

The BEGGAR MAID Who BECAME a QUEEN

How a Rich and Powerful King, Refusing the Love of Royal Princesses, was Enslaved by the Fair Beauty of the Penniless Zenelophon.

COPHETUA. In a sunny land across the seas, there lived, once upon a time, a king who was surrounded with all the luxury and magnificence of a wealthy court. His palace was of marble, decorated with gold; and within its shady courtyards fountains of clear water splashed in basins of silver.

King Cophetua reigned over immense territories with an authority that was absolute. His word was law. His subjects were his slaves. Perhaps power had made him vain. Men were of as little account in his sight as the sheep on the hill-sides. His courtiers were mere puppets. Women he hated. No doubt there were many whisperings, and much wonderment, in the palace of King Cophetua about this latter fact, for there had never been a king who, contrary to all kingly precedent, had professed such indifference.

A Royal Woman-hater

Beautiful princesses from near and from afar had been brought to his notice, and his statesmen had delicately hinted many times at the advantages that would accrue to his country by a judicious alliance with a richly-dowered royal bride from some neighbouring state. But the royal woman-hater heeded them not. In all the world there was no bride rich enough to buy the love of King Cophetua.

One day the king beheld from the window of his palace some beggars standing at his gate. One of them was a maiden so beautiful that she seemed to him the fairest creature he had ever beheld. For a time he watched her unseen, then, turning away, he threw himself on his couch, disturbed by a restlessness and pain he had never known before.

Ne'er was monarch so surprised:

"Here I lie, her captive slave;

But I'll to her, court her, woo her—

She must heal the wound she gave."

KING COPHETUA AND THE BEGGAR MAID



This beautiful picture portraying the legendary King Cophetua and the humble maiden who became his queen is the work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

King Cophetua descended to his gate, and when the beggars approached him to ask for alms he threw them a purse of gold. Then he called the beggar maid aside. Her name, it appears, was Zenelophon, and her beauty shone amid her rags like a diamond in the roadway. The King confessed his love. The beggar maid blushed, "then straight became as pale as lead," but the king had his way. Before many days had passed they were married; the bride, for all she had been a beggar, looking in her lovely robes "as if she had been a queen before."

It was a happy marriage. Zenelophon won the love of her subjects as well as that of the king; and after a happy life had ended, and King Cophetua and his queen were laid to rest together, their son ruled wisely in their place.

Tennyson's Poem

The story of this king and the beggar maid is probably legendary. In Ambrose Philips's "Collection of Old Ballads," printed in 1723, the editor ingeniously attempts to make out that the ballad "Cupid's Revenge," which tells the story of these lovers, was written on the marriage of Henry VI, but there seems very little proof of this. The story is referred to three times by Shakespeare: in "Love's Labour's Lost," "Henry IV," and "Romeo and Juliet." Tennyson also has a poem entitled "The Beggar Maid," which, in the Moxon edition of his poems, is illustrated by no less an artist than W. Holman Hunt.