## A Chaparral Prince

O. Henry

Nine o’clock at last, and the drudging toil of the day was ended. Lena climbed to her room in the third half-story of the Quarrymen’s Hotel. Since daylight she had slaved, doing the work of a full-grown woman, scrubbing the floors, washing the heavy ironstone plates and cups, making the beds, and supplying the insatiate demands for wood and water in that turbulent and depressing hostelry.

The din of the day’s quarrying was over—the blasting and drilling, the creaking of the great cranes, the shouts of the foremen, the backing and shifting of the flat-cars hauling the heavy blocks of limestone. Down in the hotel office three or four of the labourers were growling and swearing over a belated game of checkers. Heavy odours of stewed meat, hot grease, and cheap coffee hung like a depressing fog about the house.

Lena lit the stump of a candle and sat limply upon her wooden chair. She was eleven years old, thin and ill-nourished. Her back and limbs were sore and aching. But the ache in her heart made the biggest trouble. The last straw had been added to the burden upon her small shoulders. They had taken away Grimm. Always at night, however tired she might be, she had turned to Grimm for comfort and hope. Each time had Grimm whispered to her that the prince or the fairy would come and deliver her out of the wicked enchantment. Every night she had taken fresh courage and strength from Grimm.

To whatever tale she read she found an analogy in her own condition. The woodcutter’s lost child, the unhappy goose girl, the persecuted stepdaughter, the little maiden imprisoned in the witch’s hut—all these were but transparent disguises for Lena, the overworked kitchenmaid in the Quarrymen’s Hotel. And always when the extremity was direst came the good fairy or the gallant prince to the rescue.

So, here in the ogre’s castle, enslaved by a wicked spell, Lena had leaned upon Grimm and waited, longing for the powers of goodness to prevail. But on the day before Mrs. Maloney had found the book in her room and had carried it away, declaring sharply that it would not do for servants to read at night; they lost sleep and did not work briskly the next day. Can one only eleven years old, living away from one’s mamma, and never having any time to play, live entirely deprived of Grimm? Just try it once and you will see what a difficult thing it is.

Lena’s home was in Texas, away up among the little mountains on the Pedernales River, in a little town called Fredericksburg. They are all German people who live in Fredericksburg. Of evenings they sit at little tables along the sidewalk and drink beer and play pinochle and scat. They are very thrifty people.

Thriftiest among them was Peter Hildesmuller, Lena’s father. And that is why Lena was sent to work in the hotel at the quarries, thirty miles away. She earned three dollars every week there, and Peter added her wages to his well-guarded store. Peter had an ambition to become as rich as his neighbour, Hugo Heffelbauer, who smoked a meerschaum pipe three feet long and had wiener schnitzel and hassenpfeffer for dinner every day in the week. And now Lena was quite old enough to work and assist in the accumulation of riches. But conjecture, if you can, what it means to be sentenced at eleven years of age from a home in the pleasant little Rhine village to hard labour in the ogre’s castle, where you must fly to serve the ogres, while they devour cattle and sheep, growling fiercely as they stamp white limestone dust from their great shoes for you to sweep and scour with your weak, aching fingers. And then—to have Grimm taken away from you!

Lena raised the lid of an old empty case that had once contained canned corn and got out a sheet of paper and a piece of pencil. She was going to write a letter to her mamma. Tommy Ryan was going to post it for her at Ballinger’s. Tommy was seventeen, worked in the quarries, went home to Ballinger’s every night, and was now waiting in the shadows under Lena’s window for her to throw the letter out to him. That was the only way she could send a letter to Fredericksburg. Mrs. Maloney did not like for her to write letters.

The stump of the candle was burning low, so Lena hastily bit the wood from around the lead of her pencil and began. This is the letter she wrote:

Dearest Mamma:—I want so much to see you. And Gretel and Claus and Heinrich and little Adolf. I am so tired. I want to see you. To-day I was slapped by Mrs. Maloney and had no supper. I could not bring in enough wood, for my hand hurt. She took my book yesterday. I mean “Grimm’s Fairy Tales,” which Uncle Leo gave me. It did not hurt any one for me to read the book. I try to work as well as I can, but there is so much to do. I read only a little bit every night. Dear mamma, I shall tell you what I am going to do. Unless you send for me to-morrow to bring me home I shall go to a deep place I know in the river and drown. It is wicked to drown, I suppose, but I wanted to see you, and there is no one else. I am very tired, and Tommy is waiting for the letter. You will excuse me, mamma, if I do it.

Your respectful and loving daughter, Lena.

Tommy was still waiting faithfully when the letter was concluded, and when Lena dropped it out she saw him pick it up and start up the steep hillside. Without undressing she blew out the candle and curled herself upon the mattress on the floor.

At 10:30 o’clock old man Ballinger came out of his house in his stocking feet and leaned over the gate, smoking his pipe. He looked down the big road, white in the moonshine, and rubbed one ankle with the toe of his other foot. It was time for the Fredericksburg mail to come pattering up the road.

Old man Ballinger had waited only a few minutes when he heard the lively hoofbeats of Fritz’s team of little black mules, and very soon afterward his covered spring wagon stood in front of the gate. Fritz’s big spectacles flashed in the moonlight and his tremendous voice shouted a greeting to the postmaster of Ballinger’s. The mail-carrier jumped out and took the bridles from the mules, for he always fed them oats at Ballinger’s.

While the mules were eating from their feed bags old man Ballinger brought out the mail sack and threw it into the wagon.

Fritz Bergmann was a man of three sentiments—or to be more accurate— four, the pair of mules deserving to be reckoned individually. Those mules were the chief interest and joy of his existence. Next came the Emperor of Germany and Lena Hildesmuller.

“Tell me,” said Fritz, when he was ready to start, “contains the sack a letter to Frau Hildesmuller from the little Lena at the quarries? One came in the last mail to say that she is a little sick, already. Her mamma is very anxious to hear again.”

“Yes,” said old man Ballinger, “thar’s a letter for Mrs. Helterskelter, or some sich name. Tommy Ryan brung it over when he come. Her little gal workin’ over thar, you say?”

“In the hotel,” shouted Fritz, as he gathered up the lines; “eleven years old and not bigger as a frankfurter. The close-fist of a Peter Hildesmuller!—some day I shall with a big club pound that man’s dummkopf—all in and out the town. Perhaps in this letter Lena will say that she is yet feeling better. So, her mamma will be glad. Auf wiedersehen, Herr Ballinger—your feets will take cold out in the night air.”

“So long, Fritzy,” said old man Ballinger. “You got a nice cool night for your drive.”

Up the road went the little black mules at their steady trot, while Fritz thundered at them occasional words of endearment and cheer.

These fancies occupied the mind of the mail-carrier until he reached the big post oak forest, eight miles from Ballinger’s. Here his ruminations were scattered by the sudden flash and report of pistols and a whooping as if from a whole tribe of Indians. A band of galloping centaurs closed in around the mail wagon. One of them leaned over the front wheel, covered the driver with his revolver, and ordered him to stop. Others caught at the bridles of Donder and Blitzen.

“Donnerwetter!” shouted Fritz, with all his tremendous voice—“wass ist? Release your hands from dose mules. Ve vas der United States mail!”

“Hurry up, Dutch!” drawled a melancholy voice. “Don’t you know when you’re in a stick-up? Reverse your mules and climb out of the cart.”

It is due to the breadth of Hondo Bill’s demerit and the largeness of his achievements to state that the holding up of the Fredericksburg mail was not perpetrated by way of an exploit. As the lion while in the pursuit of prey commensurate to his prowess might set a frivolous foot upon a casual rabbit in his path, so Hondo Bill and his gang had swooped sportively upon the pacific transport of Meinherr Fritz.

The real work of their sinister night ride was over. Fritz and his mail bag and his mules came as gentle relaxation, grateful after the arduous duties of their profession. Twenty miles to the southeast stood a train with a killed engine, hysterical passengers and a looted express and mail car. That represented the serious occupation of Hondo Bill and his gang. With a fairly rich prize of currency and silver the robbers were making a wide detour to the west through the less populous country, intending to seek safety in Mexico by means of some fordable spot on the Rio Grande. The booty from the train had melted the desperate bushrangers to jovial and happy skylarkers.

Trembling with outraged dignity and no little personal apprehension, Fritz climbed out to the road after replacing his suddenly removed spectacles. The band had dismounted and were singing, capering, and whooping, thus expressing their satisfied delight in the life of a jolly outlaw. Rattlesnake Rogers, who stood at the heads of the mules, jerked a little too vigorously at the rein of the tender-mouthed Donder, who reared and emitted a loud, protesting snort of pain. Instantly Fritz, with a scream of anger, flew at the bulky Rogers and began to assiduously pummel that surprised freebooter with his fists.

“Villain!” shouted Fritz, “dog, bigstiff! Dot mule he has a soreness by his mouth. I vill knock off your shoulders mit your head— robbermans!”

“Yi-yi!” howled Rattlesnake, roaring with laughter and ducking his head, “somebody git this here sour-krout off’n me!”

One of the band yanked Fritz back by the coat-tail, and the woods rang with Rattlesnake’s vociferous comments.

“The dog-goned little wienerwurst,” he yelled, amiably. “He’s not so much of a skunk, for a Dutchman. Took up for his animile plum quick, didn’t he? I like to see a man like his hoss, even if it is a mule. The dad-blamed little Limburger he went for me, didn’t he! Whoa, now, muley—I ain’t a-goin’ to hurt your mouth agin any more.”

Perhaps the mail would not have been tampered with had not Ben Moody, the lieutenant, possessed certain wisdom that seemed to promise more spoils.

“Say, Cap,” he said, addressing Hondo Bill, “there’s likely to be good pickings in these mail sacks. I’ve done some hoss tradin’ with these Dutchmen around Fredericksburg, and I know the style of the varmints. There’s big money goes through the mails to that town. Them Dutch risk a thousand dollars sent wrapped in a piece of paper before they’d pay the banks to handle the money.”

Hondo Bill, six feet two, gentle of voice and impulsive in action, was dragging the sacks from the rear of the wagon before Moody had finished his speech. A knife shone in his hand, and they heard the ripping sound as it bit through the tough canvas. The outlaws crowded around and began tearing open letters and packages, enlivening their labours by swearing affably at the writers, who seemed to have conspired to confute the prediction of Ben Moody. Not a dollar was found in the Fredericksburg mail.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” said Hondo Bill to the mail-carrier in solemn tones, “to be packing around such a lot of old, trashy paper as this. What d’you mean by it, anyhow? Where do you Dutchers keep your money at?”

The Ballinger mail sack opened like a cocoon under Hondo’s knife. It contained but a handful of mail. Fritz had been fuming with terror and excitement until this sack was reached. He now remembered Lena’s letter. He addressed the leader of the band, asking that that particular missive be spared.

“Much obliged, Dutch,” he said to the disturbed carrier. “I guess that’s the letter we want. Got spondulicks in it, ain’t it? Here she is. Make a light, boys.”

Hondo found and tore open the letter to Mrs. Hildesmuller. The others stood about, lighting twisted up letters one from another. Hondo gazed with mute disapproval at the single sheet of paper covered with the angular German script.

“Whatever is this you’ve humbugged us with, Dutchy? You call this here a valuable letter? That’s a mighty low-down trick to play on your friends what come along to help you distribute your mail.”

“That’s Chiny writin’,” said Sandy Grundy, peering over Hondo’s shoulder.

“You’re off your kazip,” declared another of the gang, an effective youth, covered with silk handkerchiefs and nickel plating. “That’s shorthand. I see ‘em do it once in court.”

“Ach, no, no, no—dot is German,” said Fritz. “It is no more as a little girl writing a letter to her mamma. One poor little girl, sick and vorking hard avay from home. Ach! it is a shame. Good Mr. Robberman, you vill please let me have dot letter?”

“What the devil do you take us for, old Pretzels?” said Hondo with sudden and surprising severity. “You ain’t presumin’ to insinuate that we gents ain’t possessed of sufficient politeness for to take an interest in the miss’s health, are you? Now, you go on, and you read that scratchin’ out loud and in plain United States language to this here company of educated society.”

Hondo twirled his six-shooter by its trigger guard and stood towering above the little German, who at once began to read the letter, translating the simple words into English. The gang of rovers stood in absolute silence, listening intently.

“How old is that kid?” asked Hondo when the letter was done.

“Eleven,” said Fritz.

“And where is she at?”

“At dose rock quarries—working. Ach, mein Gott—little Lena, she speak of drowning. I do not know if she vill do it, but if she shall I schwear I vill dot Peter Hildesmuller shoot mit a gun.”

“You Dutchers,” said Hondo Bill, his voice swelling with fine contempt, “make me plenty tired. Hirin’ out your kids to work when they ought to be playin’ dolls in the sand. You’re a hell of a sect of people. I reckon we’ll fix your clock for a while just to show what we think of your old cheesy nation. Here, boys!”

Hondo Bill parleyed aside briefly with his band, and then they seized Fritz and conveyed him off the road to one side. Here they bound him fast to a tree with a couple of lariats. His team they tied to another tree near by.

“We ain’t going to hurt you bad,” said Hondo reassuringly. “‘Twon’t hurt you to be tied up for a while. We will now pass you the time of day, as it is up to us to depart. Ausgespielt—nixcumrous, Dutchy. Don’t get any more impatience.”

Fritz heard a great squeaking of saddles as the men mounted their horses. Then a loud yell and a great clatter of hoofs as they galloped pell-mell back along the Fredericksburg road.

For more than two hours Fritz sat against his tree, tightly but not painfully bound. Then from the reaction after his exciting adventure he sank into slumber. How long he slept he knew not, but he was at last awakened by a rough shake. Hands were untying his ropes. He was lifted to his feet, dazed, confused in mind, and weary of body. Rubbing his eyes, he looked and saw that he was again in the midst of the same band of terrible bandits. They shoved him up to the seat of his wagon and placed the lines in his hands.

“Hit it out for home, Dutch,” said Hondo Bill’s voice commandingly. “You’ve given us lots of trouble and we’re pleased to see the back of your neck. Spiel! Zwei bier! Vamoose!”

Hondo reached out and gave Blitzen a smart cut with his quirt.

The little mules sprang ahead, glad to be moving again. Fritz urged them along, himself dizzy and muddled over his fearful adventure.

According to schedule time, he should have reached Fredericksburg at daylight. As it was, he drove down the long street of the town at eleven o’clock A.M. He had to pass Peter Hildesmuller’s house on his way to the post-office. He stopped his team at the gate and called. But Frau Hildesmuller was watching for him. Out rushed the whole family of Hildesmullers.

Frau Hildesmuller, fat and flushed, inquired if he had a letter from Lena, and then Fritz raised his voice and told the tale of his adventure. He told the contents of that letter that the robber had made him read, and then Frau Hildesmuller broke into wild weeping. Her little Lena drown herself! Why had they sent her from home? What could be done? Perhaps it would be too late by the time they could send for her now. Peter Hildesmuller dropped his meerschaum on the walk and it shivered into pieces.

“Woman!” he roared at his wife, “why did you let that child go away? It is your fault if she comes home to us no more.”

Every one knew that it was Peter Hildesmuller’s fault, so they paid no attention to his words.

A moment afterward a strange, faint voice was heard to call: “Mamma!” Frau Hildesmuller at first thought it was Lena’s spirit calling, and then she rushed to the rear of Fritz’s covered wagon, and, with a loud shriek of joy, caught up Lena herself, covering her pale little face with kisses and smothering her with hugs. Lena’s eyes were heavy with the deep slumber of exhaustion, but she smiled and lay close to the one she had longed to see. There among the mail sacks, covered in a nest of strange blankets and comforters, she had lain asleep until wakened by the voices around her.

Fritz stared at her with eyes that bulged behind his spectacles.

“Gott in Himmel!” he shouted. “How did you get in that wagon? Am I going crazy as well as to be murdered and hanged by robbers this day?”

“You brought her to us, Fritz,” cried Frau Hildesmuller. “How can we ever thank you enough?”

“Tell mamma how you came in Fritz’s wagon,” said Frau Hildesmuller.

“I don’t know,” said Lena. “But I know how I got away from the hotel. The Prince brought me.”

“By the Emperor’s crown!” shouted Fritz, “we are all going crazy.”

“I always knew he would come,” said Lena, sitting down on her bundle of bedclothes on the sidewalk. “Last night he came with his armed knights and captured the ogre’s castle. They broke the dishes and kicked down the doors. They pitched Mr. Maloney into a barrel of rain water and threw flour all over Mrs. Maloney. The workmen in the hotel jumped out of the windows and ran into the woods when the knights began firing their guns. They wakened me up and I peeped down the stair. And then the Prince came up and wrapped me in the bedclothes and carried me out. He was so tall and strong and fine. His face was as rough as a scrubbing brush, and he talked soft and kind and smelled of schnapps. He took me on his horse before him and we rode away among the knights. He held me close and I went to sleep that way, and didn’t wake up till I got home.”

“Rubbish!” cried Fritz Bergmann. “Fairy tales! How did you come from the quarries to my wagon?”

“The Prince brought me,” said Lena, confidently.

And to this day the good people of Fredericksburg haven’t been able to make her give any other explanation.