nothing thank you," and headed for the door.

That night he could not sleep. He knew he had fallen deeply and irretrievably in love. None of the debutantes who pursued him, none of the actresses or models he had frequently dated had ever aroused such feeling in him.

"Absurd", he reasoned to himself as he tossed and turned in his comfortable hotel bed. "Things like that just don't happen. Perhaps if I see her again, I will realise it was all my imagination."

"That's only your excuse to see her again", said reason; and it was true. He rose early, showered and dressed casually, picked at his breakfast continually checking his watch and as soon as he felt it was a reasonable hour, he took a cab back to the area.

He found the shop without difficulty, and, as he again pressed open the creaky old door, the girl came forward at once. Again Joshua found his feelings in turmoil. "Can I show you something?" she asked. Her accent was broad cockney.

But Joshua did not even notice. He picked up the nearest article which happened to be a pair of old rusty fire tongs. "I'll take these," he stammered, without taking his eyes off her face. He watched as she carefully wrapped them in a sheet of newspaper from under the counter. Their eyes met and he saw a flicker of interest in hers which encouraged him. "I was wondering, would you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked hesitantly.

The small cafe – one could scarcely call it a restaurant – situated in the next street, was certainly not the sort of venue Joshua was accustomed to for his dinner dates. But he wanted to meet her on her home territory where she would feel comfortable. So he did his best to hide his revulsion as they faced each other across a stained plastic-topped table in an atmosphere of beer and tobacco smoke.

The menu scrawled on an old blackboard propped against one wall, offered a variety of dishes – fish and chips, egg and chips, hamburgers and chips, sausages and chips. She chose the latter which she then liberally covered with tomato sauce.

She told him that her name was Perdita. "It was my mother's name, and my grandmothers too", she said. As they talked, it became apparent that her ancestors had been people of culture and affluence, but generations of moral corruption, poverty and dissolute living had

resulted in the state of degradation in which he had found her. The man she explained, was her stepfather, who demanded that she cook and clean for him as her dead mother had done, as well as working in the shop.

So, in that unlikely, unsavoury atmosphere, he began to woo her. As he talked, her face brightened and a light appeared in her blue eyes. Perdita was mesmerised by the power of his love, and something in her warmed to him. Outside in the dark street, they embraced in one long lingering kiss before he took her back to the shop.

The next evening they drove out to a charming little restaurant by the river. As they sat at a small corner table which looked out over the water, to Joshua, in spite of her cheap, shabby clothes and straggly hair, Perdita looked beautiful. He could wait no longer. He was crazy about her.

“Perdita,” he said, “trust me. Trust your life to me. I know that we have only just met, but I want you as my bride. We will have the rest of our lives together to get to know each other.”

It seemed crazy, incredible, but by now both knew they were madly in love. They returned to the shop to tell her stepfather that Perdita was leaving him. Smelling strongly of beer now, as well as garlic, he ranted and raved, as he realised he was about to lose some very cheap slave labour.

“Look here”, argued Joshua, “She is of age, and she has a right to freedom and to do as she chooses. I am a very wealthy man, I will pay you a large price for her freedom”.

So matters were settled, and they were soon married. Joshua took great delight in showing her his country estate, and showering her with gifts of expensive clothes and jewellery. He employed tutors to further her education. He introduced her to fine wines and gourmet foods. She learnt quickly, perhaps responding to that dormant culture of her past ancestry. She learned to ride and they spent many hours together riding through the countryside; She shared his love of the sea and quickly learnt how to sail under his instruction. They were enthralled with each other!

In fact, they were inseparable. He loved to see the light in her eyes when she looked at him. They walked hand in hand through the rose gardens that both loved, and she responded eagerly to his tender embraces. Their love grew.

Time passed and Perdita began to occupy herself with other things which she felt would please her husband; she shopped for unnecessary items for the house; she began her own small flower garden and visited nurseries to acquire more and more plants.

These new activities took so much of her time that she was no longer always available for Joshua. He remonstrated gently with her. “But don’t you see,” she responded, as she carefully arranged yet another vase of flowers, “I just want to make your home even more beautiful”.

Joshua turned sadly away. He longed for her company once more, but the light seemed to have gone from her eyes when she looked at him. She was so often out on shopping expeditions, and when she came home, too tired to respond to his overtures. Joshua had to

admit he hardly saw her, and the distance between them grew.

Then she began to complain about the servants. "You said I would be free", she stormed one day. "I am so tired of this ordered life and all the fuss. I want to be me.

"My love, they are only doing their job". Joshua tried to explain." They are responsible to me for your welfare, and the smooth running of my house. They have a concern for you".

When she left, taking with her all his gifts and many valuable items from the house, he did not try to stop her. "Forget her, there are plenty of other women out there, " said many of his friends. "Divorce her", said others. Joshua ignored them and carried on with his life as before, but there was now a deep sadness in his eyes. There were many long, lonely nights when he would lie awake and call softly "Perdita, Perdita, come back to me, my love".

A year passed. Unknown to Perdita, Joshua had used his wealth and resources to follow her whereabouts and activities. Still he waited. He knew she would return. "Such love!" marvelled his friends. "It just isn't natural."

Perdita had at first returned to her old friends and casual untidy way of life. But she found that somehow she did not enjoy that lifestyle any more. The old friends began to make fun of her, her more cultured speech and lifestyle. She became more and more isolated and

She spent long hours alone sailing in the small dinghy which she had bought with the money from the sale of her jewellery.

One summer day Joshua drove to a small secluded beach not far from his home, where they had walked, talked and swam together in those early halcyon days. Then, as he looked towards the sea, he saw her!

She stood a small pathetic figure. Soaking wet, enveloped in seaweed, looking out to the sea from whence she had come. In the distance, crashed against the rocks, Joshua could see the remains of her small dinghy.

Perdita was indeed lost!

"Perdita, Perdita," he called, and as the warm gentle wind, carried his voice toward her, she turned and saw him. Joshua bounded towards her and quickly pulled away the seaweed which entangled her. As he clasped her slight bedraggled body to him and showered her with kisses. He saw once again the light come into her eyes.

Somehow they both knew that now she was here to stay by his side forever, weathering the storms of life together.

"Oh, Joshua," she whispered, her arms around his neck, as he carried her up the beach, "I've been such a fool. Please take me back again".

And he did! Perdita had come home.