

A short story by Nigel Coates

Thirrell of Carnation

Princess Emerald is to be married at the age of 21 to a man who is *true*. But the Princess knows very little of *true love*, so her father, King Thordelious, sets an almighty challenge to sort the single men of Carnation.

Thirrell had often dreamed of having her hand, but he knows he is not the fastest or fittest or strongest... How will he fare?

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Once upon a time, there was a King named Thordelious, who governed the Province of Carnation. By his side were Queen Alexandria and their newborn daughter Emerald.

Everyone in the Province of Carnation loved them dearly, for the King ruled with a kind hand. They only lived in a modest castle, and didn't waste money on extravagance. King Thordelious kept taxes low – which kept the townsfolk's spirits high. They gave back to the community at every chance and saw that no one was left wanting.

The lands of Carnation were great and plentiful, having mountains that climbed far into the sky, thick wooded forests, and lush green pastures. The River Brazen started from high in the mountains and wound through the Province, before traveling the great distance to the sea. For all those who knew, it was a perfect community, in perfect balance.

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When Emerald was just 6 years old, Carnation was consumed by the coldest winter anyone could remember. It was usual to have just a few days of snow, but this year the snow was relentless. For an entire month it came down in thick sheets. Furious winds howled and swirled, doorways were covered over, and the light of the sun was rarely seen.

To everyone's concern, Queen Alexandria fell ill with a very bad case of pneumonia. The King kept a constant vigil by her bedside and prayed she would get better. The servants made hot soup, brought her warm towels, and stoked the fire – but nothing could break her fever.

On a frightfully cold evening, when a ferocious blizzard blew in from the North, the Queen knew her time was near. She hugged her beloved daughter Emerald and held her near. With tears running down her cheeks she said, "Emerald, I always *have*, and I always *will* love you. Fill your childhood with fun – and know you will always make me proud." Queen Alexandria hugged her daughter again and wished her sweet dreams, for the last time.

From her deathbed she asked of Thordelious, "Keep loving me when I'm gone, so there is no room in your heart for anger or sorrow. If you ever feel lonely, you need only to look at the beauty of the Province and imagine my smile – I will never be far. Look after our beloved daughter Emerald, and see she is married at the age of 21 to a true man, a man who will do her well." In the early hours of the following morning, the Queen passed.

Word traveled fast throughout the Province, and braving the cold, many of the townsfolk gathered in a somber huddle in the town square that afternoon. They shared their memories of the Queen and recalled many instances of her kindness. King Thordelious joined the group and thanked them for their well-wishes.

King Thordelious was left with the task of raising Emerald by himself. Emerald had remembered her mother's parting words and was conscious to have fun at every chance. As a youngster she was quite a handful! Emerald loved to climb trees and jump in puddles. She would go on adventures into the forest and would always return mostly covered in dirt. In the warmer seasons she would take great delight in swinging from a rope on the riverbank into the waters of the River Brazen. Emerald would play funny pranks on the servants in the castle, and she was always running late for engagements.

For a long while the King feared he had raised a mischievous Princess – but his concern was not needed, for Emerald matured with her age. She did indeed grow to become a sensible young woman, and a woman who was truly the most beautiful of all in the lands. She too had a kind heart, and loved her father and the townsfolk dearly.

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"My beautiful daughter Emerald, I can't believe you are just days from 21. It seems only like yesterday I looked at you for the first time in your mother's arms and felt truly to be the proudest man who ever stepped foot in this Province. Emerald, that pride has never left me, and with great pleasure do I tell you one of your mother's last requests. Queen Alexandria asked that at age 21, you marry a man who will do you well... A man who is true."

But Emerald knew little of true love. She could only remember glimpses of her parents being together, and although her father had told her many stories of their love, she had not seen it often with her own eyes. She knew of true love from fairy tales and books she had read, but this notion of true love was in her mind – not her heart.

At least once a week, a single man from the Province would sneak past the guards and the King and confess their true love for her, but Emerald was unsure as to whether her heart had ever held such passion in return. Emerald always wondered whether the men who confessed their love were true to their word, or whether they were confessing their love as they wanted the wealth and title. Whoever she chose to marry would become a Prince – and be next in line for the throne.

But getting married at 21 was her mother's request, and she did wonder what it would be like to share her life with a kindred soul. Emerald embraced the idea of getting married, and indeed became quite excited.

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The townsfolk of Carnation all turned up for the extravagant party the King had thrown for Emerald's 21st birthday. Not long after the party had started, King Thordelious made the announcement.

"Single men of Carnation, at this fine time do I declare my support for your efforts to woo my daughter."

All of the single men were extremely happy at hearing this news. For years, most had dreamed this day would come.

Dances were a regular occurrence in Carnation, but on this special day the cue to dance with Emerald was far longer than usual. All of the potential suitors had only one song each to convince Emerald it should be they to be chosen. Each presented themselves in their most professional manner, danced with great passion and vigor, and used every opportunity to speak most highly of themselves.

Emerald had never danced so much before! She was given no opportunity to rest and before the line was even half through, it was obvious she was starting to tire. The men at the rear of the line feared they would not get their chance to impress her and tried to push their way to the front. The men who'd been standing at the front objected, and after some pushing and shoving a fight broke out – which was a rare occurrence indeed for Carnation!

Realizing a better method of choice was needed, the King informed the townsfolk of a challenge from which the one would be chosen.

“With the first light of the morrow, all those who wish for the chance of my daughter’s hand should be back here in the town square. I will ask you to venture deep into the forest to the abandoned mine, where you are to choose a single stone. Then, you will climb to the summit of Mount Majestic – the highest of all in the Province, before returning here to the village square.”

It was an almighty quest – truly deserved of the occasion!

“For those with an interest, scribe your name here,” said the King as he pointed to his assistant. King Thordelious headed for the castle to join his daughter, and the assistant was swamped by all of the men who had queued for a dance. Thirrell sat back patiently, waiting for the cue of potential suitors to disperse.

Thirrell was more reserved than the others. He was more inclined to view commotion with perspective. He had often dreamed of being with Princess Emerald, but never realistically considered himself a chance of having her hand. He did believe himself to be worthy – but doubted his ability to express that meaning to the world.

When the crowd had dispersed, Thirrell approached the King’s assistant. Somewhat exhausted, he handed Thirrell the register and slumped on a seat to catch his breath. The register asked for name and trade. Thirrell skimmed the notes of those previous and considered his friends and their roles in the village. He realized it truly took many skills to combine for harmony.

He noted the farmer and grocer, the shepherd and butcher, the woodchopper and carpenter, the horse-breaker and blacksmith, the minor and stonemason, the musician and singer, and the list continued for pages...

Thirrell supposed that some would have thought themselves more important than others, but with truth, he knew that all were needed for the Province of Carnation to run smoothly.

Thirrell scribed his name, and potter.

For many years Thirrell had dug the creek bed for clay. He shaped bowls and cups and plates for necessity – and statues and placemats and the like for fun. He thought of himself more of an artist than a craftsman, and spent many of his spare hours marveling at the miracles of nature for inspiration.

In his deepest heart he would have loved to be the one to have Emerald's hand, but his heart sank on hearing the tasks set by the King. He would have surely preferred a challenge in clay!

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It had been the longest time since the sun had shone and the morning was brisk. Thirrell knew the sun's return was only moments away as he surveyed the expectant crowd who had gathered in the village square. The morning songs of the Province birds fell second to the chatter of the nervous suitors who jockeyed for position at the starting line – and the townsfolk who stood close to see.

As the King's eye was struck by the sun's first ray, he waved the starting flag with vigor. The suitors jumped to panic and flung themselves into the icy waters of the River Brazen - the most direct route to the forest path. Many of the suitors thought they had a good chance of returning in the shortest time, and were fuelled by the thought of being welcomed by Emerald's enthused embrace.

Thirrell wanted to complete the King's challenge – but knew he was not realistically a chance of returning first. Many of the others competing were fitter and faster and stronger than he. With that in mind, not only did emersion into the icy waters seem none too inviting, neither did emerging on the other side and having to run the forest path in drenched clothes.

Thirrell was very familiar with the river, as he was always digging there for fresh clay. He walked calmly up the bank for a few minutes to where it had always seemed more sensible to cross. Thirrell rolled his pants to his knees and just hopped across the rocks. Indeed his feet were cold, but the rest of him gave thanks!

Thirrell found a walking rhythm that seemed in time with his surrounds. He listened attentively to the chorus of birds. He could smell the fragrance of the fresh blossoms that were opening to the morning sun, inviting both the birds and bees to their nectar and pollen. He could feel the sun warm his skin and the breeze flick his hair.

Thirrell would sometimes look at the majesty of the forest whole, knowing that each tree strove for the sky with just as much might as it used to hold the earth for support. At other times, he would stop at the path's edge, drop to his knees and marvel at an alternate beauty of reduced scale. Thirrell truly believed the smallest of insects that broke the fallen leaves to decay were just as incredible to behold as the tallest of hard woods. And he knew both were needed for the forest to waltz magically to nature's great symphony.

As he walked the forest path knowing he was the last of the suitors, he questioned how a potter could ever be with a Princess. He did not know how to eat a meal using three different sets of knives and forks! He would not know how to spend a whole day without getting dirty, as he loved to dig for clay. He wondered how they could be suited, as they knew of different worlds.

But then Thirrell realized a universal truth. If he were suddenly to become a Prince, it may change what he did – but not who he was. With that in mind, he thought that just because Emerald was a Princess, did not alter who she was inside. He figured that suited souls were independent of profession or placement, and he continued with a smile.

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Thirrell could hear some of the suitors approaching from the path ahead – knowing they had already run to the mine, chosen a stone, and were returning to tackle Mount Majestic. Thirrell noted that most had chosen stones too big to fit in their pockets, probably thinking that bigger was better. Some were even carrying stones that needed two hands to hold! He was amused when he pictured them climbing the mountain without being able to use their hands – but it was the suitors who were laughing at him, because he walked with such ease. Thirrell just wished them all well – as he always tried not to concern himself with the thoughts of others.

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All of the racing suitors had well and truly passed Thirrell on their return before he had even reached the darkest part of the forest. A crashing sound off the path grabbed his interest, for he imagined an animal at play. Thirrell trod lightly towards the lowered embankment from where the sound emerged, trying not to rustle the dried leaves and fallen sticks. He peered through the trees and froze in fright at what he saw.

Most of the villagers never had reason to venture so far into the woods, and the King had surely only requested so in his challenge to truly prove the worthiness of each contender. Thirrell had only visited the area one time previous in search of new clay, but as he had been on horseback had made too much noise to go unnoticed. This time on foot, things were different. He rubbed his eyes to refocus, as he could not believe the village rumors true...

Thirrell was looking at an Ogre!

Stories were told to the young about an Ogre who lived in these woods. Till this moment he had never really thought the stories were true! Thirrell crouched unnoticed in the bushes to look on. He saw from the distance that the Ogre seemed to very much resemble a man, but was just bigger and hairier! Most men of the village stood no taller than 5 foot, but Thirrell guessed this Ogre to be at least 8!

Thirrell was not struck by fear as he expected he would be. He figured the scary stories must have been fully imagined – as he had never heard of actual proof of an incident with this Ogre. As he looked on, it didn't seem to Thirrell that the Ogre seemed so mean.

The Ogre was trying to move the fallen trunk of a tree up the embankment – Thirrell guessing the wood would be used to fuel his fire. The trunk was too heavy for him to carry up the embankment as one, so he carried up one end first, before climbing back down the embankment to do the same to the other end. He tried several times without luck – as the unsecured end would always slip back down to where it had started.

Thirrell knew it would be an easy task with two people and decided he would offer his assistance and secure the high end. His only plan if the Ogre was nasty was to turn and run as fast as he could. He did hope that action was not needed though, as he knew the Ogre's large gate would catch him before too long.

Thirrell slid unnoticed down the embankment and secured one end of the trunk as the Ogre took breath.

"I am only here to help," he offered.

The Ogre turned in shock as he laid eyes on the man who had crept up behind him. They both paused a moment. The loudest sound in the forest was Thirrell's pounding heart! Without further word the Ogre lifted his end, and they carried the trunk up the embankment to the path – Thirrell most thankful the Ogre hadn't done any of the terrible things that Ogre's were rumored to do.

Thirrell dipped his head before turning to continue along the path towards the mine. He had only walked 20 steps before the Ogre spoke.

“You will not get back to your village before nightfall.”

Thirrell didn't know how Ogre's were supposed to speak, but he was surprised it was so clear.

He had been keeping an eye on the sun and knew as much of the advice.

“I plan to shelter in the mine and return in the morrow.”

The Ogre looked at him a moment.

“The mine is wet, cold and hard to the touch. Return to here and call my name...”

“And that would be...?”

“Ben,” replied the Ogre.

Thirrell did not know what would happen on his return, but gave thanks and made his way. He had never ventured so far into the forest and was not fully comfortable the Ogre was now between him and his home. He did figure though, that if the Ogre wished him harm he could have easily done so already. He gave Ben the benefits of his doubts.

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On reaching the mine Thirrell indeed saw it was wet, just as Ben had said. A small creek moved with continuous flow from deep within the darkness to the forest floor. Because this water had seeped through the rock walls of the mine, it carried with it minerals and crystals, which over many years many years had attached themselves onto whichever objects they came to rest. Thirrell had never seen so many mineral embedded rocks, glinting with ribbons of sparkled silver and gold! Though spoilt by choice, he looked past all that lay before him, and with habit peered to the bottom of the creek.

With great delight Thirrell plunged his hand into a thick and rich bed of clay, which was infused with color like he had never before seen! As he squished the clay in his hands, he saw that it wasn't the usual consistent orange – but more a rainbow of glimmer and shine. Tiny fragments of sparkling color shone in the moist clay, which Thirrell could imagine working into artistic objects of pure delight. He kept just a small handful which he placed in his pocket, knowing he could return on horse back for more.

With only a little of the day's light left, he returned to where he had carried the tree trunk to the path, and called the name 'Ben' to the treetops...

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With great enthusiasm, two young boys who were keeping watch from the top of the town's water tower rang the warning bell and yelled at the top of their lungs. It grabbed the attention of all those in the township. The first returning suitor was in sight!

King Thordelious, Princess Emerald and all of the townsfolk rushed to the finish line at the village square. It was the woodchopper! The townsfolk cheered as loud as they could. The woodchopper was indeed fit, strong and healthy, and he had even crossed the finish line a little sooner than the King had expected.

Near complete exhaustion he had just strength enough to approach the Princess and the King. He bowed before them, pulled a stone from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"As the first to the mine, I can tell you this stone is the golddest of all that lay. I feel it is worthy of a mantle, so that it may be admired each and every day."

He stood tall to draw breath, and receive his great rewards.

Emerald looked to the woodchopper and tried to imagine a life with him. It did not bring a smile. She knew of the woodchopper – as they had often shared a dance, and although she enjoyed his company, knew he would be unable to fill her heart with love. She respected her father though, and knew getting married at 21 was one of her mother's last wishes. She was about to congratulate the woodchopper on winning, but her father spoke first.

"Tell me woodchopper... Why did you race?"

"Sir, Emerald is the fairest of the land. I long to stand by her side, as the fastest and strongest of all who wished to do so," he answered.

"And what did you learn from the challenge I set?"

"Learn Sir?"

"Yes learn. True you are fast and strong, but a King's tasks are not just those."

With those words, Emerald was now clear of her father's motives. She had just realized her father had never told the suitors that it would be the first to finish who would win her hand. He had never called it a race. The King had actually set a *challenge*, from which *the one* would be chosen. It was just a way for him to gain an insight into their nature. This pleased Emerald greatly, for she too wished to see more from each suitor than just how fast they could run.

The woodchopper also realized the challenge was not over and looked to please the King.

"Learn Sir... Putting in the most effort to cross the river allowed me to be first to the forest path. With clear vision – I could run unencumbered."

"Clear vision?" queried the King, "Then tell me what you saw at the mountain summit."
The woodchopper froze, for in fact he had not climbed all the way to the top of Mount Majestic.

The woodchopper had figured that because he was running first, no one would know that he had turned at half way. At the time he had thought his decision wise, as he would sooner be the one to hold Emerald's hand, but now, he was trembling in his boots! He had expected his deceit would go without notice, but the woodchopper could not lie to the face of the King.

"Sir I confess. I did not reach the summit. With perspective I now know my vision was not clear, for I was indeed blinded by the reward. I beg for your forgiveness."

Disgraced, the woodchopper stepped down. The townsfolk booed and jeered him. They slowly returned to what they had been doing, before they had been disappointed by the woodchopper.

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With the passing of some time more, the warning bell again sounded as the village blacksmith was spotted on approach. He looked a little puzzled as he crossed the finish line. The crowd was cheering for him, although he knew he was second to the woodchopper. He guessed that Emerald's hand was still to be given.

The blacksmith placed his stone on the table next to the woodchoppers. He had chosen a much larger stone which was sprinkled with a vast rainbow of colors. He was pleased to be relieved of his burden.

"A doorstep like no other!" he exclaimed.

"Tell me blacksmith... Why did you race?" asked King Thordelious.

"Sir, to be your successor and govern these lands do I dream. And with Emerald as my Queen – my life would be grand!"

When asked next by the King what he had learned – he too was stumped by the question and could offer nothing of weight. When asked what he had seen, he could only tell the King of his focus.

"Sir, when working the molten shoe of the horse, it is important to stare with focus to strike with precision. I looked only at the path before me – as to be precise."

"So what did you see on the mountain summit?"

"Sir, I saw the flag that bares your crest," he answered with conviction.

The blacksmith's answer was correct. He had indeed made it to the top of Mount Majestic.

"But what else did you see?" asked the King. The blacksmith was surprised. He thought he had achieved the goal on seeing the crest of the King and turned with haste to start his decent. He now questioned his memory as to what else he may have missed.

"Sir, there was nothing else."

The King looked a little disappointed. He thanked the blacksmith for his effort and honesty, before asking him to join the villagers – as truly the *fastest* of all who tried. The townsfolk cheered at his accomplishments, only now realizing themselves that the challenge for Emerald's hand was not a race.

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Tired and sore bodies continued to return to the village square. Each stood bemused before the crowd and conversed briefly with the King. He asked the same questions as for the woodchopper and blacksmith, before thanking each suitor and asking them to join the crowd. Some admitted very quickly they had given up and not completed the challenge. There were those who guessed Emerald's hand would have already been given and questioned the point of the continued effort. Other admitted defeat as they had chosen stones so large they couldn't even carry them back along the forest path – let alone up Mount Majestic. Others had pushed themselves so hard in trying to catch those in front, they could not physically continue.

Thirrell knew at the start line he would not finish first. He had participated primarily because he was compelled to accept the King's challenge. He had never thought himself to venture through the darkest part of the forest to the mine, before climbing the highest mountain of the Province all in one trip. If he had done it any other day, those who knew of his plans would have thought him crazy. But what an adventure indeed! What a challenge!

By the light of the moon, all those who returned to the square either admitted they did not complete the challenge, and for those who did, they answered the questions of the King before being dismissed. With no more suitors on approach, and the evening wind chilling their bones, they all returned to their homes – Emerald the saddest of all she had not found true love.

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The King lay to sleep with the burden of not one single suitor in his Province fulfilling his wishes. He felt sad for Emerald, and thought as well he had failed his wife. He tossed and turned for most of the night.

Emerald also had trouble with sleep. Her mind was too busy being puzzled by love. She had seen all of the potential suitors who had completed the challenge, and heard their words as they had answered her father. But when she listened for her heart – it did not speak. Emerald was unsure.

She knew the importance of her decision. Firstly, she would have to spend her life with the person she chose, and secondly, her chosen Prince would one day become King and govern all of Carnation. She felt that was of greater importance as it would effect more lives than just her own. She was truly confused by whom to love.



On waking the next morning, the King called a village meeting for that afternoon. Unable to decide himself, he offered to Emerald the decision of choice from those who completed the challenge. Emerald had learnt much from her father and had figured the motives behind his questions. She planned to quiz the suitors further, to learn more of their character.

All of the townsfolk gathered with great anticipation. It had been some time since they had been drawn by such entertainment. Many doubted the Province had ever seen a greater drama. They grouped together in the town square to share their views on how they thought the proceedings would unfold.

The King addressed the townsfolk, and asked only for the suitors who had completed the challenge to stand in a group to the side. They were all very excited, again having the chance to win Emerald's hand – and one day become King.

Emerald proceeded to ask further questions of the potentials. For the benefit of her father she asked questions to gauge their suitability as King, and for herself she asked questions trying to figure if the suitors actually wanted her – or the wealth and title. Just like the previous day, Emerald and her father were reluctant to offer her hand, as no one suitor stood apart from the crowd, or compelled her heart with love.

The townsfolk hung off each answered word, all holding an opinion of whom they thought best suited. The King sat back for the most part, quietly watching the proceedings unfold. But, from the corner of his eye he caught sight of Thirrell, walking casually along the riverbank.



King Thordelious was furious at Thirrell's tardy attendance – for when he called a town meeting it was expected all arrive promptly!

"You there!" he yelled. "Who are you to turn up late to this gathering?"

"My name is Thirrell, and please forgive me Sir for I knew of it not."

The King was about to continue his enquiry, but Emerald stood tall. She had seen Thirrell previously at the town markets and dances, and although he had always cast her pleasant smiles, had never joined the cue for a dance. Not joining the cue and not having completed the challenge with the rest, Emerald had expected him to be involved with another – which she would now put to truth.

"How is it you did not know?"

"My Lady, I have not seen another from town since yesterday's first sun. I return from the mountain summit just now."

"Are you injured?"

"No my Lady."

"But you have taken so long... Are you lazy?"

"No my Lady."

The King was annoyed at the interruption.

"Explain Yourself!" he demanded.

The townsfolk looked on in silence. This was a twist they had not seen coming.

"Sir, with the challenge you set, I knew winning was not for I. To please your wishes did I set out, but in honesty... for myself did I complete." Thirrell took just a moment to look around him and realized he was now the centered focus of the gathering. He knew immediately Emerald's hand was still to be given, although he was unsure why. He was only a little nervous – for most of him was excited! Thirrell figured that if he were ever to shine, it best be now. He moved closer to the front of the gathering and addressed all before him.

"I expected fair Emerald's hand would already be holding that of the fitter, stronger, or faster. Who is a potter amongst such men?"

"Who is such a man indeed?" replied the Princess, slowly warming to the fact she had another potential that was already standing apart from the crowd. The King gave her a nod to continue. She recalled her father's first question from the previous day and thought it wise to compare. "Tell me potter... Why did you race?"

"My Lady, my able body and late return prove I was in no race. But as to why I completed the challenge... I offer you the truth in parts. Yes I did want to see the mine and reach the summit on a single adventure, but from yesterday's first light, I'll admit with great joy that I've had a glimmer of hope that has sparkled in my eye – knowing I was as close to the offered rewards as I was ever likely to be.

Without wanting to speak out of line in front of yourself or the King... I declare that your beauty compares to the morning sun, the early songs of the forest birds, a pure white butterfly that can pass you by without sound, the sweet smell of nectar from a honey blossom, the soothing rumble of the river as it calls longingly for the ocean, and the crimson that blesses the evening sky. Princess Emerald, you are indeed a creature of beauty. To side you in life would be an honor and a blessing.

Of the throne, be assured I am not so certain. From yesterday's first light I've also held a little reservation in my belly. While dreaming wildly of success, please know I've also feared it. To wear the crown I would be lost, for I know naught of how to be a good King. To state with certainty now – there is more I don't know than do! Clay has been my life, and I've only had life as my teacher."

"And with life as your teacher, I ask what you've learnt on this challenge."

"My Lady, I ask kindly for a specific, or I dare marvel in thought at the wonders of life itself!"

Emerald could not find words – left contemplating how Thirrell's perspectives differed from all others. With the pause, Thirrell thought it license to continue.

"I learned more of nature – and of myself. I learned of a light in the darkest part of the forest. I learned of reward for effort. And I learned never to be late for a town meeting or fear the wrath of the King!" The townsfolk laughed aloud. Even the King smiled – for he found the potter amusing and clever. Emerald looked at Thirrell – seeing what he was with her eyes, but knowing he was so much more in mind. The harder she looked, the deeper he seemed. She wanted to know more.

"But last night the North wind blew to us from the ice – How is it you did not suffer?"

Thirrell was warming to both the situation and his eager audience. The spotlight had never been his, and neither had such focus from the Princess. Thirrell had nothing to lose. He walked before the crowd with confidence and realized he was really having some fun.

"I ask the townsfolk to tell me... If they have ever heard the stories of the Ogre that lives deep in the forest." The townsfolk had witnessed each suitor on their return – and had not yet been so entertained. Their enthused headshaking and muttered confirmations of the various Ogre stories they recalled took a moment to settle. The King seemed to take particular note.

"Well... I warmed by his fire – feasted on his game – enjoyed the shelter of his roof – and took delight in his company!" The townsfolk erupted! They all thought Thirrell hilarious. They all knew that an Ogre would offer none of those delights, and they now questioned all of what had been said.

To silence the laughter and commotion the Princess continued.

"Potter! How do we believe you? Who here could believe you? What do you offer as proof?"

Thirrell took a moment in thought. Not one of the townsfolk drew breath – all were staring with open jaws, amazed by the anticipation of possible proof.

"I offer you only my word... Though I ask of all here if I've ever been known to lie..."

The townsfolk remained silent. It was true Thirrell had never done anyone wrong, but Emerald didn't look convinced.

"Princess, if my word is not weight enough, I offer you naught but an invitation to walk the forest path." Thirrell offered one hand to the Princess and motioned with the other to the forest. The crowd gasped at his brashness. Emerald too was shocked and looked instinctively to her father.

"Time not well spent, for I can hold your truth to the light," stated the King. "With a name for the Ogre, I offer you *my* support."

The townsfolk peered with baited breath. Thirrell's word was being questioned directly by the King!

"Sir to be true, he be less of an Ogre and more of a gentleman. But in answer, I offer the name of Ben." The village square was swamped with chatter. No one could believe an Ogre would be called as such, and the villagers openly wondered what would happen to Thirrell for telling such tales to the King.

But it was in fact a duty of the King to know everything about his lands. The village murmurs of an Ogre many years previous set to motion a secret search for the truth. The King and just a few men from his army ventured deep into the forest, and did indeed meet a man of enormous proportions. He was also a gentleman to the King – and had also offered the name of Ben. He had told the King the same story as Thirrell... 'He was once a normal boy who lived in a neighboring province, but to the horror of the townsfolk who lived there, he never stopped growing!'

Ben was driven from his home and labeled a monster. He now found it easiest to live in solitude, which both Thirrell and the King could understand. The King had allowed the murmurs of an Ogre to continue, as it wrapped the adventurous with just a little caution, and the stories enlivened the imaginations of the young.

The King announced his support for Thirrell's word, which again left Emerald and the townsfolk in disbelief. Such a man indeed was the potter!

"Well," started the Princess a little flabbergasted, "What of your stone?"

Thirrell pulled from his pocket the pliable clay and offered it forth. The other stones still sat on the table and Thirrell glanced between them and his offering. The Princess questioned the clay's beauty and validity.

"My Lady, to question its beauty I say true, it may not look much now, but with just a little work I can make it take the form of your desire. These other rocks indeed hold beauty, but that is all they can ever be. Of its validity I agree now it differs, but let me fire my kiln and tomorrow I'll offer it as hard as all others. I offer this forth as the most beautiful clay I've ever seen!" The Princess gave her acceptance of the clay on seeing the nodding head of her father.

"Well... What did you see on top of Mount Majestic?"

"Again my Lady, without a specific it may be easier to offer what I did not...

Though I could mention the thick woods of the lowlands becoming further sparse with each step, and a change in nature's creatures. I saw what it's like in the autumn, and shall be able to tell you in a year of the other seasons – for I've vowed to myself to return in each. From the summit I saw a vast distance like I've never known, but I saw that I climbed a great height but moved not closer to the sun... I also saw the flag that bore your father's crest."

The townsfolk had filled with delight. Thirrell had offered himself forth as never before. They all knew him to be polite and kind hearted – and indeed a talented potter... but they were now witness to the beauty of the thoughts he could form into words.

Emerald knew they all were expecting Thirrell be chosen as the one to have her hand. She too was very impressed by his manner and views, and could see he stood far in front of the others – but she was not yet willing to commit.

"Thirrell, explain to me please, why you did not *try* to win my hand."

"My Lady, I too am in search of love, though I believe strength alone is not enough, as heart and mind play their parts. If I possessed the best qualities of all those who finished before me, I may have been tempted to give my all – but my Lady, without verdict, I offer that a hand given to a *winner* is not likely a hand I wish to hold."

Princess Emerald thought on his answer a moment. She could see it contained her thoughts on love, and her father's wisdom.

"Then, as my last question... Why Thirrell, why have you never asked me for a dance?"

"My Lady, at each village dance I stare in awe. My heart nearly explodes on catching your smile. You glide in song as though skating on ice - and I fear trudging through mud! My Lady, you give your all and ask for none... so I am free to live with dreams of delight that can warm my heart on the coldest of nights. So, I suppose I do not cue... in case I fall from heaven."

The Princess was again speechless. The crowd too remained hushed awaiting her response. It was just a brief silence, but it *was* time enough for Emerald to clearly hear her heart.

'He Loves Me For Me...'

Emerald could not help but smile. She held an energy inside like she had never before known. Her heart was warming. It was filling with Love.

Princess Emerald walked slowly to her father. They conversed quietly, while the townsfolk chatted wildly. One of the potential suitors, who had been standing in the group, stood and joined the masses. He was soon followed by another. With that, all of the remaining potentials also judged the weight of their worthiness compared to Thirrells and decided themselves not a chance. Thirrell was left standing alone.

This was indeed the biggest moment ever, for Thirrell of Carnation!

The King stood and the crowd hushed in an instant. He walked to Thirrell and stood by his side.

"People of Carnation... You have all seen these deeds unfold. True I did set the challenge to find a winner – though it was never to be judged by speed. It saddened me greatly to see those who were dishonest, but I must applaud the strength of those who finished true. For those who gave up in defeat, I hope you have learned..."

Thirrell has shown you all what I dreamed would be found. A King needs perspective, respect, bravery and sense. Understand it is not for all – King is reserved for the special! It is indeed an honor, but understand great burden. Thirrell is wise to view it first with reservation. He has indeed stood tall amongst you. Such a man indeed is the potter!”
The crowd let out a cheer.

The King returned to his chair and Emerald stood before them.

“I give thanks to all who accepted the challenge, and agree with my father’s thoughts on how each chose to race. It’s true I have not known greatly of love, but I do believe it blossoms from respect and attraction. Hearing Thirrell’s words, and knowing his views... I now offer him both of those in return.

With respect... I know Thirrell to be wise, to be brave, to see beauty in all things, to be committed, to be truthful, and to be filled with great passion. With attraction... yes he pleases my sight, but more than that... He excites my mind with his words and excites my heart with his meanings.

I long to watch him sculpt his clay, and to walk the forest path to meet his new friend! I wish to learn to see nature’s beauty through his eyes, and hope with shared time all that will occur.”

Emerald changed focus from the townsfolk to her father. He gave her a reassuring nod. She again looked to Thirrell and they took a moment to look deep into each others eyes...

“Thirrell, Only if it’s your true heart’s desire, I should want for you to ask for my hand.”

Thirrell could not believe how things had developed. Two days previous he was *just a potter* and stood at the starting line not trying to win. He now looked to the townsfolk, who were all willing him to propose. He looked to the King, who returned a wide smile. He looked to the fairest woman he had ever known.

“Princess Emerald... Know that each day I will try to be my best. Know I will never forget my good fortune. Know our love will always grow.” Thirrell lowered to one knee.

“Wanting never to lead you, or follow you... Know it would be an honor indeed to stand proudly by your side. Together... Forever... That is how I see us.

Fair Emerald, I ask for your hand.”

Their enthused embrace told the world of their new love. Both the King and townspeople offered their wild adulation – on a day that would be forever remembered in Carnation! They were cheered and congratulated, before being lifted onto shoulders and paraded around the square. Everybody was ecstatic with how things had developed.



Emerald and Thirrell were married one week later. The ceremony drew people from near and far – all amazed by the story of the potter, who finished last in the challenge set by the King and ended up with the hand of his daughter.

It was truly a fairytale ending!

After the service was over, Carnation prepared for the biggest party they had ever seen. When the band played the first song, the dance floor remained clear. It was time for Thirrell to ask Emerald for a dance – and this time he did not have to join any cue!

By the light of the moon they spun, and twirled, and glided across the dance floor as though they were both skating on ice. It brought a tear to most of the women who looked on, and even some of the men! What a perfect couple they made!

It was the happiest day of both their lives. They had both found True Love!

And they did indeed live happily ever after, in the blessed Province of Carnation!

The End