

## ***Keeping the Castle***

**By Patrice Kindl**

### Chapter I

We were walking in the castle garden. The silvery light of early spring streaked across the grass, transforming the overgrown shrubbery into a place of magic and romance. He had begged me for a few moments of privacy, to “discuss a matter of great importance.” By this I assumed that he meant to make an offer of marriage.

“I love you, Althea—you are *so* beautiful,” murmured the young man into my ear.

Well, I was willing enough. I looked up at him from under my eyelashes. “I love you too,” I confessed. I averted my gaze and added privately, “You are *so* rich.”

Unfortunately, I apparently said this aloud, if just barely, and his hearing was sharper than one would expect, given his other attributes.

“I beg your pardon? You love me *because* I’m rich?”

“Not *only* because of that,” I hastened to assure him. He also was reasonably amiable and came of a good family. He admired me and was apparently willing to overlook my lack of fortune, all points in his favor. And, yes, he was rich. Quite enough to turn the head, and the heart, of an impressionable and impecunious young girl such as myself.

“So,” he thought this over, “if I lost my money you wouldn’t love me anymore?”

“If I became ill,” I countered, “so that my hair fell out in clumps and my skin was covered with scabs and I limped, would you still love me?”

“Egad!” He stared at me, evidently attempting to picture this. He turned a little green.

“But,” I said, “Most likely those things will not happen. You are rich and I am beautiful. We should make an excellent couple. Our children will have my looks and your money.” At least, so I hoped. Only imagine a child with his lack of neck and my lack of funds! The poor man’s head looked exactly like a melon, or perhaps one of those large orange gourds from the Americas, bursting out of his cravat. And he had such big red lips, which he licked incessantly.

We each were lost in our own separate thoughts for a moment, I, mourning the fate of these hypothetical offspring, he, as his subsequent commentary proved, considering the finer distinctions of desire and avarice.

“It’s not the same thing,” he said at last, looking sulky. “Admiration of a woman’s beauty in a man is . . .” he waved a hand, searching for the *mot juste*, “it’s spiritual. It shows that he has a soul.” His gaze swept up and down my form, lingering regretfully on my bosom, which was exposed enough for interest and covered enough for decorum. He licked his lips. “But,” he went on, withdrawing his gaze, “any consideration of the contents of a man’s purse by a lady he is courting is—I regret to say this to one I held in such high esteem only a few short moments ago, but I must—it is mercenary and shows a cold heart. I must withdraw my protestations of ardor. Good evening to you.”

He bowed, turned and stalked out of the garden. I sighed. When would I learn to speak with a tactful tongue? There went another one. I kept forgetting how ridiculously sensitive and illogical men were. He assumed that his fortune would buy a beauty; I assumed that my beauty would procure me a rich husband. It seemed much the same thing to me, but evidently what was permissible in a man was not in a woman.

Ah well. There was yet time; I was but seventeen.