

# The Winter's Tale

*William Shakespeare*



**Adapted from “Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare” by E Nesbit.**

LEONTES was the King of Sicily, and his dearest friend was Polixenes, King of Bohemia. They had been brought up together, and only separated when they reached man’s estate and each had to go and rule over his kingdom.

After many years, when each was married and had a son, Polixenes came to stay with Leontes in Sicily.



Leontes was a violent-tempered man and rather silly, and he took it into his stupid head that his wife, Hermione, liked Polixenes better than she did him, her own husband.



When once he had got this into his head, nothing could put it out; and he ordered one of his lords, Camillo, to put a poison in Polixenes' wine. Camillo tried to dissuade him from this wicked action, but finding he was not to be moved, pretended to consent.



He then told Polixenes what was proposed against him,  
and they fled from the Court of Sicily that night, and  
returned to Bohemia, where Camillo lived on as Polixenes'  
friend and counselor.



Leontes threw the Queen into prison; and her son, the heir to the throne, died of sorrow to see his mother so unjustly and cruelly treated.



While the Queen was in prison she had a little baby, and a friend of hers, named Paulina, had the baby dressed in its best, and took it to show the King, thinking that the sight of his helpless little daughter would soften his heart towards his dear Queen, who had never done him any wrong, and who loved him a great deal more than he deserved; but the King would not look at the baby, and ordered Paulina's husband to take it away in a ship, and leave it in the most desert and dreadful place he could find, which Paulina's husband, very much against his will, was obliged to do.



Then the poor Queen was brought up to be tried for treason in preferring Polixenes to her King; but really she had never thought of anyone except Leontes, her husband. Leontes had sent some messengers to ask the god, Apollo, whether he was not right in his cruel thoughts of the Queen.



But he had not patience to wait till they came back, and so it happened that they arrived in the middle of the trial.



The Oracle said—

“Hermione is innocent, Polixenes blameless,  
Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, and  
the King shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found.”



Then a man came and told them that the little Princess was dead. The poor Queen, hearing this, fell down in a fit; and then the King saw how wicked and wrong he had been. He ordered Paulina and the ladies who were with the Queen to take her away, and try to restore her.



But Paulina came back in a few moments, and told the King that Hermione was dead. Now Leontes' eyes were at last opened to his folly. His Queen was dead, and the little daughter who might have been a comfort to him he had sent away to be the prey of wolves and kites. Life had nothing left for him now.



He gave himself up to his grief, and passed many sad years in prayer and remorse.

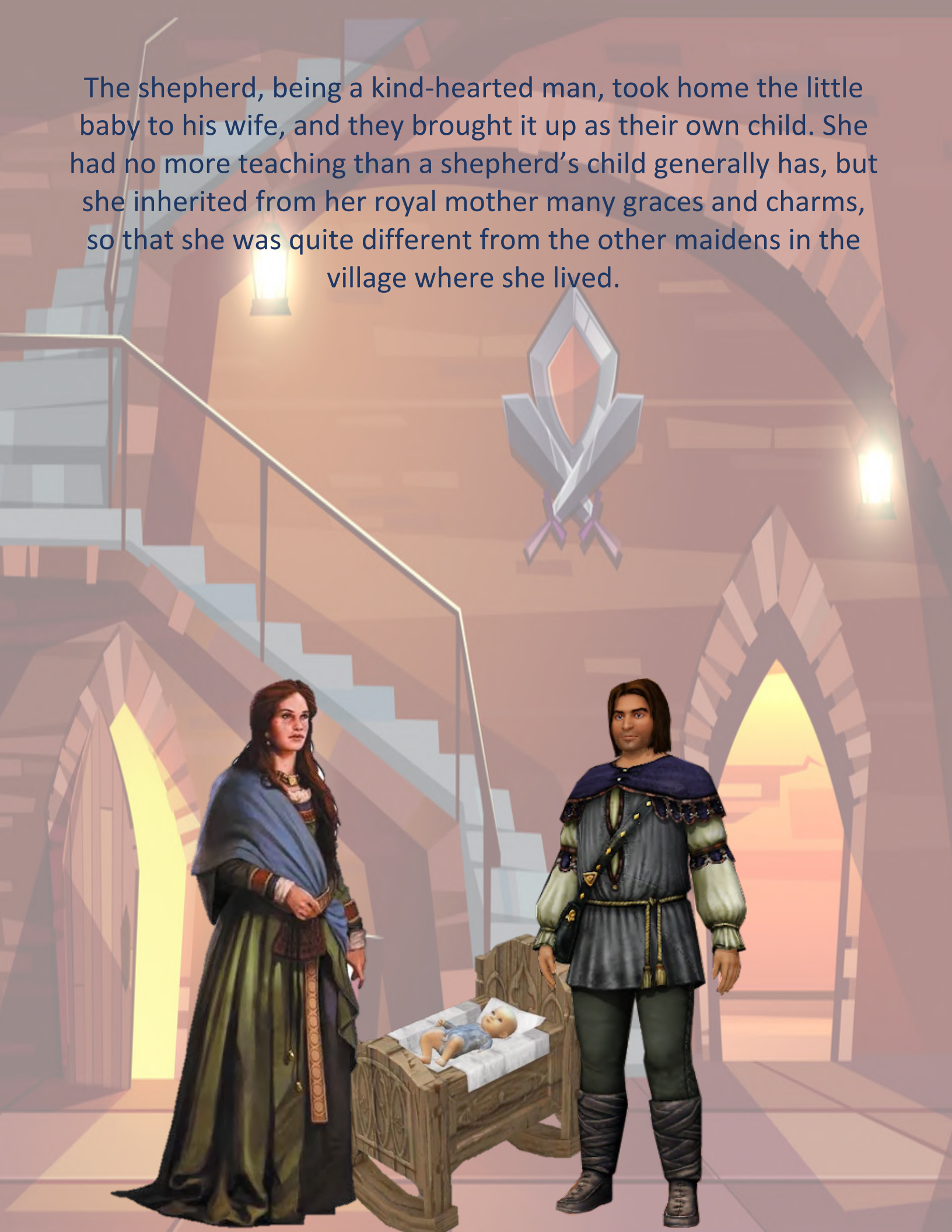
The baby Princess was left on the seacoast of Bohemia, the very kingdom where Polixenes reigned. Paulina's husband never went home to tell Leontes where he had left the baby; for as he was going back to the ship, he met a bear and was torn to pieces. So there was an end of him.



But the poor deserted little baby was found by a shepherd. She was richly dressed, and had with her some jewels, and a paper was pinned to her cloak, saying that her name was Perdita, and that she came of noble parents.



The shepherd, being a kind-hearted man, took home the little baby to his wife, and they brought it up as their own child. She had no more teaching than a shepherd's child generally has, but she inherited from her royal mother many graces and charms, so that she was quite different from the other maidens in the village where she lived.



One day Prince Florizel, the son of the good King of Bohemia, was hunting near the shepherd's house and saw Perdita, now grown up to a charming woman. . He made friends with the shepherd, not telling him that he was the Prince, but saying that his name was Doricles, and that he was a private gentleman; and then, being deeply in love with the pretty Perdita, he came almost daily to see her.



The King could not understand what it was that took his son nearly every day from home; so he set people to watch him, and then found out that the heir of the King of Bohemia was in love with Perdita, the pretty shepherd girl.



Polixenes, wishing to see whether this was true, disguised himself, and went with the faithful Camillo, in disguise too, to the old shepherd's house. They arrived at the feast of sheep-shearing, and, though strangers, they were made very welcome. There was dancing going on, and a peddler was selling ribbons and laces and gloves, which the young men bought for their sweethearts.



Florizel and Perdita, however, were taking no part in this gay scene, but sat quietly together talking.

The King noticed the charming manners and great beauty of Perdita, never guessing that she was the daughter of his old friend, Leontes.



He said to Camillo— “This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever ran on the green sward. Nothing she does or seems but smacks of something greater than herself—too noble for this place.”

And Camillo answered, “In truth she is the Queen of curds and cream.”



But when Florizel, who did not recognize his father, called upon the strangers to witness his betrothal with the pretty shepherdess, the King made himself known and forbade the marriage, adding that if ever she saw Florizel again, he would kill her and her old father, the shepherd; and with that he left them.



But Camillo remained behind, for he was charmed with Perdita, and wished to befriend her.

Camillo had long known how sorry Leontes was for that foolish madness of his, and he longed to go back to Sicily to see his old master. He now proposed that the young people should go there and claim the protection of Leontes.



So they went, and the shepherd went with them, taking Perdita's jewels, her baby clothes, and the paper he had found pinned to her cloak.

Leontes received them with great kindness. He was very polite to Prince Florizel, but all his looks were for Perdita. He saw how much she was like the Queen Hermione, and said again and again—

“Such a sweet creature my daughter might have been, if I had not cruelly sent her from me.”



When the old shepherd heard that the King had lost a baby daughter, who had been left upon the coast of Bohemia, he felt sure that Perdita, the child he had reared, must be the King's daughter, and when he told his tale and showed the jewels and the paper, the King perceived that Perdita was indeed his long-lost child. He welcomed her with joy, and rewarded the good shepherd.



Polixenes had hastened after his son to prevent his marriage with Perdita, but when he found that she was the daughter of his old friend, he was only too glad to give his consent.



Yet Leontes could not be happy. He remembered how his fair Queen, who should have been at his side to share his joy in his daughter's happiness, was dead through his unkindness, and he could say nothing for a long time but—

“Oh, thy mother! thy mother!” and ask forgiveness of the King of Bohemia, and then kiss his daughter again, and then the Prince Florizel, and then thank the old shepherd for all his goodness.



Then Paulina, who had been high all these years in the King's favour, because of her kindness to the dead Queen Hermione, said—"I have a statue made in the likeness of the dead Queen, a piece many years in doing, and performed by the rare Italian master, Giulio Romano.

I keep it in a private house apart, and there, ever since you lost your Queen, I have gone twice or thrice a day. Will it please your Majesty to go and see the statue?"



So Leontes and Polixenes, and Florizel and Perdita, with Camillo and their attendants, went to Paulina's house where there was a heavy purple curtain screening off an alcove; and Paulina, with her hand on the curtain, said—

“She was peerless when she was alive, and I do believe that her dead likeness excels whatever yet you have looked upon, or that the hand of man hath done. Therefore I keep it lonely, apart. But here it is—behold, and say, 'tis well.”



And with that she drew back the curtain and showed them the statue. The King gazed and gazed on the beautiful statue of his dead wife, but said nothing.

“I like your silence,” said Paulina; “it the more shows off your wonder. But speak, is it not like her?”

“It is almost herself,” said the King, “and yet, Paulina, Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing like so old as this seems.”

“Oh, not by much,” said Polixenes.



“Ah,” said Paulina, “that is the cleverness of the carver, who shows her to us as she would have been had she lived till now.” And still Leontes looked at the statue and could not take his eyes away.

“If I had known,” said Paulina, “that this poor image would so have stirred your grief, and love, I would not have shown it to you.”

But he only answered, “Do not draw the curtain.”



“No, you must not look any longer,” said Paulina, “or you will think it moves.” “Let be! let be!” said the King. “Would you not think it breathed?”

“I will draw the curtain,” said Paulina; “you will think it lives presently.” “Ah, sweet Paulina,” said Leontes, “make me to think so twenty years together.”

“If you can bear it,” said Paulina, “I can make the statue move, make it come down and take you by the hand. Only you would think it was by wicked magic.”

“Whatever you can make her do, I am content to look on,” said the King.



And then, all folks there admiring and beholding, the statue moved from its pedestal, and came down the steps and put its arms round the King's neck, and he held her face and kissed her many times, for this was no statue, but the real living Queen Hermione herself.



She had lived hidden, by Paulina's kindness, all these years, and would not discover herself to her husband, though she knew he had repented, because she could not quite forgive him till she knew what had become of her little baby.

Now that Perdita was found, she forgave her husband everything, and it was like a new and beautiful marriage to them, to be together once more.



Florizel and Perdita were married and lived long and happily.

To Leontes his many years of suffering were well paid for in the moment when, after long grief and pain, he felt the arms of his true love around him once again.



