

## Ginger

Jessica Allen was in her local library, poring over a book about medieval costumes and hair styles.

Most of the plates were in colour, but there were a few smaller ones in black and white, one of which was particularly interesting. It was to this picture, a small painting of a young Plantaganet troubadour, that she returned again and again. As she studied the picture, it seemed as if the book shook slightly in her hands. Then the shades of the picture seemed to take on colours. She moved her head and blinked her eyes, but the colours persisted, definite in blues, reds, and golds. She felt a little startled, but decided it was a trick of the light, and thought to herself,

"This young man has ginger hair and hazel eyes..."

She turned the page over.

Although it was something she could never explain to anyone, she had always had an aversion to men with ginger hair since she was a child. When her brother's friend Josh, who had this colour hair, came into the house she would run upstairs to her room and cringe in one corner feeling sick.

"This is stupid!", she said to herself, and turned back to the picture of the troubadour. He seemed to be looking straight at her. She half closed her eyes, and as she did so she thought she saw the white fingers moving over the strings of the lute he was holding, as if playing a melody. He pursed his lips to whistle. Jessica heard the strains of the music and the whistling clearly. As first it was faint and far away, then it grew louder, the sweetest sound, and yet it held a mocking note as if challenging her to follow it.

"Oh, no!" she whispered, with tears streaming down her face, "I can't! I can't! Please stop! Oh, stop!"

He lifted one white finger in a beckoning gesture. She put out her hand which he clasped in his. At the touch of his cold hand, a great shudder went through her body. The world became dark and she sank to the floor. When she opened her eyes again a man was bending over her holding her hand.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, thank you." she said without looking up. She was still holding the book. Glancing at the picture of the troubadour she saw that his face had faded and in the top left hand corner was a mask of her own face. She heard the man speak to her and heard herself answer,

"I am trying to remember, I am trying to remember!"

It was all so long ago. It seemed as if she had been through many lives and many countries and was searching for the right one in which to come to rest; she felt so tired....

Jessica tried to remember what Allan had said to her before he went away as a troubadour to entertain the soldiers of King Richard's army.

"I shall be gone for one year. You must promise to wait for me, and stay with my mother until I return. She will watch over you and guide you, as you are to be my wife and her daughter-in-law. For although we were betrothed as children, you are still very wilful in thinking that it does not matter. It is binding and I will not set you free. We need your lands to enlarge our farm. We shall be married as soon as I return one year from now."

Jessica bowed her head and with a heavy heart she watched him gallop off down the road, his lute slung over his back. His mother called to her,

"Come, girl, we have much to do. You have much to learn if you are to be a good wife to my

son. You can start on the dairy by cleaning the butter and milk churns."

The work of the farm and the house, as well as spinning and waving, was long and tiring to a girl brought up as gently as Jessica had been. But her parents had died and she was now in the care of her mother's cousin, Madam Fullalove, Allen's mother. The work started early and finished late in the evening. Madam Fullalove kept her at it through most of the day. She was not an unkind person, but she knew the work had to be done and there was no time for day-dreaming. What work did not get done on its appointed hour on the right day could put the running of the farm very much out of schedule. Delays cost money and money was what she looked after most carefully at all times

One day, when Madam Fullalove was away at the market, a neighbouring farmer came to call. Jessica heard him galloping along the highway on his brown horse. He drew up at the side of the house where his horse would not be seen from the road, dismounted, and came into the dairy where Jessica was working, skimming the cream from the milk to turn into butter.

She was feeling very tired, and longed to leave the dairy and to take off her shoes and run wildly through the fields of yellow buttercups until she dropped with sheer happiness. Life with her prospective mother-in-law was far from easy. She dreaded each day as it dawned and each season as it came round.

She dreaded the return of Allan from the wars, and the thought of being his wife filled her with despair so great that sometimes, as she stood by the water well to draw the daily buckets of water, she wondered what it would be like to fall to the bottom and know no more.

The farmer, John Finch, came into the dairy and stood behind Jessica so closely that she could feel the heat from his body. The smell of horse and the maleness of him made her close her eyes. She put up a hand to her mouth to stop the sound of a scream.

"Jessica," his voice was rough and harsh. He put his large hands on her shoulders,

"You don't have to marry Allan you know. If you marry me there is nothing anyone can do to hurt you. True, I need your lands, and this is partly what prompts me to ask you to be my wife, but my house is not so large as this one and you would be your own mistress. I have no mother to worry about. Think, girl, marry me, be my wife, my real wife; and you are your own mistress from then on."

He turned her round to face him. She saw a face reddened by the sun, wind, and rain, with its thatch of straw coloured hair. If this was her only means of escape then she knew that she had to give it more thought. Twisting out of his arms, she moved further down the dairy away from him.

"Think it over and let me know next time I come here." he said. "Then, if you decide to do as I ask, I will arrange everything, and we shall be married within the month."

"I will think about it." she replied. "If I decide to marry you, I will show it by wearing a blue apron next time you come."

With that she ran out of the dairy, across the yard to the house and into the tiny room at the top of the house which was hers. She sat there until it was nearly dark.

When Madam Fullalove returned home and found that Jessica had not finished in the dairy, she berated her soundly, saying how lazy, good for nothing and useless she was, and then left her in her room in the eves of the house. Once there Jessica sank to the floor beside her bed, and leaning her head against the worn quilt burst into tears. When she had calmed down she undressed and climbed wearily under the covers. She tried to sleep, but it seemed impossible. Every now and again a huge sob would shake her body.

At last she did sleep. And when she opened her eyes again dawn was appearing in the east. She got out of bed and crossed to the window. The shadows were lifting and the first rays of the sun could be seen through the trees. Even as she watched the rays grew longer. Just over the horizon the first arc of the sun began to rise and show through the moving leafy fingers of the trees.

Jessica looked around her room and made up her mind quickly. She pulled out of a

cupboard a large hessian bag that she had made for herself, embroidering it with brightly coloured wools. Hastily she put in it all her belongings and crept quietly down stairs in her rough woollen stockinged feet. As she passed through the farm yard to the gate nearest the road a cock crowed and the chickens cackled.

Once on the uneven, rutted, road she put on her shoes and walked as swiftly as she could the four miles to the farm of John Finch.

As Jessica approached the farm she saw John looking out of an upstairs window. As she drew nearer the dogs in the outhouse started to bark making John look down.

"Jessica" he cried in amazement.

"I have come to be with you" she whispered.

John's head disappeared from the window. He ran downstairs and flinging open the door he held out his hand. As Jessica put her hand in his, he drew her into the house and she went with him, knowing she could fight no more, for Allan would be home the following month.

John and Jessica were married within the month, as John had promised. As they came out of the church into the autumn sunshine and were walking down the gravel path to the gate Jessica saw Madam Fullalove watching her from her dark, brown eyes. As the couple drew near to her she said to Jessica

"Allan is here".

The girl looked round and standing under the shade of a tree was Allan. He bowed his head as she passed, then said to her in an icy voice.

"You should have waited for me. I have waited for you, and I shall always wait, throughout the ages if needs be, but I shall have you in the end. You will always be mine."

Throughout the ages! Jessica felt John hold her a little more tightly. As he swung her on to his horse and mounted behind her she glanced back at Allan.

"Through out the ages" he said. "Remember this!"

Jessica all but slipped from the horse as the world grew dark around her. John steadied her with his muscular arms and with a "Hey up!" they galloped off down the road. Allan's last words were ringing in her ears to the rhythm of the horses hooves.

"Throughout the ages - throughout the ages"

These words kept coming back into Jessica's head as she hurried into the entrance of Russell Square station and into the lift. She edged her way carefully to the other side. The attendant was calling to the late comers to hurry. As the gates clanged together and the lift began to descend she became aware of a presence, as if eyes were boring into the back of her head. She knew without turning her head who it was. For the last three weeks it had been the same. Every evening the same dash for the lift and he was the last one in every time. The gates opened and everyone spilled out onto their various platforms for the train home. She would look round but the man was never in sight until she got out at Kings Cross, then somehow, he would be on the escalator ahead of her. He was always in the same carriage sitting opposite her, this tall, young man with ginger hair and hazel eyes. He always carried a guitar in a black case. He never looked at her directly, but glanced at her now and again through long, tawny eye lashes.

As the train slowed down at the stop before hers, Jessica rose to her feet and stood by the door. The young man stood behind her, then, as the doors opened, he stepped out in front of her on to the platform. As he did so Jessica stepped back into the train. The doors closed and she sank into the nearest seat. She was alone in the carriage. When she got out at the next station of to her amazement he was waiting for her at the barrier. He said to her in a reproachful voice, which was at the same time sweet and musical,

"I have waited for you. You made a promise that you would wait for me."

With wonder that was tinged with a kind of sick fear, she said, "Now I know who you are".

The ginger haired young man held out his white hand, and taking hers he gripped it firmly

and said to her,

"I told you I would wait. I told you I would come, however long it took to do so, even throughout the ages."

Even throughout the ages? The young man still holding her arm led her up the steps and over the bridge. As they descended the steps, Jessica saw the tall figure of John, her husband coming towards them with outstretched arms, and, smiling, he said,

"I finished work earlier than usual as something told me you would appreciate my meeting you this evening. Who was that young man?"

She turned her head to see through the tears in her eyes to see the ginger haired young man standing a little way off near the entrance of the station. It may have been the mist in her eyes, but he slowly disappeared, melting shapelessly into the evening shadows. Jessica thought she heard the sound of a sweet whistle and the strumming of a guitar in her ears, then he was gone!

"Who was that young man?", asked John again.

"Just someone who has travelled along the way with me." she replied.