



Perdita

WINTER'S TALE, ACT 4, SC. 3.

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Perdita, daughter of Leontes, king of Sicily, and his queen,
beautiful and excellent Hermione, was born in a prison, where
her cruel father, in a fit of jealous rage, had confined his wife
some time before the birth of Perdita.

Leontes, suspecting Hermione of infidelity with his guest Polix-
enes, king of Bohemia, ordered her to be put to death. She was
therefore confined in a prison, where she gave birth to a
daughter, who was found by a shepherd, and named Perdita.

Polixenes, a brave friend of the queen, took the babe to his
own home, hoping thus to touch his heart, and avert his displeasure from
his unhappy mother. But her devoted mission failed miserably;
he commanded Antigonus, another of his lords, to take the
child out to sea, and leave it to perish on some desolate shore.

At the same time his orders were fulfilled: Antigonus left the babe
in rich robes and bedecked with jewels, on a little
raft, and sailed for Bohemia, whither a storm had driven the ship.



PERDITA.

PERDITA, daughter of Leontes, king of Sicily, and his queen, the beautiful and excellent Hermione, was born in a prison, wherein her cruel father, in a fit of jealous rage, had confined his wife some time before the birth of Perdita.

Leontes, suspecting Hermione of infidelity with his guest Polixenes, king of Bohemia, ordered Camillo, one of his lords, to poison the latter. Camillo, however, believing his royal mistress to be most foully slandered, pretended to acquiesce in her husband's treacherous plot, only to disclose it to Polixenes; whereupon they took flight together to Bohemia. It was at this juncture that Hermione was cast into prison, where she eventually gave birth to a princess.

Paulina, a brave friend of the queen's, bore the babe to its father, hoping thus to touch his heart, and avert his displeasure from the unhappy mother. But her devoted mission failed miserably; the king commanded Antigonus, another of his lords, to take the child out to sea, and leave it to perish on some desolate shore.

This time his orders were fulfilled: Antigonus left the babe, all swaddled in rich robes and bedecked with jewels, on a lonely "fishing coast" of Bohemia, whither a storm had driven the ship—

taking the precaution, however, of pinning a paper to the baby's mantle, with the name, *Perdita*, written thereon, and a line or two dimly significant of its illustrious birth. A humane shepherd found the poor little innocent, and took it home to his wife, who nursed it tenderly; his extreme poverty, dazzled by the rare jewels, induced him to keep secret the manner in which he found the child, and she was reared in every respect as his own daughter.

Shakspeare gives proof of his loyal belief in "blood," in the sequel of this pretty tale. The royal foundling, reared in a shepherd's hut, receiving almost none of the graces of education, queen only over flocks and herds, lived and moved a princess.

The young Prince Florizel, only son of Polixenes, hunting one day near the shepherd's dwelling, saw the charming *Perdita*, and became desperately, but in all honor, enamoured of her high-born beauty. Under an assumed name, and in the guise of a simple gentleman, he paid court to her at once.

Polixenes, remarking Florizel's frequent absence from court, set spies on the prince, who soon apprised him of his son's love for the fair shepherdess. Forthwith, he and Camillo visited in disguise the house of the old shepherd during the merry-making of sheep-shearing. Here the king discovered himself to his son, loaded him with reproaches, and commanded *Perdita* never again to receive him, on pain of her own and her father's death.

Camillo, anxious to return to his native land, rescued the lovers from the wrath of Polixenes, and accompanied them to the Sicilian court, to solicit Leontes' influence and protection till Polixenes should consent to their union.

Leontes, full of remorse for the cruelty which, he supposed, had caused the death of his well-beloved queen, joyfully received Camillo back again to his favor, and made the young people welcome. The marvellous resemblance of *Perdita* to *Hermione* caused his

heart to bleed afresh; and his self-accusing ejaculations aroused the suspicions of the old shepherd, who produced the proofs of *Perdita*'s identity with the deserted babe.

Paulina, convinced of Leontes' repentance, invited him to her house to see a cunning statue from the hand of a great master. The statue was *Hermione* herself, whom, to protect her, Paulina had declared dead. Thus, a faithful wife was restored to the arms of her penitent husband, and the shepherd's foundling found a tender mother in the virtuous queen.

Polixenes followed the fugitives to Sicily; but there no longer existed any objection, personal or political, to the marriage of the Bohemian prince to the heiress of the throne of Sicily, and their union crowned the general rejoicing.

Though the character of *Perdita* is quite subordinate to that of *Hermione*, the heroine proper of "The Winter's Tale," it is, nevertheless, a carefully finished picture in every detail. Its delicate coloring is suggestive rather than simply descriptive, its subtle poetry conveyed to the beholder by master touches; beside the glowing, life-size portraits of Juliet, Portia, and Lady Macbeth, this unique miniature gem sparkles half concealed, yet full of exquisite beauties. *Perdita*, perhaps, of all Shakspeare's heroines, is the completest exemplification of the intuitive lady, whose inbred daintiness no accident of life can affect.

Frequent mention is made of her rare personal beauty, and not by her lover only. Florizel says to her, touching her gay holiday attire at the sheep-shearing:

These, your unusual weeds, to each part of you
Do give a life—no shepherdess, but Flora

Peering in April's front; this, your sheep-shearing,
Is as a meeting of the petty gods,
And you the queen on't.

This rhapsody, too, is plainly something more than the mere
extravagance of an ardent lover:

What you do
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I'd have you do it ever. When you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so, so give alms,
Pray so, and for the ordering of your affairs
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that—move still, still so, and own
No other function.

* * * Were I crown'd the most imperial monarch,
* * * Were I the fairest youth
That ever made eye swerve, had force and knowledge
More than was ever man's, I would not prize them
Without her love: for her employ them all,
Commend them, and condemn them to her service,
Or to their own perdition!

Polixenes himself pays an involuntary tribute to her charms:

This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever
Ran on the greensward; nothing she does, or seems,
But smacks of something greater than herself,
Too noble for this place.

To which Camillo replies:

* * * * Good sooth, she is
The queen of curds and cream.

Arrived with Florizel at the Sicilian court, one of the gentle-
men says of her:

* * * The most peerless piece of earth, I think,
That e'er the sun shone bright on.

And another:

* * * * This is such a creature,
Would she begin a sect, might quench the zeal
Of all professors else—make proselytes
Of who she but bid follow.

Women will love her, that she is a woman
More worth than any man; men, that she is
The rarest of all women.

In Perdita's well known and oft-quoted greeting to the stranger-
guests at the sheep-shearing, we have a fine example of her innate
courtesy, as well as of the poetic delicacy of her fancy:

* * * * Reverend sirs,
For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep
Seeming and savor, all the winter long;
Grace and remembrance be to you both,
And welcome to our shearing!

Here's flowers for you:
Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram,
The marigold, that goes to bed with the sun,
And with him rises, weeping: these are flowers
Of middle summer, and I think they are given
To men of middle age. You are very welcome!

* * * Now, my fairest friend,
I would I had some flowers o' the spring that might
Become your time of day. * * * *
* * * * O Proserpina!
For the flowers now that, frightened, thou let'st fall
From Dis's wagon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses,

That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phœbus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips, and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one! O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of—and, my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er.

Flor. What? like a corse?

Perd. No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on;
Not like a corse—or if, not to be buried,
But quick, and in mine arms!

The simple dignity and exquisite tenderness of Perdita are beautifully portrayed in one or two addresses to Florizel after his royal father has commanded them to part forever:

Even here undone!

I was not much afeard; for once or twice
I was about to speak, and tell him plainly,
The self-same sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike. Wilt please you, sir, begone?
I told you what would come of this. Beseech you,
Of your own state take care: this dream of mine—
Being now awake, I'll queen it no inch further,
But milk my ewes, and weep.

HERMIONE.

CRITICALLY (though not popularly) considered, Hermione must ever occupy a position superior to Perdita in the charming story to which both contribute so much beauty.

Endowed with every virtue that helps to complete the perfect woman, Hermione is distinguished by her illustrious resignation under the most grievous wrongs that can befall an honored queen, and a devoted wife. Repudiated by her husband for senseless suspicions of her chastity, conceived without an excuse of foundation; thrown into prison, to give birth to a poor little princess; her first-born son dying of grief for his mother's disgrace; her infant condemned to death by its unnatural father; herself put to public shame—a second Grissel, Hermione endures all with scarce a murmur; not so much from patient love, however, as from an indomitable fortitude, a grand pride in her conscious innocence, which has all the exalting effect of martyrdom.

To Hermione, daughter of an emperor, wife to a king, and mother of a "hopeful prince," a serene, majestic composure belongs, as a birthright; and her soul is full of a repose as imperturbable as her bearing is royal. She has no passions: no violent demonstrations, no tears nor reproaches, resent her lord's injustice;