

Abigail

Queen of Natronia

Her name was Abigail, Queen of Natronia. Her beauty is legend among the people of her country. Her wisdom was a marvel and as well-known as her compassion and love for the people of her kingdom.

She was born in the natural way, but Abigail's appearance at the time of her birth was anything but ordinary. Her lips were flat and huge, her ears equally so, her nose lay flat against her face, her eyes were small and dark. Her head was too large for her body; her arms, hands and legs looked more like those of a turtle. The nurses attending her mother covered their faces, then the baby's, fearing she would frighten the other patients.

Despite her appearance, Abigail's parents loved her. As a baby, then a toddler, Abigail rarely left her home. If she took her out at all, her mother put a veil over Abigail's face.

Her parents consulted many doctors to see if there was anything they could do for the little girl. They performed every test known to the medical field at that time. They could find nothing physically wrong. The doctors sent Abigail home, telling her parents all they could do was hope she would somehow outgrow her repulsiveness.

When the time came for Abigail to go to school, her mother fashioned a cloth sack to put over her head. However, she could do nothing about her body. The children were curious at first as to why Abigail wore the strange hood. When they discovered the truth, they began to make cruel remarks. The boys made a game of trying to snatch the sack from her head. If one of them succeeded, he would run away laughing while holding the bag high like a victory flag. After hiding the sack, he rejoined the group.

Once, at recess, the children joined hands and danced in a circle around Abigail, taunting the weeping girl. With her classmates back inside after the bell rang, Abigail wandered the school grounds looking for the sack. Finally giving up, she entered the classroom, trying to hide her face behind her hands while the children giggled and laughed. The teacher stopped the lesson, scolded the students and made the child who hid the sack go and retrieve it. Class would not resume until Abigail had pulled it into place.

Even with all the unkindness heaped on her, Abigail's pure heart remained loving, sweet and kind. However, the children's cruel remarks and the adults' heartless behavior cut her to the bone. Personally, she was glad to wear the bag over her head. That way, the others could not see the tears in her eyes. The cloth barrier gave her a sense of privacy from the unkind world.

As time went on, Abigail grew more sensitive to her appearance. She refused to look in a mirror. Each time she left her bedroom, she wore the

sack over her face. She wore loose-fitting clothes to disguise her body and gloves to conceal her hands.

As she grew to be an adult, Abigail's one joy was writing stories about love, justice and compassion. All the emotions the outside world denied her were expressed in those stories. As she wrote, she perfected her language skills. Her stories began to take on a dreamy, poetic air.

The day came when Abigail accidentally left one of her fairy tales on a bench outside the bakery. Hurrying by, the bakery shop owner noticed the sheaf of papers. He picked them up, sat down on the bench and began reading the anonymous author's folktale. He was so amazed by the story he couldn't put it down and forgot about his urgent errand.

That night he gave the tale to his wife to read, who in turn gave it to a friend, who gave it to another, and so forth and so on until the entire village had read Abigail's yarn. In every shop and home, people spoke of the story and wondered, who was this brilliant writer who could charm the whole countryside with such magical words?

Abigail kept silent, fearing ridicule if they found out it was her. For the next two years, she sat alone in her room every evening writing her tales of hope, joy and love. Sometimes she wrote until the wee hours of the morning. In her stories, she let her imagination guide her words. She became the princess rescued from the dragon by the knight in shining armor. Or she was the damsel lost in the forest, then found by a handsome prince who instantly falls madly in love with her and insists she marry him. In truth, while others were living their lives, marrying and having children, Abigail existed only in her daydreams.

Every few weeks she would slip out of her bedroom window just before dawn. Keeping to the shadows, she would make her way to the town square. Fearing detection, she left each new story in a different place. If it was windy, she weighed the papers down with a stone. If it was raining, she shoved them under the door of a shop. It became an unspoken understanding among the people of the village that whomever was fortunate enough to find the tale would hurry and take it to the print shop. A jolly man, the printer would make copies for all in the town.

Soon the demand for the stories became so great the printer bound them into small booklets. He hired an apprentice just to help print and distribute them. You would have thought the man would have to charge for the little books. But he didn't. The people were so enthralled by the stories they insisted on giving the printer gold and silver coins. Living a comfortable life, the printer saw no need to increase his wealth. Therefore, he expanded his shop and hired more workers to print the stories.

Now Abigail's fairy tales spread throughout the entire kingdom. Mothers read them to their children at bedtime. People wanted more of them. It seemed the stories were changing the villagers. They became kinder and more compassionate toward one another.

In her bedroom, the young lady Abigail smiled. While her appearance terrified little children, her stories brought comfort to their hearts. To the adults they ministered hope and pleasure.

Now, King Billwick was well advanced in years. His son, Phillip, was a handsome young man, but shy, preferring the company of horses to that of people. No matter how hard the king tried, he could not convince Phillip to take his proper place in the kingdom. The king would hold many feasts, festivals and balls which all the lovely young ladies would attend. But they never got to dance with the prince. He would ride on his steed into the forest before the music started.

As the years passed, King Billwick began to despair. Then one spring day he discovered his footman reading a booklet. The servant was so engrossed he did not notice the monarch approaching, a grievous error. One of the king's bodyguards raised a whip to bring it down on the man's back. A kind man, the king stopped the officer from hitting the footman. He asked the footman to loan him the book. Grateful to have escaped punishment, the man gave the small booklet to the king.

That night, King Billwick could not sleep. He kept thinking of the white knight in the story, how brave he was to rescue the damsel from the dragon's clutches. He yearned for Phillip to share the same traits as that courageous knight.

The next day the king left the booklet open on Phillip's steed's saddle. Curious, Phillip read the first paragraph. He never took his morning ride. As a matter of fact, he didn't take his morning ride all week. For days, the prince walked aimlessly around as if in a trance. Calling the Royal Mandarin, he commanded him to find the author. This being the first order his son had ever uttered, the king was quite pleased.

The official immediately sent runners to every corner of the kingdom, with no results. No one seemed to know who the author was. Some of the villagers believed the stories came from an angel named Jerome. Others thought they came from an old woman who lived in the forest. The only thing they all could agree on was that the author must be a brilliant person to write such marvelous stories.

Now, as I said before, Abigail never looked in a mirror. In fact, she had removed the mirror from the vanity in her bedroom, since that was where she spent most of her days and nights. Any time she ventured into the rest of the house or outdoors, she wore her bag and loose clothing. The look of her hands distressed her, so unless she was writing she wore gloves. Wanting Abigail to live a normal life, her parents often cried for her,

Distressed by the Royal Mandarin's lack of success, Prince Phillip began searching the countryside for the author himself. Having acquired and read all the booklets, the prince became convinced that the author of such wonderful tales must be a beautiful woman. In a bold move, he declared his love for one he never saw. If his assumption was right and the writer was a woman of marriageable age, he intended to ask for her hand.

As fate would have it, on the very day Prince Phillip arrived in the village, Abigail was discovered. Arriving early at his shop, the butcher spotted a shadowy figure leaving a stack of papers on a bench. He followed Abigail back to her home. As soon as he saw her climb through her bedroom window, he spread the news among the townspeople. For hours, the people argued over whether or not to tell the prince. After all, Abigail's appearance went beyond homeliness. No one in Natronia would want a queen that ugly.

Dressed in the hooded garb of a traveling gypsy, Prince Phillip entered the town hall. The debate among the townsfolk was so heated no one noticed him. After listening for several minutes, Phillip stood to his feet. "It seems my friend's true beauty comes from the heart," he said, smiling. He surprised himself by speaking up so boldly. Before reading the stories he would never have dared to voice his opinion.

The people began to laugh and call out cruel remarks. Some even threatened the young prince. Unafraid, he strode to the front of the room. Some shouted at the audacity of this stranger. Turning to face the crowd, the prince removed his disguise. With a collective gasp, the people bowed. Fear ran through their hearts over what Phillip would do to them for threatening a member of the royal family. Taking no notice of their discomfort, the prince offered a reward to any person who could bring the author's name to him at the inn by three o'clock that afternoon.

Having made his announcement, Phillip exited the building, leaving the people to a different argument. Each one wanted the treasure. However, no one wanted to tell Phillip that the woman he sought was a monster.

By four o'clock, the prince gave up waiting. He mounted his horse and wandered the streets. Aware of the meeting and the announcement, Abigail dared to peek through her bedroom window. Just as she drew aside the heavy curtain, Phillip approached her home. Their eyes met, the young woman looking through the eyeholes of a sack as the future king of Natronia gazed up at her. Abigail dropped the curtain, her heart pounding, hoping against hope he had not seen her.

The next moment a knock at her cottage door made her heart plunge and soar at the same time. Entering the home, the prince demanded to meet the girl in the bedroom. Aware of the consequences of refusing a royal command, her parents summoned her. Covered from head to foot, Abigail slowly came into the parlor. She trembled as she knelt before the prince. Gently taking her by the hand, he brought her to her feet. Terror gripped Abigail's heart as the prince grasped the bag to remove it. She put her gloved hands up to stop him. Smiling, Phillip gently pushed them away. "No, my beloved, all is well," he told her.

The prince gasped, as did Abigail's parents. Fearing the horror she would see in his face, she nevertheless opened her eyes. The future king of Natronia stared into the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Abigail's long, flowing, golden hair shone like a summer sunrise; her tender, loving eyes were bluer than the waters of the deepest lake. Her skin,

though pale from lack of sunlight, was nevertheless flawless. Gently, Phillip removed her gloves. Bringing Abigail's hands to his lips, he kissed each delicate finger. Then, taking her in his arms, he pledged his undying love for her.

It seemed that, as Abigail wrote her charming tales, the love in her heart came through until it transformed her body. To Phillip she was beautiful from the first time he read her stories.

Carrying her to his horse, Prince Phillip set her before him. Reigning the white stallion around, he paraded his future queen through the streets, then rode at a gallop with his bride-to-be to the castle.

Three weeks later they were married. Phillip and Abigail wanted to be wed sooner, but the king and queen persuaded them to wait. After all, time was needed for everyone to prepare for the greatest marriage feast in the history of Natronia.

So the moral of the story, if there is a moral, is this: True beauty comes from the heart. When nurtured and allowed to grow, it always changes us, for the better.

The End