

THE LION AND THE LARK

Patricia A. McKillip

Patricia A. McKillip, winner of the World Fantasy Award, is one of the very finest writers working in the field today. She has published many wonderful books, including *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*, *Stepping from the Shadows*, *Fool's Run*, and *The Cygnet and the Firebird*. Her most recent works are *Something Rich and Strange* and *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, both highly recommended. McKillip grew up in America, Germany, and England, and now lives in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

"The Lion and the Lark" is a literary fairy tale reminiscent of such old folktales as "Beauty and the Beast," "The Falcon King," or "East of the Sun, West of the Moon." It is a thoughtful and poetic story that poses the question: How much can love stand? The story is reprinted from *The Armless Maiden*.

There was once a merchant who lived in an ancient and magical city with his three daughters. They were all very fond of each other, and as happy as those with love and leisure and wealth can afford to be. The eldest, named Pearl, pretended domesticity. She made bread and forgot to let it rise before she baked it; she pricked her fingers sewing black satin garters; she inflicted such oddities as eggplant soup and barley muffins on her long-suffering family. She was very beautiful, though a trifle awkward and absent-minded, and she had suitors who risked their teeth on her hard, flat bread as boldly as knights of old slew dragons for the heart's sake. The second daughter, named Diamond, wore delicate, gold-rimmed spectacles, and was never without a book or a crossword puzzle at hand. She discoursed learnedly on the origins of the phoenix and the conjunctions of various astrological signs. She had an answer for everything, and was considered by all her suitors to be wondrously wise.

The youngest daughter, called Lark, sang a great deal but never spoke much. Because her voice was so like her mother's, her father doted on her. She was by no means the fairest of the three daughters; she did not shine with beauty or wit. She was pale and slight, with dark eyes, straight, serious brows, and dark braided hair. She had a loving and sensible heart, and she adored her family, though they worried her with their extravagances and foolishness. She wore Pearl's crooked garters, helped Diamond with her crossword puzzles, and heard odd questions arise from deep in her mind when she sang. "What is life?" she would wonder. "What is love? What is man?" This last gave her a good deal to ponder, as she watched her father shower his daughters with chocolates and taffeta gowns and gold bracelets. The young gentlemen who came calling seemed especially puzzling. They sat in their velvet shirts and their leather boots, nibbling burnt cakes and praising Diamond's mind, and all the while their eyes said other things. Now, their eyes said: Now. Then: Patience, patience. You are flowers, their mouths said, you are jewels, you are golden dreams. Their eyes said: I eat flowers, I burn with dreams, I have a tower without a door in my heart and I will keep you there....

Her sisters seemed fearless in the face of this power--whether from

innocence or design, Lark was uncertain. Since she was wary of men, and seldom spoke to them, she felt herself safe. She spoke mostly to her father, who only had a foolish, doting look in his eyes, and who of all men could make her smile.

One day their father left on a long journey to a distant city where he had lucrative business dealings. Before he left, he promised to bring his daughters whatever they asked for. Diamond, in a riddling mood, said merrily, "Bring us our names!"

"Oh, yes," Pearl pleaded, kissing his balding pate. "I do love pearls." She was wearing as many as she had, on her wrists, in her hair, on her shoes. "I always want more."

"But," their father said with an anxious glance at his youngest, who was listening with her grave, slightly perplexed expression, "does Lark love larks?"

Her face changed instantly, growing so bright she looked almost beautiful. "Oh, yes. Bring me my singing name, Father. I would rather have that than all the lifeless, deathless jewels in the world."

Her sisters laughed; they petted her and kissed her, and told her that she was still a child to hunger after worthless presents. Someday she would learn to ask for gifts that would outlast love, for when love had ceased, she would still possess what it had once been worth.

"But what is love?" she asked, confused. "Can it be bought like yardage?" But they only laughed harder and gave her no answers.

She was still puzzling ten days later when their father returned. Pearl was in the kitchen baking spinach tea cakes, and Diamond in the library, dozing over the philosophical writings of Lord Thiggut Moselby. Lark heard a knock at the door, and then the lovely, liquid singing of a lark. Laughing, she ran down the hall before the servants could come, and swung open the door to greet their father.

He stared at her. In his hands he held a little silver cage. Within the cage, the lark sang constantly, desperately, each note more beautiful than the last, as if, coaxing the rarest, finest song from itself, it might buy its freedom. As Lark reached for it, she saw the dark blood mount in her father's face, the veins throb in his temples. Before she could touch the cage, he lifted it high over his head, dashed it with all his might to the stone steps.

"No!" he shouted. The lark fluttered within the bent silver; his boot lifted over cage and bird, crushed both into the stones. "No!"

"No!" Lark screamed. And then she put both fists to her mouth and said nothing more, retreating as far as she could without moving from the sudden, incomprehensible violence. Dimly, she heard her father sobbing.

He was on his knees, his face buried in her skirt. She moved finally, unclenched one hand, allowed it to touch his hair.

"What is it, Father?" she whispered. "Why have you killed the lark?" He made a great, hollow sound, like the groan of a tree split to its heart. "Because I have killed you."

In the kitchen, Pearl arranged burnt tea cakes on a pretty plate. The maid who should have opened the door hummed as she dusted the parlor, and thought of the carriage driver's son. Upstairs, Diamond woke herself up midsnore, and stared dazedly at Lord Moselby's famous words and wondered, for just an instant, why they sounded so empty. That has nothing to do with life, she protested, and then went back to sleep.

Lark sat down on the steps beside the mess of feathers and silver and blood, and listened to her father's broken words.

"On the way back . . . we drove through a wood . . . just today, it was . . . I had not found you a lark. I heard one singing. I sent the post boy looking one way, I searched another. I followed the lark's song, and saw it finally, resting on the head of a great stone lion." His face wrinkled and fought itself; words fell like stones, like the tread of a stone beast. "A long line of lions stretched up the steps of a huge castle. Vines covered it so thickly it seemed no light could pass through the windows. It looked abandoned. I gave it no thought. The lark had all my attention. I took off my hat and crept up to it. I had it, I had it . . . singing in my hat and trying to fly.... And then the lion turned its head to look at me."

Lark shuddered; she could not speak. She felt her father shudder.

"It said, 'You have stolen my lark.' Its tail began to twitch. It opened its stone mouth wide to show me its teeth. 'I will kill you for that.' And it gathered its body into a crouch. I babbled--I made promises--I am not a young man to run from lions. My heart nearly burst with fear. I wish it had . . . I promised--"

"What," she whispered, "did you promise?"

"Anything it wanted."

"And what did it want?"

"The first thing that met me when I arrived home from my journey." He hid his face against her, shaking her with his sobs. "I thought it would be the cat! It always suns itself at the gate! Or Columbine at worst--she always wants an excuse to leave her work. Why did you answer the door? Why?"

Her eyes filled with sudden tears. "Because I heard the lark."

Her father lifted his head. "You shall not go," he said fiercely. "I'll

bar the doors. The lion will never find you. If it does, I'll shoot it, burn it-"

"How can you harm a stone lion? It could crash through the door and drag me into the street whenever it chooses." She stopped abruptly, for an odd, confused violence tangled her thoughts. She wanted to make sounds she had never heard from herself before. You killed me for a bird! she wanted to shout. A father is nothing but a foolish old man! Then she thought more calmly, But I always knew that. She stood up, gently pried his fingers from her skirt. "I'll go now. Perhaps I can make a bargain with this lion. If it's a lark it wants, I'll sing to it. Perhaps I can go and come home so quickly my sisters will not even know."

"They will never forgive me."

"Of course they will." She stepped over the crushed cage, started down the path without looking back. "I have."

But the sun had begun to set before she found the castle deep in the forest beyond the city. Even Pearl, gaily proffering tea cakes, must notice an insufficiency of Lark, and down in the pantry, Columbine would be whispering of the strange, bloody smear she had to clean off the porch.... The stone lion, of pale marble, snarling a warning on its pedestal, seemed to leap into her sight between the dark trees. To her horror, she saw behind it a long line of stone lions, one at each broad step leading up to the massive, barred doors of the castle.

"Oh," she breathed, cold with terror, and the first lion turned its ponderous head. A final ray of sunlight gilded its eye. It stared at her until the light faded. She heard it whisper,

"Who are you?"

"I am the lark," she said tremulously, "my father sent to replace the one he stole. "

"Can you sing?"

She sang, blind and trembling, while the dark wood rustled around her, grew close. A hand slid over her mouth, a voice spoke into her ear. "Not very well, it seems."

She felt rough stubbled skin against her cheek, arms tense with muscle; the voice husky and pleasant, murmured against her hair. She turned, amazed, alarmed for different reasons. "Not when I am so frightened," she said to the shadowy face above hers. "I expected to be eaten."

She saw a sudden glint of teeth. "If you wish."

"I would rather not be."

"Then I will leave that open to negotiation. You are very brave. And very honest to come here. I expected your father to send along the family cat or some little yapping powder puff of a dog. "

"Why did you terrify him so?"

"He took my lark. Being stone by day, I have so few pleasures."

"Are you bewitched?"

He nodded at the castle. Candles and torches appeared on steps now. A row of men stood where the lions had been, waiting, while a line of pages carrying light trooped down the steps to guide them. "That is my castle. I have been under a spell so long I scarcely remember why. My memory has been turning to stone for some time, now . . . I am only human at night, and sunlight is dangerous to me." He touched her cheek with his hand; unused to being touched, she started. Then, unused to being touched, she took a step toward him. He was tall and lean, and if the mingling of fire and moonlight did not lie, his face was neither foolish nor cruel. He was unlike her sisters'suitors; there was a certain sadness in his voice, a hesitancy and humor that made her want to hear him speak. He did not touch her again when she drew closer, but she heard the pleased smile in his voice. "Will you have supper with me?" he asked. "And tell me the story of your life?"

"It has no story yet."

"You are here. There is a story in that." He took her hand, then, and drew it under his arm. He led her past the pages and the armed men, up the stairs to the open doors. His face, she found, was quite easy to look at. He had tawny hair and eyes, and rough, strong, graceful features that were young in expression and happier than their experience.

"Tell me your name," he asked, as she crossed his threshold.

"Lark," she answered, and he laughed.

His name, she discovered over asparagus soup, was Perrin. Over salmon and partridge and salad, she discovered that he was gentle and courteous to his servants, had an ear for his musicians' playing, and had lean, strong hands that moved easily among the jeweled goblets and gold-rimmed plates. Over port and nuts, she discovered that his hands, choosing walnuts and enclosing them to crack them, made her mouth go dry and her heart beat. When he opened her palm to put a nut into it, she felt something melt through her from throat to thigh, and for the first time in her life she wished she were beautiful. Over candlelight, as he led her to her room, she saw herself in his eyes. In his bed, astonished, she thought she discovered how simple life was.

And so they were married, under moonlight, by a priest who was bewitched by day and pontifical by night. Lark slept until dusk and sang until

morning. She was, she wrote her sisters and her father, entirely happy.

Divinely happy. No one could believe how happy. When wistful questions rose to the surface of her mind, she pushed them under again ruthlessly. Still they came--words bubbling up--stubborn, half coherent: Who cast this spell and is my love still in danger? How long can I so blissfully ignore the fact that by day I am married to a stone, and by night to a man who cannot bear the touch of sunlight? Should we not do something to break the spell? Why is even the priest, who preaches endlessly about the light of grace, content to live only in the dark? "We are used to it," Perrin said lightly, when she ventured these questions, and then he made her laugh, in the ways he had, so that she forgot to ask if living in the dark, and in a paradox, was something men inherently found more comfortable than women.

One day she received letters from both sisters saying that they were to be married in the same ceremony; and she must come, she could not refuse them, they absolutely refused to be married without her; and if their bridegrooms cast themselves disconsolately into a dozen mill ponds, or hung themselves from a hundred pear trees, not even that would move them to marry without her presence.

"I see I must go," she said with delight. She flung her arms around Perrin's neck. "Please come," she pleaded. "I don't want to leave you. Not for a night, nor for a single hour. You'll like my sisters--they're funny and foolish, and wiser, in their ways, than I am."

"I cannot," he whispered, loath to refuse her anything.

"Please. "

"I dare not."

"Please. "

"If I am touched by light as fine as thread, you will not see me again for seven years except in the shape of a dove."

"Seven years," she said numbly, terrified. Then she thought of lovely, clumsy Pearl and her burnt tea cakes, and of Diamond and her puzzles and earnest discourses on the similarities between the moon and a dragon's egg. She pushed her face against Perrin, torn between her various loves, gripping him in anguish. "Please," she begged. "I must see them. But I cannot leave you. But I must go to them. I promise: no light will find you, my night-love. No light, ever."

So her father sealed a room in his house so completely that by day it was dark as night, and by night as dark as death. By chance, or perhaps because, deep in the most secret regions of his mind he thought to free Lark from her strange, enchanted husband, and bring her back to light and into his life, he used a piece of unseasoned wood to make a shutter.

While Lark busied herself hanging pearls on Pearl, diamonds on Diamond, and swathing them both in yards of lace, Sun opened a hair-fine crack in the green wood where Perrin waited.

The wedding was a sumptuous, decadent affair. Both brides were dressed in cloth-of-gold, and they carried huge languorous bouquets of calla lilies. So many lilies and white irises and white roses crowded the sides of the church that, in their windows and on their pedestals, the faces of the saints were hidden. Even the sun, which had so easily found Perrin in his darkness, had trouble finding its way into the church. But the guests, holding fat candles of beeswax, lit the church with stars instead. The bridegrooms wore suits of white and midnight blue; one wore pearl buttons and studs and buckles, the other diamonds. To Lark they looked very much alike, both tall and handsome, tweaking their mustaches straight, and dutifully assuming a serious expression as they listened to the priest, while their eyes said: at last, at last, I have waited so long, the trap is closing, the night is coming.... But their faces were at once so vain and tender and foolish that Lark's heart warmed to them. They did not seem to realize that one had been an ingredient in Pearl's recipes that she had stirred into her life, and the other a three-letter solution in Diamond's crossword puzzle. At the end of the ceremony, when the bridegrooms had searched through cascades of heavy lace to kiss their brides' faces, the guests blew out their candles.

In the sudden darkness a single hair-fine thread of light shone between two rose petals.

Lark dropped her candle. Panicked without knowing why, she stumbled through the church, out into light, where she forced a carriage driver to gallop madly through the streets of the city to her father's house.

Not daring to let light through Perrin's door, she pounded on it.

She heard a gentle, mournful word she did not understand.

She pounded again. Again the sad voice spoke a single word.

The third time she pounded, she recognized the voice.

She flung open the door. A white dove sitting in a hair-fine thread of light fluttered into the air, and flew out the door.

"Oh, my love," she whispered, stunned. She felt something warm on her cheek that was not a tear, and touched it: a drop of blood. A small white feather floated out of the air, caught on the lace above her heart. "Oh," she said again, too grieved for tears, staring into the empty room, her empty life, and then down the empty hall, her empty future.

"Oh, why," she cried, wild with sorrow, "have I chosen to love a lion, a dove, an enchantment, instead of a fond foolish man with waxed mustaches

whom nothing, neither light nor dark, can ever change? Someone who could never be snatched away by magic? Oh, my sweet dove, will I ever see you? How will I find you?"

Sunlight glittered at the end of the hall in a bright and ominous jewel. She went toward it thoughtlessly, trembling, barely able to walk. A drop of blood had fallen on the floor, and into the blood, a small white feather. She heard Perrin's voice, as in a dream: Seven years. Beyond the open window on the flagstones another crimson jewel gleamed. Another feather fluttered, caught in it. On the garden wall she saw the dove turned to look at her.

Seven years.

This, its eyes said. Or your father's house, where you are loved, and where there is no mystery in day or night. Stay. Or follow.

Seven years.

By the end of the second year, she had learned to speak to animals and understand the mute, fleeting language of the butterflies. By the end of the third year, she had walked everywhere in the world. She had made herself a gown of soft white feathers stained with blood that grew longer and longer as she followed the dove. By the end of the fifth year, her face had grown familiar to the stars, and the moon kept its eye on her. By the end of the sixth year, the gown of feathers and her hair swept behind her, mingling light and dark, and she had become, to the world's eye, a figure of mystery and enchantment. In her own eyes she was simply Lark, who loved Perrin; all the enchantment lay in him.

At the end of the seventh year she lost him.

The jeweled path of blood, the moon-white feathers stopped. It left her stranded, bewildered, on a mountainside in some lonely part of the world. In disbelief, she searched frantically: stones, tree boughs, earth. Nothing told her which direction to go. One direction was as likely as another, and all, to her despairing heart, went nowhere. She threw herself on the ground finally and wept for the first time since her father had killed the lark.

"So close," she cried, pounding the earth in fury and sorrow. "So close--another step, another drop of blood--oh, but perhaps he is dead, my Perrin, after losing so much blood to show me the way. So many years, so much blood, so much silence, so much, too much, too much . . ." She fell silent finally, dazed and exhausted with grief. The wind whispered to her, comforting; the trees sighed for her, weeping leaves that caressed her face. Birds spoke.

Maybe the dove is not dead, they said. We saw none of ours fall dying from the sky. Enchantments do not die, they are transformed . . . Light sees everything. Ask the sun. Who knows him better than the sun who

changed him into a dove?

"Do you know?" she whispered to the sun, and for an instant saw its face among the clouds.

No, it said in words of fire, and with fire, shaped something out of itself. It's you I have watched, for seven years, as constant and faithful to your love as I am to the world. Take this. Open it when your need is greatest.

She felt warm light in her hand. The light hardened into a tiny box with jeweled hinges and the sun's face on its lid. She turned her face away disconsolately; a box was not a bird. But she held it, and it kept her warm through dusk and nightfall as she lay unmoving on the cold ground.

She asked the full moon when it rose above the mountain, "Have you seen my white dove? For seven years you showed me each drop of blood, each white feather, even on the darkest night."

It was you I watched, the moon said. More constant than the moon on the darkest night, for I hid then and you never faltered in your journey. I have not seen your dove.

"Do you know," she whispered to the wind, and heard it question its four messengers, who blew everywhere in the world. No, they said, and No, and

No, And then the sweet south wind blew against her cheek, smelling of roses and warm seas and endless summers. "Yes."

She lifted her face from the ground. Twigs and dirt clung to her. Her long hair was full of leaves and spiders and the grandchildren of spiders. Full of webs, it looked as filmy as a bridal veil. Her face was moon pale; moonlight could have traced the bones through it. Her eyes were fiery with tears.

"My dove."

"He has become a lion again. The seven years are over. But the dove changed shape under the eyes of an enchanted dragon, and when the dragon saw lion, battle sparked. He is still fighting."

Lark sat up. "Where?"

"In a distant land, beside a southern sea. I brought you a nut from one of the trees there. It is no ordinary nut. Now listen. This is what you must do . . ."

So she followed the South Wind to the land beside the southern sea, where the sky flashed red with dragon fire, and its fierce roars blew down trees and tore the sails from every passing ship. The lion, no longer stone by daylight, was golden and as flecked with blood as Lark's

gown of feathers. Lark never questioned the wind's advice, for she was desperate beyond the advice of mortals. She went to the seashore and found reeds broken in the battle, each singing a different, haunting note through its hollow throat. She counted. She picked the eleventh reed and waited. When the dragon bent low, curling around itself to roar rage and fire at the lion gnawing at its wing, she ran forward quickly, struck its throat with the reed.

Smoke hissed from its scales, as if the reed had seared it. It tried to roar; no sound came out, no hre. Its great neck sagged; scales darkened with blood and smoke. One eye closed. The lion leaped for its throat.

There was a flash, as if the sun had struck the earth. Lark crouched, covering her face. The world was suddenly very quiet. She heard bullfrogs among the reeds, the warm, slow waves fanning across the sand.

She opened her eyes.

The dragon had fallen on its back, with the lion sprawled on top of it. A woman lay on her back, with Perrin on top of her. His eyes were closed, his face bloody; he drew deep, ragged breaths, one hand clutching the woman's shoulder, his open mouth against her neck. The woman's weary face, upturned to the sky above Perrin's shoulder, was also bloodstained; her free hand lifted weakly, fell again across Perrin's back. Her hair was as gold as the sun's little box; her face as pale and perfect as the moon's face. Lark stared. The waves grew full again, spilled with a languorous sigh across the sand. The woman drew a deep breath. Her eyes flickered open; they were as blue as the sky.

She turned her head, looked at Perrin. She lifted her hand from his back, touched her eyes delicately, her brows rising in silent question. Then she looked again at the blood on his face.

She stiffened, began pushing at him and talking at the same time. "I remember. I remember now. You were that monstrous lion that kept nipping at my wings." Her voice was low and sweet, amused as she tugged at Perrin. "You must get up. What if someone should see us? Oh, dear. You must be hurt." She shifted out from under him, made a hasty adjustment to her bodice, and caught sight of Lark. "Oh, my dear," she cried, "it's not what you think."

"I know," Lark whispered, still amazed at the woman's beauty, and at the sight of Perrin, whom she had not seen in seven years, and never in the light, lying golden-haired and slack against another woman's body. The woman bent over Perrin, turned him on his back.

"He is hurt. Is there water?" She glanced around vaguely, as if she expected a bullfrog to emerge in tie and tails, with water on a tray. But Lark had already fetched it in her hands, from a little rill of fresh water.

She moistened Perrin's face with it, let his lips wander over her hands, searching for more. The woman was gazing at Lark.

"You must be an enchantress or a witch," she exclaimed. "That explains your--unusual appearance. And the way we suddenly became ourselves again. I am--we are most grateful to you. My father is king of this desert, and he will reward you richly if you come to his court." She took a tattered piece of her hem, wiped a corner of Perrin's lips, then, in after-thought, her own.

"My name is Lark. This man is--"

"Yes," the princess said, musing. Her eyes were very wide, very blue; she was not listening to Lark. "He is, isn't he? Do you know, I think there was a kind of prophecy when I was born that I would marry a lion. I'm sure there was. Of course they kept it secret all these years, for fear I might actually meet a lion, but--here it is. He. A lion among men. Do you think I should explain to my father what he was, or do you think I should just--not exactly lie, but omit that part of his past? What do you think? Witches know these things."

"I think," Lark said unsteadily, brushing sand out of Perrin's hair, "that you are mistaken. I am--"

"So I should tell my father. Will you help me raise him? There is a griffin just beyond those rocks. Very nice; in fact we became friends before I had to fight the lion. I had no one else to talk to except bullfrogs. And you know what frogs are like. Very little small talk, and that they repeat incessantly." She hoisted Perrin up, brushing sand off his shoulders, his chest, his thighs. "I don't think my father will mind at all. About the lion part. Do you?" She put her fingers to her lips suddenly and gave a piercing whistle that silenced the frogs and brought the griffin, huge and flaming red, up over the rocks. "Come," she said to it. Lark clung to Perrin's arm.

"Wait," she said desperately, words coming slowly, clumsily, for she had scarcely spoken to mortals in seven years. "You don't understand. Wait until he wakes. I have been following him for seven years."

"Then how wonderful that you have found him. The griffin will fly us to my father's palace. It's the only one for miles, in the desert. You'll find it easily." She laid her hand on Lark's. "Please come. I'd take you with us, but it would tire the griffin--"

"But I have a magic nut for it to rest on, while we cross the sea--"

"But you see we are going across the desert, and anyway I think a nut might be a little small." She smiled brightly, but very wearily at Lark. "I feel I will never be able to thank you enough." She pushed the upright Perrin against the griffin's back, and he toppled face down between the bright, uplifted wings.

"Perrin!" Lark cried desperately, and the princess, clinging to the griffin's neck, looked down at her, startled, uncertain. But the thrust of the griffin's great wings tangled wind and sand together and choked Lark's voice. She coughed and spat sand while the princess, cheerful again, waved one hand and held Perrin tightly with the other.

"Good-bye . . ."

"No!" Lark screamed. No one heard her but the frogs.

She sat awake all night, a dove in speckled plumage, mourning with the singing reeds. When the sun rose, it barely recognized her, so pale and wild was her face, so blank with grief her eyes. Light touched her gently. She stirred finally, sighed, watching the glittering net of gold the sun cast across the sea. They should have been waking in a great tree growing out of the sea, she and Perrin and the griffin, a wondrous sight that passing sailors might have spun into tales for their grandchildren. Instead, here she was, abandoned among the bullfrogs, while her true love had flown away with the princess. What would he think when he woke and saw her golden hair, heard her sweet, amused voice telling him that she had been the dragon he had fought, and that at the battle's end, she had awakened in his arms? An enchantress— a strange, startling woman who wore a gown of bloodstained feathers, whose long black hair was bound with cobweb, whose face and eyes seemed more of a wild creature's than a human's— had wandered by at the right moment and freed them from their spells.

And so. And therefore. And of course what all this must mean was, beyond doubt, their destiny: the marriage of the dragon and the lion. And if they were very lucky--wouldn't it be splendid--the enchantress might come to see them married.

"Will he remember me?" Lark murmured to the bullfrogs. "If he saw me now, would he even recognize me?" She tried to see her face reflected in the waves--but of the faces gliding and breaking across the sand, none seemed to belong to her, and she asked desperately, "How will he recognize me if I cannot recognize myself?"

She stood up then, her hands to her mouth, staring at her faceless shadow in the sand. She whispered, her throat aching with grief, "What must I do? Where can I begin? To find my lost love and myself?"

"You know where he is," the sea murmured. "Go there."

"But she is so beautiful--and I have become so--"

"He is not here," the reeds sang in their soft, hollow voices. "Find him. He is again enchanted."

"Again! First a stone lion, and then a dove, and then a real lion—now

what is he?"

"He is enchanted by his human form."

She was silent, still gazing at her morning shadow. "I never knew him fully human," she said at last. "And he never knew me. If we meet now by daylight, who is to say whether he will recognize Lark, or I will recognize Perrin? Those were names we left behind long ago."

"Love recognizes love," the reeds murmured. Her shadow whispered, "I will guide you."

So she set her back to the sun and followed her shadow across the desert. By day the sun was a roaring lion, by night the moon a pure white dove. Lion and dove accompanied her, showed her hidden springs of cool water among the barren stones, and trees that shook down dates and figs and nuts into her hands. Finally, climbing a rocky hill, she saw an enormous and beautiful palace, whose immense gates of bronze and gold lay open to welcome the richly dressed people riding horses and dromedaries and elegant palanquins into it.

She hurried to join them before the sun set and the gates were closed. Her bare feet were scraped and raw; she limped a little. Her feathers had grown frayed; her face was gaunt, streaked with dust and sorrow. She looked like a beggar, she knew but the people spoke to her kindly, and even tossed her a coin or two.

"We have come for the wedding of our princess and the Lion of the Desert, whom it is her destiny to wed."

"Who foretold such a destiny?" Lark asked, her voice trembling.

"Someone," they assured her. "The king's astrologer. A great sorceress disguised as a beggar, not unlike yourself. A bullfrog, who spoke with a human tongue at her birth. Her mother was frightened by a lion just before childbirth, and dreamed it. No one exactly remembers who, but someone did. Destiny or no, they will marry in three days, and never was there a more splendid couple than the princess and her lion."

Lark crept into the shadow of the gate. "Now what shall I do?" she murmured, her eyes wide, dark with urgency. "With his eyes full of her, he will never notice a beggar."

Sun slid a last gleam down the gold edge of the gate. She remembered its gift then and drew the little gold box out of her pocket. She opened it. A light sprang out of it, swirled around her like a storm of gold dust, glittering, shimmering. It settled on her, turned the feathers into the finest silk and silk cloth of gold. It turned the cobwebs in her hair into a long sparkling net of diamonds and pearls. It turned the dust on her feet into soft golden leather and pearls. Light played over her face, hiding shadows of grief and despair. Seeing the wonderful dress,

she laughed for the first time in seven years, and with wonder, she recognized Lark's voice.

As she walked down the streets, people stared at her, marveling. They made way for her. A man offered her his palanquin, a woman her sunshade. She shook her head at both, laughing again. "I will not be shut up in a box, nor will I shut out the sun." So she walked, and all the wedding guests slowed to accompany her to the inner courtyard.

Word of her had passed into the palace long before she did. The princess, dressed in fine flowing silks the color of her eyes, came out to meet the stranger who rivaled the sun. She saw the dress before she saw Lark's face.

"Oh, my dear," she breathed, hurrying down the steps. "Say this is a wedding gift for me. You cannot possibly wear this to my wedding--No one will look at me! Say you brought it for me. Or tell me what I can give you in return for it." She stepped back, half-laughing, still staring at the sun's creation. "Where are my manners? You came all the way from--from--and here all I can do is--where are you from, anyway? Who in the world are you?" She looked finally into Lark's eyes. She clapped her hands, laughing again, with a touch of relief in her voice. "Oh, it is the witch! You have come! Perrin will be so pleased to meet you. He is sleeping now; he is still weak from his wounds." She took Lark's hand in hers and led her up the steps. "Now tell me how I can persuade you to let me have that dress. Look how everyone stares at you. It will make me the most beautiful woman in the world on my wedding day. And you're a witch, you don't care how you look. Anyway, it's not necessary for you to look like this. People will think you're only human."

Lark, who had been thinking while the princess chattered, answered, "I will give you the dress for a price."

"Anything! "

Lark stopped short. "No--you must not say that!" she cried fiercely. "Ever! You could pay far more than you ever imagined for something as trivial as this dress!"

"All right," the princess said gently, patting her hand. "I will not give you just anything. Though I'd hardly call this dress trivial. But tell me what you want."

"I want a night alone with your bridegroom."

The princess's brows rose. She glanced around hastily to see if anyone were listening, then she took Lark's other hand. "We must observe a few proprieties," she said softly, smiling. "Not even I have had a whole night in my lion's bed--he had been too ill. I would not grant this to any woman. But you are a witch and you helped us before, and I know you mean no harm. I assume you wish to tend him during the night with magic

arts so that he can heal faster."

"If I can do that, I will. But--"

"Then you may. But I must have the dress first."

Lark was silent. So was the princess, who held her eyes until Lark bowed her head. Then I have lost, she thought, for he will never even look at me without this dress.

The princess said lightly, "You were gracious to refuse my first impulse to give you anything. I trust you, but in that dress you are very beautiful, and you know how men are. Or perhaps, being a witch, you don't. Anyway, there is no need at all for you to appear to him like this. And how can I surprise him on our wedding day with this dress if he sees you in it first?"

You are like my sisters, Lark thought. Foolish and wiser than I am. She yielded knowing she wanted to see Perrin with all her heart, and the princess only wanted what dazzled her eyes. "You are right," she said. "You may tell people that I will stay with Perrin to heal him if I can. And that I brought the dress for you."

The princess kissed her cheek. "Thank you. I will find you something else to wear, and show you his room. I'm not insensitive--I fell in love with him myself the moment I looked at him. So I can hardly blame you for--and of course he is in love with me. But we hardly know each other, and I don't want to confuse him with possibilities at this delicate time. You understand."

"Perfectly."

"Good."

She took Lark to her own sumptuous rooms and had her maid dress Lark in something she called "refreshingly simple" but which Lark called "drab," and knew it belonged not even to the maid, but to someone much farther down the social strata, who stayed in shadows and was not allowed to wear lace.

I am more wren or sparrow than Lark, she thought sadly, as the princess brought her to Perrin's room.

"Till sunrise," she said; the tone of her voice added, And not a moment after.

"Yes," Lark said absently, gazing at her sleeping love. At last the puzzled princess closed the door, left Lark in the twilight.

Lark approached the bed. She saw Perrin's face in the light of a single candle beside the bed. It was bruised and scratched; there was a long weal from a dragon's claw down one bare shoulder. He looked older,

weathered, his pale skin burned by the sun, which had scarcely touched it in years. The candlelight picked out a thread of silver here and there among the lion's gold of his hair. She reached out impulsively, touched the silver. "My poor Perrin," she said softly. "At least, as a dove, for seven years, you were faithful to me. You shed blood at every seventh step I took. And I took seven steps for every drop you shed. How strange to find you naked in this bed, waiting for a swan instead of Lark. At least I had you for a little while, and at long last you are unbewitched."

She bent over him, kissed his lips gently. He opened his eyes.

She turned away quickly before the loving expression in them changed to disappointment. But he moved more swiftly, reaching out to catch her hand before she left.

"Lark?" He gave a deep sigh as she turned again, and eased back into the pillows. "I heard your sweet voice in my dream.... I didn't want to wake and end the dream. But you kissed me awake. You are real, aren't you?" he asked anxiously as she lingered in the shadows, and he pulled her out of darkness into light.

He looked at her for a long time, silently, until her eyes filled with tears. "I've changed," she said.

"Yes," he said. "You have been enchanted, too."

"And so have you, once again."

He shook his head. "You have set me free."

"And I will set you free again," she said softly, "to marry whom you choose."

He moved again, too abruptly, and winced. His hold tightened on her hand. "Have I lost all enchantment?" he asked sadly. "Did you love the spellbound man more than you can love the ordinary mortal? Is that why you left me?"

She stared at him. "I never left you--"

"You disappeared," he said wearily. "After seven long years of flying around in the shape of a dove, due to your father's appalling carelessness, I finally turned back into a lion, and you were gone. I thought you could not bear to stay with me through yet another enchantment. I didn't blame you. But it grieved me badly--I was glad when the dragon attacked me, because I thought it might kill me. Then I woke up in my own body, in a strange bed, with a princess beside me explaining that we were destined to be married."

"Did you tell her you were married?"

He sighed. "I thought it was just another way of being enchanted. A lion, a dove, marriage to a beautiful princess I don't love--what

difference did anything make? You were gone. I didn't care any longer what happened to me." She swallowed, but could not speak. "Are you about to leave me again?" he asked painfully. "Is that why you'll come no closer?"

"No," she whispered. "I thought--I didn't think you still remembered me."

He closed his eyes. "For seven years I left you my heart's blood to follow...."

"And for seven years I followed. And then on the last day of the seventh year you disappeared. I couldn't find you anywhere. I asked the sun, the moon, the wind. I followed the south wind to find you. It told me how to break the spell over you. So I did--"

His eyes opened again. "You. You are the enchantress the princess talks about. You rescued both of us. And then--"

"She took you away from me before I could tell her--I tried--"

His face was growing peaceful in the candlelight. "She doesn't listen very well. But why did you think I had forgotten you?"

"I thought--she was so beautiful, I thought--and I have grown so worn, so strange--"

For the first time in seven years, she saw him smile. "You have walked the world, and spoken to the sun and wind . . . I have only been enchanted. You have become the enchantress." He pulled her closer, kissed her hand, and then her wrist. He added, as she began to smile,

"What a poor opinion you must have of my human shape to think that after all these years I would prefer the peacock to the Lark."

He pulled her closer, kissed the crook of her elbow, and then her breast. And then she caught his lips and kissed him, one hand in his hair, the other in his hand.

And thus the princess found them, as she opened the door, speaking softly, "My dear, I forgot, if he wakes you must give him this potion--I mean, this tea of mild herbs to ease his pain a little--" She kicked the door shut and saw their surprised faces. "Well," she said frostily. "Really."

"This is my wife," Perrin said.

"Well, really." She flung the sleeping potion out the window, and folded her arms. "You might have told me."

"I never thought I would see her again."

"How extraordinarily careless of you both." She tapped her foot furiously for a moment, and then said, slowly, her face clearing a little, "That's why you were there to rescue us! Now I understand. And I snatched him away from you without even thinking--and after you had searched for him so long, I made you search--oh, my dear." She clasped

her hands tightly. "What I said. About not spending a full night here. You must not think-"

"I understand."

"No, but really--tell her, Perrin."

"It doesn't matter," Perrin said gently. "You were kind to me. That's what Lark will remember."

But she remembered everything, as they flew on the griffin's back across the sea: her father's foolish bargain, the fearsome stone lion, the seven years when she followed a white dove beyond any human life, the battle between dragon and lion, and then the hopeless loss of him again. She turned the nut in her palm, and questions rose in her head: Can I truly stand more mysteries, the possibilities of more hardships, more enchanting princesses between us? Would it be better just to crack the nut and eat it? Then we would all fall into the sea, in this moment when our love is finally intact. He seems to live from spell to spell. Is it better to die now, before something worse can happen to him? How much can love stand?

Perrin caught her eyes and smiled at her. She heard the griffin's labored breathing, felt the weary catch in its mighty wings. She tossed the nut high into the air and watched it fall a long, long way before it hit the water. And then the great tree grew out of the sea, to the astonishment of passing sailors, who remembered it all their lives, and told their incredulous grandchildren of watching a griffin red as fire drop out of the blue to rest among its boughs.