

# The Princes and the Peas

by Louise Young

**P**icture an ogre—what do you see? A huge troll-like creature? Maybe wearing raggedy clothes? They’re probably not too bright, but definitely ugly! Am I right? You’d be able to spot one if they came lumbering into your playground. Wouldn’t you?

Well, I’m sorry to alarm you, but these are not the kind you need to worry about. The worst kind of ogres look totally, boringly unremarkable. They live in our towns and villages, eat in our cafes and meet their friends in our parks; many of them have jobs, and some have fantastically well-paid jobs. Ogres worship in our churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, they own pets or have hobbies, and many of them have partners and children.

Amy lived with one of these ogres. His name was Valerian Imran Prince, but Amy called him Dad.

Valerian was a very successful businessman who had made a fortune from manufacturing and selling the comfiest mattresses in the entire world.

None of the other bed manufacturers had worked out the secret behind each Princely Night mattresses' ability to deliver a minimum of eight hours' blissful, uninterrupted sleep each time you went to bed.

"So important in these stressful times we're living through," adults were frequently heard to say.

No one outside the palace knew that each mattress had been soaked in a Princely Night sleeping potion—a herbal formula containing hops, lavender and critically endangered violet peas. In fact, if you were to fly over the Princes' grounds and peer through strong binoculars, you might just glimpse a sight of the last 99.9% of these precious plants known to humankind.

"That's me off, Princess. Come and give your old Dad a kiss!"

Amy came out of her second-best bedroom on the fourth floor, hitched up her skirt and began the long descent down the solid gold bannister.

Lately this way of moving around the palace had lost its appeal. Maybe it was because she was getting older, Amy thought, as she passed between the third and second floor. She was going to be ten next month after all, and that sounded so much more grown up than nine. Maybe it wasn't just that. Lately many things had been feeling not quite right, Amy reflected, as she reached the landing near the front door.

"Bye, Dad. Have a great trip."

Valerian was going to a faraway land to launch his latest product, Sleepy Cuddles blankets.

"Aww, thanks Princess. Hopefully, I'll make a killing," Valerian said, excitedly rubbing his hands together. "I'll bring you back a racehorse, or an elephant. You'd like that."

"NO. No, I don't need you to do that. Thank you, though. What I'd like, what I'd really like, is to do normal stuff with you."



“Normal? What d’you mean normal?”

“Well, I was wondering... I thought it would be nice for us to go to that area with grass and seats and people and dogs, on the other side of the moat.”

“You want to go to the PARK? Are you out of your MIND? Why would you want to go there when you have your own gardens and tennis courts and zoo and museum and art gallery and waterpark? Haven’t I slaved all these years to give you all this so you wouldn’t need to be a part of all of THAT?!!”

By now, Valerian was windmilling his arms wildly, spitting out the words as his daughter stared down at her emerald-encrusted slippers.

“I’m sorry if I sounded ungrateful. I am a very lucky girl. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Mmmm, I might forgive you. See you in a week, and no more funny notions. You’re beginning to sound like your mother.”

With that, Valerian stomped out of the palace, leading a team of personal assistants to the helipad.

Amy slumped to the marble floor. What *was* wrong with her? How could she be so ungrateful?

As she stood up, Amy became aware of something shiny lying by the door. It was a key, and on closer inspection, Amy saw, engraved in tiny letters, V.I.P. Testing Room. Testing Room? Amy didn’t possess any keys, so she was very keen to find the door that could be opened by this one.

She tried all the doors in the main palace, the stables, the galleries and greenhouses, the museum, the cinema and even the house where the peacocks lived when they weren’t busy showing off on the lawn. Two days passed, and still Amy had not found the door to which the key belonged.

That night, just as Amy was finishing her hot chocolate, the sky started to rumble. It rumbled and it grumbled and it rumbled some more. Velvet black clouds drew themselves tight around the palace, and then the rain started. This was no ordinary downpour—this felt like all the Gods and Goddesses had decided to dump their bath water at exactly the same time. The wind whipped itself into a whirl, and soon Amy found it hard to see anything clearly out of her window, just a blur of leaves and twigs and pea pods—lots and lots of pea pods.

The next morning, the sun rose and the world felt more at peace. The gardeners tried to replant what had been uprooted, and the tilers replaced missing slates on the roof. Amy decided to investigate the basement to make sure the storerooms were not flooded. Her Dad would not be happy if the caviar had floated away or the champagne bottles had smashed.

A little rain had got in through the cellar door, but it was nothing to fret about, assured the pastry chef. Relieved, Amy turned to go upstairs when she noticed a curtain ripple ever so slightly with the breeze from all the comings and goings of the kitchen staff. Curious about a curtain placed against a wall, Amy crossed the floor and lifted back the cloth. Behind it was a door—and yes, the key fit.

With just the slightest *creeeak*, Amy stepped through the door and pulled it closed behind her. The familiar smell of lavender, hops and violet peas engulfed her all at once. Adjusting her eyes to the gloom, Amy gasped at the sight of a gigantic pile of mattresses stacked in front of her. There must have been 80? 100? 120? It was hard to tell. The only light came from a small window near the top of the staggeringly high room.

Without any plan in mind, Amy began to climb the mattress mountain. It felt reassuringly stable, with handy footholds between each layer.



“35, 36, 37, this is a dawdle!”

“52, 53, 54, mmm, might need to pace myself.”

“82, 83, oh no, why did I start this?”

“94, OH NO. I should not have looked down!”

Amy clung to the mattresses, forehead pressed against the side, legs shaking in fear. She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself by counting to ten. Her heart rate slowed, and she willed herself on.

“95, 96, you can do this!”

Amy felt a little rock under her finger. No time to investigate, she put it in her cardigan pocket as a souvenir, should she ever get out of this situation alive.

“113, 114. Nearly at the top. Nearly there. 118. Made it!”

With a final burst of adrenaline, Amy clambered onto the top mattress. Not daring to peer over the edge, she shuffled towards a wall where the window was within easy reach.

Feeling faint and short of breath, Amy pushed the window open and guzzled the sweet air.

A window box had been securely fastened to the outside ledge. Only a little earth remained, and the space between the earth and the bottom of the box revealed a half-hidden red notebook and a bottle with clear liquid in it. Amy picked up the book and dusted off the earth.

Opening the first page, she read:

“My darling Amy, you have found me, just as I knew you would, my brave, clever child.”

“Whoa! No way this could be written by Dad,” Amy thought as she felt the tenderness in every word.

“Believe me, I never wanted to leave you, and I can understand if you are angry and want nothing to do with me. But know that I have never

stopped loving you and will wait my whole life to be with you, if you so wish.

I had to leave to keep you safe. I had to leave so I could live. I am ready, and I am waiting for a sign. If you would like to meet, bury the pea you have collected on your journey. Plant it in this window box, and water it with my tears in the bottle buried under the soil. I shall come find you. All my love forever, Mum XX.”

Finding herself in tears, life suddenly started to feel real to Amy. Her mother—who her father had said left them—was out there, waiting. She hadn’t left *them*. She had left *him*. But where was the pea? Amy rooted around the pockets of her cardigan looking for a tissue when she felt the stone. She took it out and smiled and cried some more as she realized it wasn’t a stone—it was the pea. She planted and watered the pea with her own tears of joy along with the tears from her mum. Each day, she returned to care for the seedling and watch it grow as she waited for her real life to begin.