

## Chapter Fourteen - The Frozen Heart

In the hut of Pon, the gardener's boy, Button-Bright was the first to waken in the morning. Leaving his companions still asleep, he went out into the fresh morning air and saw some blackberries growing on bushes in a field not far away. Going to the bushes he found the berries ripe and sweet, so he began eating them. More bushes were scattered over the fields, so the boy wandered on, from bush to bush, without paying any heed to where he was wandering. Then a butterfly fluttered by. He gave chase to it and followed it a long way. When finally he paused to look around him, Button-Bright could see no sign of Pon's house, nor had he the slightest idea in which direction it lay.

"Well, I'm lost again," he remarked to himself. "But never mind; I've been lost lots of times. Someone is sure to find me."

Trot was a little worried about Button-Bright when she awoke and found him gone. Knowing how careless he was, she believed that he had strayed away, but felt that he would come back in time, because he had a habit of not staying lost. Pon got the little girl some food for her breakfast and then together they went out of the hut and stood in the sunshine.

Pon's house was some distance off the road, but they could see it from where they stood and both gave a start of surprise when they discovered two soldiers walking along the roadway and escorting Princess Gloria between them. The poor girl had her hands bound together, to prevent her from struggling, and the soldiers rudely dragged her forward when her steps seemed to lag.

Behind this group came King Krewl, wearing his jeweled crown and swinging in his hand a slender golden staff with a ball of clustered gems at one end.

"Where are they going?" asked Trot. "To the house of the Wicked Witch, I fear," Pon replied. "Come, let us follow them, for I am sure they intend to harm my dear Gloria."

"Won't they see us?" she asked timidly.

"We won't let them. I know a short cut through the trees to Blinkie's house," said he.

So they hurried away through the trees and reached the house of the witch ahead of the King and his soldiers. Hiding themselves in the shrubbery, they watched the approach of poor Gloria and her escort, all of whom passed so

near to them that Pon could have put out a hand and touched his sweetheart, had he dared to.

Blinkie's house had eight sides, with a door and a window in each side. Smoke was coming out of the chimney and as the guards brought Gloria to one of the doors it was opened by the old witch in person. She chuckled with evil glee and rubbed her skinny hands together to show the delight with which she greeted her victim, for Blinkie was pleased to be able to perform her wicked rites on one so fair and sweet as the Princess.

Gloria struggled to resist when they bade her enter the house, so the soldiers forced her through the doorway and even the King gave her a shove as he followed close behind. Pon was so incensed at the cruelty shown Gloria that he forgot all caution and rushed forward to enter the house also; but one of the soldiers prevented him, pushing the gardener's boy away with violence and slamming the door in his face.

"Never mind," said Trot soothingly, as Pon rose from where he had fallen. "You couldn't do much to help the poor Princess if you were inside. How unfortunate it is that you are in love with her!"

"True," he answered sadly, "it is indeed my misfortune. If I did not love her, it would be none of my business what the King did to his niece Gloria; but the unlucky circumstance of my loving her makes it my duty to defend her."

"I don't see how you can, duty or no duty," observed Trot.

"No; I am powerless, for they are stronger than I. But we might peek in through the window and see what they are doing."

Trot was somewhat curious, too, so they crept up to one of the windows and looked in, and it so happened that those inside the witch's house were so busy they did not notice that Pon and Trot were watching them.

Gloria had been tied to a stout post in the center of the room and the King was giving the Wicked Witch a quantity of money and jewels, which Googly-Goo had provided in payment. When this had been done the King said to her:

"Are you perfectly sure you can freeze this maiden's heart, so that she will no longer love that low gardener's boy?"

"Sure as witchcraft, your Majesty," the creature replied.

"Then get to work," said the King. "There may be some unpleasant features about the ceremony that would annoy me, so I'll bid you good day and leave you to carry out your contract. One word, however: If you fail, I shall burn you at the stake!" Then he beckoned to his soldiers to follow him, and throwing wide the door of the house walked out.

This action was so sudden that King Krewl almost caught Trot and Pon eavesdropping, but they managed to run around the house before he saw them. Away he marched, up the road, followed by his men, heartlessly leaving Gloria to the mercies of old Blinkie.

When they again crept up to the window, Trot and Pon saw Blinkie gloating over her victim. Although nearly fainting from fear, the proud Princess gazed with haughty defiance into the face of the wicked creature; but she was bound so tightly to the post that she could do no more to express her loathing.

Pretty soon Blinkie went to a kettle that was swinging by a chain over the fire and tossed into it several magical compounds. The kettle gave three flashes, and at every flash another witch appeared in the room.

These hags were very ugly but when one-eyed Blinkie whispered her orders to them they grinned with joy as they began dancing around Gloria. First one and then another cast something into the kettle, when to the astonishment of the watchers at the window all three of the old women were instantly transformed into maidens of exquisite beauty, dressed in the daintiest costumes imaginable. Only their eyes could not be disguised, and an evil glare still shone in their depths. But if the eyes were cast down or hidden, one could not help but admire these beautiful creatures, even with the knowledge that they were mere illusions of witchcraft.

Trot certainly admired them, for she had never seen anything so dainty and bewitching, but her attention was quickly drawn to their deeds instead of their persons, and then horror replaced admiration. Into the kettle old Blinkie poured another mess from a big brass bottle she took from a chest, and this made the kettle begin to bubble and smoke violently. One by one the beautiful witches approached to stir the contents of the kettle and to mutter a magic charm. Their movements were graceful and rhythmic and the Wicked Witch who had called them to her aid watched them with an evil grin upon her wrinkled face.

Finally the incantation was complete. The kettle ceased bubbling and together the witches lifted it from the fire. Then Blinkie brought a wooden ladle and

filled it from the contents of the kettle. Going with the spoon to Princess Gloria she cried:

"Love no more! Magic art Now will freeze your mortal heart!"

With this she dashed the contents of the ladle full upon Gloria's breast.

Trot saw the body of the Princess become transparent, so that her beating heart showed plainly. But now the heart turned from a vivid red to gray, and then to white. A layer of frost formed about it and tiny icicles clung to its surface. Then slowly the body of the girl became visible again and the heart was hidden from view. Gloria seemed to have fainted, but now she recovered and, opening her beautiful eyes, stared coldly and without emotion at the group of witches confronting her.

Blinkie and the others knew by that one cold look that their charm had been successful. They burst into a chorus of wild laughter and the three beautiful ones began dancing again, while Blinkie unbound the Princess and set her free.

Trot rubbed her eyes to prove that she was wide awake and seeing clearly, for her astonishment was great when the three lovely maidens turned into ugly, crooked hags again, leaning on broomsticks and canes. They jeered at Gloria, but the Princess regarded them with cold disdain. Being now free, she walked to a door, opened it and passed out. And the witches let her go.

Trot and Pon had been so intent upon this scene that in their eagerness they had pressed quite hard against the window. Just as Gloria went out of the house the window-sash broke loose from its fastenings and fell with a crash into the room. The witches uttered a chorus of screams and then, seeing that their magical incantation had been observed, they rushed for the open window with uplifted broomsticks and canes. But Pon was off like the wind, and Trot followed at his heels. Fear lent them strength to run, to leap across ditches, to speed up the hills and to vault the low fences as a deer would.

The band of witches had dashed through the window in pursuit; but Blinkie was so old, and the others so crooked and awkward, that they soon realized they would be unable to overtake the fugitives. So the three who had been summoned by the Wicked Witch put their canes or broomsticks between their legs and flew away through the air, quickly disappearing against the blue sky. Blinkie, however, was so enraged at Pon and Trot that she hobbled on in the

direction they had taken, fully determined to catch them, in time, and to punish them terribly for spying upon her witchcraft.

When Pon and Trot had run so far that they were confident they had made good their escape, they sat down near the edge of a forest to get their breath again, for both were panting hard from their exertions. Trot was the first to recover speech, and she said to her companion:

"My! wasn't it terr'ble?"

"The most terrible thing I ever saw," Pon agreed.

"And they froze Gloria's heart; so now she can't love you any more."

"Well, they froze her heart, to be sure," admitted Pon, "but I'm in hopes I can melt it with my love."

"Where do you s'pose Gloria is?" asked the girl, after a pause.

"She left the witch's house just before we did. Perhaps she has gone back to the King's castle," he said.

"I'm pretty sure she started off in a different direction," declared Trot. "I looked over my shoulder, as I ran, to see how close the witches were, and I'm sure I saw Gloria walking slowly away toward the north."

"Then let us circle around that way," proposed Pon, "and perhaps we shall meet her."

Trot agreed to this and they left the grove and began to circle around toward the north, thus drawing nearer and nearer to old Blinkie's house again. The Wicked Witch did not suspect this change of direction, so when she came to the grove she passed through it and continued on.

Pon and Trot had reached a place less than half a mile from the witch's house when they saw Gloria walking toward them. The Princess moved with great dignity and with no show of haste whatever, holding her head high and looking neither to right nor left.

Pon rushed forward, holding out his arms as if to embrace her and calling her sweet names. But Gloria gazed upon him coldly and repelled him with a haughty gesture. At this the poor gardener's boy sank upon his knees and hid his face in his arms, weeping bitter tears; but the Princess was not at all moved by his distress. Passing him by, she drew her skirts aside, as if

unwilling they should touch him, and then she walked up the path a way and hesitated, as if uncertain where to go next.

Trot was grieved by Pon's sobs and indignant because Gloria treated him so badly. But she remembered why.

"I guess your heart is frozen, all right," she said to the Princess. Gloria nodded gravely, in reply, and then turned her back upon the little girl. "Can't you like even me?" asked Trot, half pleadingly.

"No," said Gloria.

"Your voice sounds like a refrig'rator," sighed the little girl. "I'm awful sorry for you, 'cause you were sweet an' nice to me before this happened. You can't help it, of course; but it's a dreadful thing, jus' the same."

"My heart is frozen to all mortal loves," announced Gloria, calmly. "I do not love even myself."

"That's too bad," said Trot, "for, if you can't love anybody, you can't expect anybody to love you."

"I do!" cried Pon. "I shall always love her."

"Well, you're just a gardener's boy," replied Trot, "and I didn't think you 'mounted to much, from the first. I can love the old Princess Gloria, with a warm heart an' nice manners, but this one gives me the shivers."

"It's her icy heart, that's all," said Pon.

"That's enough," insisted Trot. "Seeing her heart isn't big enough to skate on, I can't see that she's of any use to anyone. For my part, I'm goin' to try to find Button-Bright an' Cap'n Bill."

"I will go with you," decided Pon. "It is evident that Gloria no longer loves me and that her heart is frozen too stiff for me to melt it with my own love; therefore I may as well help you to find your friends."

As Trot started off, Pon cast one more imploring look at the Princess, who returned it with a chilly stare. So he followed after the little girl.

As for the Princess, she hesitated a moment and then turned in the same direction the others had taken, but going far more slowly. Soon she heard footsteps pattering behind her, and up came Googly-Goo, a little out of breath with running.

"Stop, Gloria!" he cried. "I have come to take you back to my mansion, where we are to be married."

She looked at him wonderingly a moment, then tossed her head disdainfully and walked on. But Googly-Goo kept beside her.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Haven't you discovered that you no longer love that gardener's boy, who stood in my way?"

"Yes; I have discovered it," she replied. "My heart is frozen to all mortal loves. I cannot love you, or Pon, or the cruel King my uncle, or even myself. Go your way, Googly-Goo, for I will wed no one at all."

He stopped in dismay when he heard this, but in another minute he exclaimed angrily:

"You must wed me, Princess Gloria, whether you want to or not! I paid to have your heart frozen; I also paid the King to permit our marriage. If you now refuse me it will mean that I have been robbed--robbed--robbed of my precious money and jewels!"

He almost wept with despair, but she laughed a cold, bitter laugh and passed on. Googly-Goo caught at her arm, as if to restrain her, but she whirled and dealt him a blow that sent him reeling into a ditch beside the path. Here he lay for a long time, half covered by muddy water, dazed with surprise.

Finally the old courtier arose, dripping, and climbed from the ditch. The Princess had gone; so, muttering threats of vengeance upon her, upon the King and upon Blinkie, old Googly-Goo hobbled back to his mansion to have the mud removed from his costly velvet clothes.