

1-15-1990

Prince of Thieves

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Angelee Sailer (1990) "*Prince of Thieves*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1990 : Iss. 9 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1990/iss9/6>

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Fiction; Prince of Thieves; Angelee Sailer Anderson

PRINCE OF THIEVES

by Angelee Sailer Anderson

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

-- Matthew 16:25

"Go not wandering, O ye maids, upon Gad's hill, in the time of autumn when the daisies linger late. For there will you meet him, and learn to heap curses on the bitter hour in which you were born."

There is a hill between Rochester and London, a morning's pilgrimage from the hamlet wherein I dwell, that is a favoured haunt of highwaymen; and any that will venture there may bid their purse's every guinea God speed. Any that will venture there may count themselves fortunate to be dispossessed of naught more than gold.

Daughter am I of an innkeeper by trade, and from a child I was warned away from the hill by all that crossed our house's threshold to have their flagons filled or their beds laid. "Ware the tricksters, the cutthroats," said they, "those that fear neither bishop nor king." So much of their warning seemed prudent, yet in this it seemed strange: if in any autumn, I was told, the daisies that o'erspread the hill should still flower beyond their natural time, one might encounter there him who is called the Prince of Thieves. "And better it were, maids, than that one should meet him, one had never wakened to the light of day. For he, with his boots of Spanish leather and the devil-dog that runs before him, will steal everything, everything."

In terror of this Prince I blossomed to womanhood, avoiding the hill when I walked, in autumn shunning it even with my gaze. Yet ever as I grew, and so much the more as I grew the older, I questioned what it was that he would take. Worldly goods, maidenhead, life's blood?

"What manner of man is he?" I asked the young chapman to whom I was betrothed.

"One might call him a man," he answered gravely, "though there is no certain telling. But he appears as an angel of light -- no marvel that, for he is the Prince of Thieves, which is as much as to say the Prince of Darkness."

"Then is it not true," I countered, "that the good have nothing to fear from him?"

But my betrothed looked harshly at me and said, "Do you not hear? He will steal everything."

I heard, and yet, I could not help but wonder.

Understand me -- I am not bold. I do not lightly

seek out danger, and am more timid than otherwise with those I know not well. But there was a lure and a mystery in this tale of a Prince that pointed my heart toward Gad's hill more straightly with each autumn that passed.

And in that autumn that followed the spring in which I turned seventeen, a month ere the day my chapman and I were bound to wed, I set out from the inn at tierce time and at noon set foot upon the path that strayed to the top of the hill. Though it was but the first breath of the season, the air was brisk and the wind wild; and the gold of the grain-fields quivered in harmony with the shades of crimson, tangerine, and brown that made the tumbling leaves too rich a hoard for the eyes' in-gathering. But upon the hill, strangely, for the later-blooming monkshood and purple loosestrife were gone, the daisies sprawled white, rose, and lavender in all the careless ease of summer. Among them I waited through the exultant afternoon.

Autumn is the season for wanderlust, when men wish most keenly for a pair of seven league boots, to carry them in one stride from the toil to which they are yoked to some milk-and-honeyed land of promise. And there upon Gad's hill, as the wind so whipped my hair that I could scarce see where I trod, my wandering led me to the forfeit that had been promised me, the boon of beggary I could not refuse to seek.

My first intimation that it had found me was in a sound of drumming. The ground beneath me jarred in rhythm to the running of the mighty legs of a beast that panted hard as it came on. Then cleaving through the daisies I saw it, tall as a horse, colour of dark earth, short and sleek of coat, teeth that could snap iron. I did not bolt in fear but stood stone still; and in a moment it was upon me, almond eyes on a level with my own, lapping at my face with a tongue that wet both cheeks in one stroke.

I knew that soon through the furrow the dog had plowed must follow its Master. But it was not as I expected, for he stole near to me rather from behind -- quietly, unmistakably sensed before seen, beating upon my back with as unshakable a power as the westerling sun.

When I felt him very close, I turned to face him. He carried no weapon among the exotic brightness of his clothes, the myriad scarves and bracelets of a gypsy. About his neck was a locket etched with runes; his hair rode in waves upon the wind, encas-

ing the whole world as I beheld it in amber, sparked with rusty red. His eyes were the hue of smoky topazes, and in them the second sight of sages walked arm in arm with an infant's wonderment.

"I knew that their slanders would not forever keep you away," said the Prince of Thieves with a pleasure calm but deep. It did not seem then that I chose when I placed my hand in the stronger hand he tendered, but that it was fate.

There was in those days a wood not many paces from the hill; now the rapers of beauty have swept it away, yet perhaps it was never enough earth's own that its loss to her should be great. Into that wood he led me, far, far in where the light was always dim; and the willows among the trees followed after us, muttering, and will-o'-the-wisps unveiled their lanterns or snuffed them hither and thither about, and a harp played among the highest branches somewhere. At last, the dog eager at our heels, we came to the clearing where the Prince's camp was made.

A bonfire blazed there, all crackling and scented heat; still enclosing my hands, he drew me down beside it. "You have heard that I am a thief, that whatever can be taken I will take. But you perceive too, else you would not have sought me, that I am a giver of gifts."

Then the thieving giver, the giving thief, began to speak in a manner that was like music in its cadence, its enrapturing ebb and flow; it was like the chantings of the monks of the abbey near my home as they have been borne to my ears at even, interpreted by a soul settling toward sleep. I cannot recount his words, but to say that by them the darkest parable that has perplexed me was made plain, that each intonation and the pauses between were treasure-troves of understanding, keys to doors whose very existence had been undreamt but behind which was preserved all desire. Nothing there was of ecstatic wisdom in me or knowing joy, long dormant, that they did not awake; and the hours' stream upon which they multiplied like floating leaves hastened on unmeasured, so that it might have been a lifetime that I listened, and yet never tasted a moment as stale but found each sweeter than the last. Surely one night could not encompass that listening, yet I cannot recall a passage into day.

"Words have done all that words may," he whispered in conclusion, and guided me from the fire into the warmth of his tent whose entry the dog lay down to ward.

Within was the smell of frankincense; rugs of Persian weave covered the ground, and upon them he bid me lie near him. And here, you will suppose, is where the thievery comes; but I swear by what I count holy that all that passed between us, beyond

the linkage of our hands and eyes, was a single kiss at the very end of that eternal night. Yet it was a night's work that the greediest robber might boast of, for he had gleaned from me the whole of every harvest past or still to be, and this I was soon to learn.

Just before the dawn's breaking, he led me back beneath the open sky; together we watched the sliver of an orange moon drown in a tree-top ocean. "The fires of heaven and earth are going out," he pronounced solemnly, and the bonfire sank as the moon had done, and the branches that had beckoned by the will of the wind fell still. Then his face was infused by a light, not the dawn's, but springing deep from within the amber aureole of his hair.

And the face was not the same. Where all the bounty that is autumn's had rested supple, there stiffened winter's impoverished chill, as though slow poison, brewed by Jack Frost, had been administered through the medium of my kiss. There were beads of ice strung along his brow, freezing and tearing the skin from my fingertips.

Though I did not yet fully know why, I began to weep; the Prince of Thieves drew out a vial from among his clothing and let my tears run into it. When it was near to overflowing he replaced its stopper and held it against his breast, and it seemed to me that it throbbed with a life's pulse I no longer felt within. Then he said, "One gift more will I give you before I take my leave."

"Before you take . . ." and suddenly I understood why among the plunderer's trade he was named Prince. "I know," I cried, "what it is you steal. How many have you stolen before mine?"

He did not answer, but the chill in his face deepened in its death, as though his hurting of me hurt himself the more. He reached to his neck, opened the rune-scored locket, and let something fall from it into the shelter of his hand.

"You know for what I have come to you; trust that my going has as good a reason. It is not in the nature of the world or in my own nature that I should stay; but this I promise, that when I seek you again it will be nevermore to forsake you."

From his grasp to mine he transferred the thing he held without permitting me to see it. "This is my token that I am with you, protecting you from lesser thieves, though you think me far away. Bind it in the lining of that which shields you from the demons of the cold, till the autumn-blooming daisies come again. This is my token that one day I will bring back to you what I have stolen, more to be yours than had it not become mine."

While I turned away for grief, he took the leave it was his nature to take; the dog remained a moment longer, pitying me with its fawn-coloured eyes, then it also was gone. The tent wherein he had kissed

me caved inward, the sticks that had fed the bonfire were ash, and as the sun rose over a tomb of trees from which every leaf had fallen, I searched my breast and could not find my heart.

I unfurled my fingers, and saw lying in my palm a cloudless garnet, heart-shaped. Stone for flesh -- unequal exchange -- yet it seemed to me that the garnet was beating. The promise of the Prince of Thieves welled quickening within it, to keep and cherish, or crush, or cast away.

Clasping it again so tightly that my whole arm shook and would not stop, I retraced the way I had wandered yestermorn, averting my eyes from a hill



whose blossoms, white, rose and lavender, had not survived the night.

When I came to the common room of the inn my father kept, I stopped upon the threshold; and all turned to stare for the confusion of love's new life with deathly despair that impassioned my face. "I have walked upon Gad's hill," I announced, trembling. "I have met the Prince of Thieves. He has stolen everything, everything."

My betrothed was there; angrily, fearfully he approached me, yet he reached forth to take my hand.

It was the hand that held the Prince's token. I could not give it him, but kept it by me still. And my betrothed's face turned so cold, that beside it the departing chill of the Prince seemed rather a burning.

"Everything," he hissed, biting the word short, and laying his hand disdainfully upon my breast as though he knew it empty, he pushed past me without bidding me farewell. The next Sunday at holy service, the vicar published the first banns of the chapman's wedding to another.

The garnet-heart of the Prince of Thieves, I sewed into the lining of the coverlet upon my goosefeather bed; when'er I slept beneath it I dreamt of him, and when fitfully I cast it off I dreamt of strangers who rummaged my person without and within but found nothing there to steal. Into no autumn afterwards for many years did the daisies again linger, and all the hamlet thought how I was a fool not to marry the simple-minded farmer who asked that favour, for none but he would have me, knowing that I had ventured upon the hill.

And it came about in time, when I was twice and a half the age I had been when my perpetual maidenhood was determined by a kiss, that my monthly cycles ceased. The next Sunday at holy service, he who was once my betrothed accosted me, though he had not spared

a word to me whether of wounding or charity these six and twenty years.

With a hand calloused by the toil-earned gold that had passed through it, he gestured toward his five sons and seven daughters, divining, I knew, the change that had taken place in me. "These might have been your children," he said in bitter triumph, "had you not played the harlot with *him*, had you not been heartless."

I looked upon his wife with the proofs of her fertility standing around her, and for a moment I envied her. Then I perceived how she had been robbed, married in spite and her babes begotten in loveless lust; and I saw that the Prince of Thieves in his forsaking of me was kinder than this man's cleaving. Giving thanks that no treasure of mine had remained beyond the day of the hill and the night of the wood for the chapman to take, I answered, "I am not heartless, though I have wept my heart away long since. A heart I have, though it is not my own."

Thereafter, the years of fleshly fairness and vigor slipped from me ever faster as leaves from their branches at winter's onset; the one whose heart I possessed in place of mine stole himself even from my dreams, for my coverlet wore too thin to retain his token. Now I keep it instead within a locket lying against my breast. I have come to believe that his very life's-essence is embodied in it, that when he reclaims it I will have my own lost life again.

Many and grim are the warnings that, through these years, I have heard issued to other maids as were long ago to me, and I have heard my unhappy state cited as lesson to those would venture on Gad's hill, when the daisies linger late. Yet never have I myself warned any, but have only smiled.

I am old now, thrice and a half seventeen, and there has once more come an autumn from which the daisies refuse to pass away. As I wander among them with the wind whirling heavenward the white of my hair, it seems that since last I walked here no time as love accounts it has gone by; for the Prince of Thieves is yet my treasure as I am his, and that is wealth indeed.

Now I am weary, and will lay me down to sleep. But as I put my ear to the earth of the hill I hear a drumming, a dog's weighty, wondrous joy running before its Master's. I think that I will not rise to meet him, but wait for the strength of the hand he tenders, and the second advent within my breast of the heart he has preserved forever young.

