

Gregorin and the Three Witches

Gregorin and the Three Witches

Collected stories

Gavin Miller

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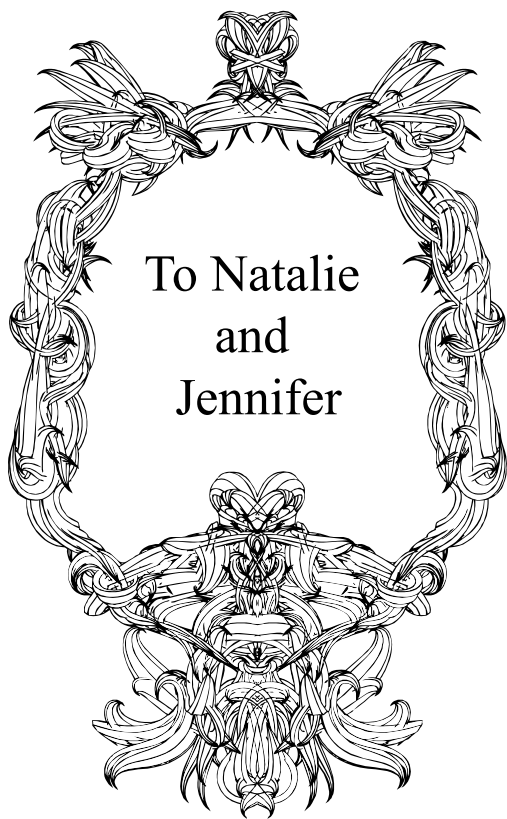
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To Natalie
and
Jennifer

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Preface

This book is a collection of short pieces written over two decades. Classic folk tales inspired some of the stories, while others were the result of pure whimsy or a suggestion from a friend. Marleen Kaptein is to be thanked for a long drive to Monterey during which we devised the outline for *The Fisherman's Daughter*. The Gregorin stories, the oldest of the tales, were inspired by the results of a ceramics class. The pottery version of Gregorin was inspired by another famous dragon, but sitting on my desk for many years, it finally demanded stories of its own. The wolf, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, was suggested by many adventures with my friend David Ross, in the northerly cold of a Canadian metropolis.

The Princess in the Tower and *Cinderella and Buttons* both began life as short stories, but with the encouragement of Roger Spreen, grew into plays that were performed by *The Menlo Players Guild* in Menlo Park, California. Dean Burgi directed a fine cast of actors. Each gave life to their characters beyond what I had written for them, and it was from those performances that the extended versions of the stories in this book were drawn. (The play versions of *The Princess in the Tower* and *Cinderella and Buttons* may be downloaded from my website at www.doctorgavin.com.)

I would like to thank Grandma Ridl, for reading my stories and plays, and encouraging me to write a book; Linda Branagan for meticulous proof-reading; my mother for her enduring support of my writing; and my wife Nancy for showing me that a happy wedding day is just the beginning.

This book is dedicated to my two nieces in the hope that it helps them to choose their princes wisely.

Gavin Miller
Los Altos, California
October 2002



Little Red
Riding Hood

Little Red Riding Hood

Once upon a time there was a young woman who lived in a small village close to a wood. It was a very sleepy village with few distractions and a limited choice of men. To alleviate her boredom, she would go every Saturday night to take fresh bread to her grandmother who lived deep in the heart of the forest. Her grandmother was always sympathetic to her grandchild's grumbling. She used to cheer her up by recollecting her own youth, when she was a lady-in-waiting at court. The old woman reminisced about the beautiful tapestries and fine food, the enchanting music and handsome lovers. Often she predicted that one day her granddaughter would meet a handsome prince and ride off to his majestic castle and live happily ever after. In the meantime it stopped them both from feeling lonely, but gave the impressionable young girl a rather elevated sense of her own importance.

At around this time there lived in the forest a wolf that was also very lonely. He was at that awkward age when he was too old to play with his friends and too young to be respected by the pack. One afternoon, when he was feeling particularly sorry for himself, he saw the young woman on her way to her grandmother's house. She was wearing a red shawl and a long red cloak and had a dreamy, far away look in her eyes. In fact she needed glasses but was too vain to wear them, which was foolish in a dangerous place like the forest. The wolf knew none of this, however, and fell in love almost instantly. Her elegant way of walking and the gentle swaying of her cloak left him hopelessly in awe.

'I must learn to speak with her,' he said to himself as the vision faded and Little Red Riding Hood moved on to the next part of the trail. In the months that followed, the wolf risked life and limb by staying as close to the village as he dared. Even in those days, wolves had as much to fear from people as the other way round.

Each evening, he would lie low and listen, trying to catch any snippets of English that he could. He found it very difficult to understand the strange grunts and hisses that people made, but gradually the meaning became clear to him. He learned a lot about farming, and something that the villagers called money. They used to get very excited about it, and for a while, the wolf thought it must be the word for the feeling that the young woman had inspired in him. However, one day, he saw two villagers fighting over money, which they seemed to think could be held in a little

Little Red Riding Hood

bag. The wolf was desolate. How can she think I money her when I don't have a bag like that? He was even tempted to steal such a bag and claim it as his own, but he thought that this would be a mistake. No true and lasting bond could begin with a lie.

Finally, late one night, two of the villagers, a man and a woman, crept out into the forest to be alone. This seemed odd to the wolf, since the man in question spent most of his time with a different woman, but they both seemed happy enough so he watched in silence. The man approached the woman and then kissed her. The wolf's heart almost stopped. He thought the man was going to eat her up—but he didn't, and when it was over she smiled back at him. A strange sort of eating thought the wolf, but his own feelings were a bit like hunger, so he understood. Then, at last, the thing the wolf had been waiting for happened.

'I love you,' said the man.

'I love you too,' said the woman, and they ate each other again. The wolf ran off into the forest. Now he knew what to say.

The next Saturday, the wolf waited on the trail for Little Red Riding Hood. The feeling was in his heart and the words were on the tip of his tongue but she didn't appear. This night, of all nights, was the time chosen for the annual dance in the village. As the young woman pirouetted until dawn, the wolf went home disappointed.

The following week, the wolf was less hopeful but waited at the appointed place nonetheless. As the forest began to darken into twilight, he heard the swaying of his beloved's dress. He smelled her lavender scent on the wind, and then he saw her—more ravishing than ever, grumbling to herself about the dance.

'So many partners, but never the right one! Andrew's an oaf. George is a fool, and Peter can't dance to save his life. And not one drop of royal blood between them.'

'I would be your prince,' said the wolf.

'Who's there?' asked Red Riding Hood, not a little scared.

'Someone who loves you,' said the wolf, trembling from head to foot.

Little Red Riding Hood

‘Come forward and show yourself,’ commanded the young woman, regaining her self-control. The wolf did so, and appeared on the path before her. Little Red Riding Hood let out a scream.

‘Save me from the wolf,’ she cried, to her imagined lover.

‘I am the wolf,’ said the wolf, and for a moment the young woman was struck dumb.

‘I fell in love with you, and learned your language so that I might tell you.’

The beautiful girl let forth a wondrous smile as a thought crossed her mind.

‘Are you a prince who was turned into a wolf by a wicked witch?’ she asked.

‘No I’m just a wolf,’ said the wolf, and her smile faded immediately. This was not going quite the way the wolf had planned.

‘Well, in that case, I shouldn’t be talking to you,’ said Little Red Riding Hood. ‘Everyone knows that wolves are not to be trusted.’

‘But I love you,’ said the wolf.

‘That, if you don’t mind me saying so, is just the sort of thing I was warned about. If you were a gentleman, you would approach a member of my family, and have us properly introduced.’

The wolf wasn’t altogether sure what a ‘gentleman’ was, but he would have rather died than admit it.

‘I must go now,’ said Little Red Riding Hood, ‘and if you try to follow me I shall scream and scream until the hunters come and kill you.’

‘How brave she is,’ thought the wolf, ‘and such elegance of phrasing. To have actually talked to her, I’m in heaven.’ He watched with tears in his eyes, as Little Red Riding Hood disappeared along the path. He could never talk to his love again. He was only a wolf, and she wanted a prince.

Little Red Riding Hood

He would need this language no longer. He must force himself to forget it. But try as he might, one thought kept ringing in his ears ‘a member of my family, a member of my family.’ Then he had it. The grandmother! Maybe he could be a gentleman after all.

He bounded off through the forest as fast as his legs would carry him. He knew all the short cuts to the grandmother’s house and would be there half an hour before Little Red Riding Hood. That should be enough time to win over the old woman. Almost completely out of breath he arrived at the tiny wooden house and scratched at the window with his claw.

‘Grandmother let me in. I must talk with you.’ The grandmother opened the door a fraction and stared down at the wolf. At first she was afraid, but then grew less alarmed as his story unfolded.

‘I saw your granddaughter in the forest, and fell in love with her. But she won’t talk to me. She says I’m not a gentleman, and that we should be introduced. Can you help me grandmother?’

The grandmother realised that the wolf was a rather pathetic character and opened the door a little wider.

‘How dare you come here like this? Do you really expect me to help a wolf to meet my own granddaughter? She is a princess in the making. Only the best is good enough for her.’

‘I will bring her the best. The reddest berries, the most succulent shrubs, the brownest nuts. I will hunt deer for her. I will keep her safe from harm. I love her and long only to be at her side.’

The grandmother, who was vain on her granddaughter’s behalf, became furious.

‘She deserves rubies, and diamonds and royal banquets, a king for a husband, and a palace for a home. You can only give her what she already has, a boring forest, a country diet, and leaves for a bed.’

‘But I’m more devoted than a prince would ever be.’

‘You are not even fit to be her dog.’

Little Red Riding Hood

Well, the wolf was, after all, a wolf and this last insult was too much to stand. He glared at the grandmother with murder in his eyes and bared his teeth.

‘I could kill you for that,’ he growled.

The grandmother, realising it was true, was suddenly terrified. Her heart stopped beating, and she fell lifeless to the floor.

The wolf was devastated. He only meant to frighten her a little. This was terrible.

‘What do I do now?’ he wondered. ‘Little Red Riding Hood will be here any minute. If she sees her dead grandmother she’s bound to think I did it, taking my revenge on her family. I must get the old lady out of the way.’ He dragged the body inside the house. Luckily there was a closet that was open, and large enough for the old woman to be hidden in. The wolf decided that he would pretend to have the grandmother’s voice and that he would tell the young girl to go away when she arrived. The wolf was about to shut the door of the closet with his nose, when a thought struck him. ‘What if Little Red Riding Hood comes inside the house? She is very wilful and would never leave her grandmother alone if she was ill. I know,’ thought the wolf ‘I must pretend to be the grandmother.’ He slipped off the grandmother’s bonnet and, after much difficulty, managed to wiggle it onto his own head.

‘The things we do for love,’ he muttered to himself and crawled into bed. He had never been in a human bed before, and he had to admit that it was rather pleasant, being both springy and warm at the same time. He was just beginning a fun game of trampoline when there was a knock at the door.

‘Can I come in grandmother?’

‘Go away child,’ croaked the wolf, ‘I have a terrible cold, and I don’t want to give it to you.’

‘But grandmother, if you’re ill, I must come in.’

‘Just as I feared,’ sighed the wolf. ‘Here comes trouble.’

Little Red Riding Hood

You'll never guess what happened to me in the forest today.'

'I think I might,' thought the wolf, and let out a sickly cough.

'You do look peculiar,' said Little Red Riding Hood.

'Don't come closer,' said the wolf. 'It might be catching.' He tried to summon up a contagious-sounding wheeze, but it came out more as a hollow whistle.

'And you do look a funny colour.' Little Red Riding Hood squinted up her eyes and cursed her vanity for not wearing glasses. The wolf didn't answer.

'And what big ears you have.'

'That's it,' thought the wolf. 'She's onto me.'

He racked his brain for something to say. 'All the better to hear you with, my dear.' It was a lame attempt, but he had to try something.

'And what big eyes you have.'

'All the better to see you with, my dear.' He mustered a sheepish grin, which is difficult for a wolf, but things went from bad to worse.

'And what big teeth you have.'

'All the better to eat you with, my dear.' He was speaking metaphorically, of course, thinking of the couple from the village, but he knew it was a mistake almost as soon as he said it. Little Red Riding Hood stuck out her chin, as if really angry, and then flounced over to the open door and started screaming.

'Help! Help!' she cried. 'There's a wolf here, and he's trying to eat me. Help! Help!'

The wolf finally saw the error of his ways. He got out of bed very slowly, took off the grandmother's bonnet, and then went over and stood right next to Little Red Riding Hood.

Little Red Riding Hood

‘If I was really going to eat you, I could have done it by now.’

‘Well you ate my grandmother!’ protested Red Riding Hood.

‘No I didn’t! She is dead, but I didn’t even take a bite.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘What is the point?’ asked the wolf, his ardour turning to exasperation.

‘You’re a horrid, nasty wolf, and I want you dead!’

‘Do you really have so many admirers that you can afford to have one killed?’ asked the wolf.

‘I do, actually,’ sniffed Little Red Riding Hood. ‘The men in the village are all mad about me.’

‘But,’ said the wolf, ‘Andrew is an oaf. George is a fool, and Peter can’t dance to save his life.’

‘At least they have a house, with a roof over their heads, and a clean bed to sleep in. What have you got?’

‘All the forest is my home—and if it’s sleep you want, I’ll take you to the secret cove where waves will sing you lullabies and all the stars will be your canopy.’

‘But men have curtains, and fine clothes—and a fire to keep away the cold.’

‘I would keep you warm,’ said the wolf as he brushed his soft fur against the young girl’s naked arm.

‘I’m sure you would,’ said Red Riding Hood, her frown at last softening a little. ‘I suppose I might survive, if you didn’t eat me,’ she added, with laughter in her voice.

‘But I would die, if you didn’t love me,’ purred the wolf, as he caressed her elbow with his ears, and nuzzled his nose into her hand.

Little Red Riding Hood

‘Well we can’t have that,’ whispered Red Riding Hood, as a tingle of pleasure shot up her arm.

‘Do I get a hug then?’ asked the wolf with great big pleading eyes.

‘Yes,’ said Red Riding Hood smiling, and she knelt down and wrapped her arms around his neck. The wolf was just beginning to think he would die of bliss when a strident cry came out of the forest.

‘Don’t worry Miss, I’ll rescue you!’

‘Oh no,’ said Little Red Riding Hood, ‘It’s the gamekeeper. He must have come to kill you.’

‘Well if you will cry wolf...’ grumbled the wolf.

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

‘I should go then,’ said the wolf.

‘No, he’ll see you. You must hide.’

‘But where?’ asked the wolf.

‘In the closet, of course!’

The wolf’s heart skipped a beat.

‘But your grandmother’s in there!’ he exclaimed. ‘I didn’t mean to...’

‘Don’t mind that now,’ said Little Red Riding Hood. ‘Apologies can wait. In you go.’ And before he knew what was happening, the wolf was swept up into the cupboard and sitting on top of the grandmother’s body.

The gamekeeper arrived puffing at the door. ‘Here I am Miss. Nothing to worry about now. I’ll save you.’

The gamekeeper paused until he finally got his breath back. ‘Where is it, then?’

Little Red Riding Hood

‘Where’s what?’ asked Little Red Riding Hood.

‘The wolf, of course.’

‘It ran away, when I started shouting.’

The gamekeeper sat down on the grandmother’s chair. ‘It might come back Miss. They’re not usually scared for long.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well I’ll wait here with you, just to be sure.’ And wait he did.

To the wolf, in the dark, the silence seemed to last for hours. He was laying his head down to make himself more comfortable, when his mouth came in contact with one of the grandmother’s hands. Because of his lovesick heart, the wolf hadn’t eaten for days—but now that he had been hugged, his appetite reappeared with a vengeance. He knew that it wasn’t really polite, but he couldn’t resist taking a little nibble at one of the fingers.

Unfortunately, the flesh was thin and sinewy. The wolf bit down harder until, suddenly, the bones collapsed in his mouth with a loud crack. The gamekeeper threw open the door, and the wolf stared straight down the barrel of his gun. In the frozen stillness of that moment, the wolf knew two things with perfect clarity. One was that he loved Red Riding Hood, and the other was that hand of grandmother doesn’t taste very good even when fresh. A single bullet passed through the wolf’s heart, stopping it instantly. Little Red Riding Hood let out a primal scream, which later she was somewhat at a loss to explain. The gamekeeper went home well satisfied, and Little Red Riding Hood returned to the village, strangely subdued.

Some months later, news reached the royal court of a brave young woman who had tricked a murderous wolf into hiding in a closet. When the young prince learned that the girl in question was very beautiful, he summoned her to the palace. Within a year they were married, and the entire kingdom told the story to their children. It was like a fairy tale. Unfortunately, the marriage was not a happy one. The prince often went off hunting for days on end, leaving Red Riding Hood quite alone. At

Little Red Riding Hood

such times, she would lie down on her favourite rug and run her fingers through its fur. She then dreamt about a secret cove where the sky was heavy with stars, and the glistening waves sang lullabies.



The Fisherman's
Daughter

The Fisherman's Daughter

Even in the years of her greatness, Susanna never forgot that her father had been a fisherman. When she was very young her family had all lived together in a tiny stonewalled cottage that overlooked a quiet harbour. Whenever her father's boat returned home Susanna's mother would carry her down to the quay to see the wriggling silver treasure that he had conjured up from the sea. After holding both of Susanna's cheeks in his sea-rasped hands, the fisherman would hoist the little girl up onto his shoulders and carry her in triumph back to their house—for a feast of steamed lobster, or whole salmon stuffed with crab.

One autumn, when Susanna was five years old, the family decided to travel northwards up the coast to spend the dark months of winter with her grandmother. The old lady had never seen her only grandchild and was excited by the letter that arrived by another fishing boat, announcing their imminent arrival. The letter said that Susanna's father had decided to make one last catch of the season before setting out for their new resting-place.

Though the resultant haul exceeded all expectations, her mother grew worried that they were a little late in the year to be sailing so far north, but her father was confident that they could put into shore at the first sign of trouble. The journey itself started calmly enough, with Susanna sitting in the prow of the ship, staring out at the glittering waves. The wind blew through her hair as she revelled in finding herself out in open water. The land was a distant sliver on the horizon and Susanna started to daydream about what adventures might unfold if they kept sailing up the coast, all the way to the land of ice. Her father had told her stories of giant white bears that ate people for supper but she was sure that he was teasing her.

Susanna's mother interrupted the little girl in her musings, and wrapped her in a warm woollen cloak. Lost in thought, Susanna hadn't noticed that she had started to shiver. Looking up she saw that the sky had begun to darken and that the waves were growing larger and more menacing, with great caps of spray being thrown off like scattered seeds in the wind. Susanna's mother took her by the hand. Stumbling on the heaving planks they made their way to the little canvas shelter in the middle of the boat. It afforded them some protection as Susanna's father held the rudder with a firm hand, glad that their destination was only a mile away. It seemed as if the journey might end well, but then the wind grew fiercer

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and louder, until it howled like a tortured sea monster. Suddenly the little craft tilted violently to one side, as a sudden gust of wind tore the rigging from the mast. Both mother and daughter had to crouch down low to avoid being swept overboard by the rampaging sails.

Looking back, Susanna saw her father fighting with the lurching ship as it bucked and twisted under his grip. Losing all forward motion, the rudder became useless in his hands. He began bailing with all his might as waves lapped over the sides of the open boat. All three took leather buckets and tried to keep the boat afloat as it was tossed about by the churning ocean. One high wave caught the boat broadside and smashed it savagely, ripping off the rudder. It was all they could do to keep from capsizing by shifting their weight from one side to another. As they drifted closer to land, the waves grew less wild, but the wind caught the little craft and sent it into a slow spin. Susanna's father, seeing what had to be done, broke out an oar and tried to counter the gyrations. With great ploughing strokes into the water he fought the wind and waves and set the craft on a steady bearing for land. Despite his finest efforts, a malevolent tide carried them from shore. Both parents tried beyond exhaustion to save the ailing ship. Row as hard as they might the boat was dragged northwards, beyond the grandmother's cove. Finally the tide turned and they were dragged in again but this time towards a row of foam-spattered rocks.

As Susanna's father still struggled with the oars, her mother realised that they might all be dashed to pieces. She took Susanna and tied the little girl to three of the rope-covered glass floats that her father used to mark the location of lobster pots. As the vessel drifted closer to its destruction, Susanna, bewildered, clung to her mother for warmth. Looking over her mother's shoulder, she saw her father fighting grimly with the waves as first one oar, and then the other, was ripped from his hands by the sea. Abandoning all hope he dragged himself over the half-submerged deck towards his huddled family. Taking the little girl in his arms he kissed her on the forehead. He brought his lips close to her ear, cupping it with his hands so that she might hear him above the storm.

'We love you!' he cried, and before she knew what was happening, Susanna had been lifted up over the side of the boat and placed down in the water. Buoyed up by the makeshift raft Susanna watched helplessly as her mother and father disappeared into the storm. Crying out not to be

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left alone, she tugged at the ropes and knots so that she might be free to join them in a watery grave, but her mother had tied them well. Overcome with exhaustion and grief, the little girl became limp, and was left at the mercy of the storm.

When the tempest was over it was found that Susanna had been washed to shore still breathing. No sign of the fishing boat remained, and her parents had vanished into the sea as if they had never existed. And so it was that grandmother and granddaughter met for the first time, and Susanna, with tears in her eyes, was ushered into her new home.

For the first month, Susanna was inconsolable, crying into her pillow every morning and refusing all food except for a little milk. Her grandmother decided to come and sit by the little girl, as her wizened fingers busied themselves with knitting pullovers for the winter to come. After a week the old lady saw that her granddaughter had started to take little glimpses to see what she was up to, and the girl's sobbing had become a little less insistent. After another week of curious peeping, Susanna came over to the old lady and asked to be allowed to watch. Within a few days she had dried her eyes and started to learn the secrets of her grandmother's craft. Both hoped that busy hands might help to distract them from their grieving hearts.

As Susanna grew, each morning was spent mending nets for the fishermen, but each afternoon was dedicated to reading, into which she plunged with eagerness. She soon exhausted her grandmother's small library and then had to borrow books from all the other people in the village. At the end of each day, as the light was fading, she used to walk several miles to a special river to bring back fresh water for the cottage. The water was especially soft and she used it to wash her hair, which was long and very beautiful. It was golden, like a field of wheat in sunshine; and sometimes as she slept it lay on the pillow in gentle waves, as if the motion of the sea had crept into her comb.

On one particular afternoon, Susanna was especially preoccupied. She had recently read an account of how Hannibal had brought elephants over the Alps, which was most exciting, but the book, unfortunately, did not contain any illustrations. Susanna had never seen an elephant, and was not altogether sure what they looked like. The blacksmith described them as spindly and tall with towering necks that let them eat the highest

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leaves. The furrier insisted that they had the legs of an ox, the ears of a wolf and one giant horn sticking out of the middle of their foreheads. The fishermen were no more helpful, saying that they had noses like enormous snakes, which could wrap themselves around a man and pick him up, and giant ears like a ship in full sail. Despairing that she would ever learn the truth, Susanna lay down with her hair in the water and looked up at the clouds, wondering whether this fluffy blob or that, most resembled the animal in question.

At this time, in the same part of the country, young prince Henry was also much distracted. His parents were insisting that he should choose a bride from among the many ladies of the court. But the song of love had yet to play on his heartstrings, so he used to slink away on his favourite horse to go hunting in the countryside. His pride and joy was an ostrich-plumed hat that had been brought to him from Africa. He would wear it on these secret adventures since it complimented his emerald green eyes and made him seem taller than he really was. As it happened he was pursuing a fox, more in sport than with the intention of killing it, when he stumbled upon Susanna as she lay with her hair in the river. His first thought was that she might be dead, having slipped on a rock as she stooped for water. He dismounted from his horse and crept closer with bated breath. He had just noticed to his great relief that her eyes were moving when the young woman looked up suddenly and said, 'You don't look like an elephant!'

The prince's heart sank. Perhaps the girl was mad.

'No.'

'Then what does one look like?'

Prince Henry paused for a moment, stumped by this unexpected question. 'They have long noses, big ears, and feet like tree trunks, I think.'

Susanna frowned and looked back at the clouds.

'That is just a tale told by fishermen.'

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'I assure you that it came directly from the man who sold me this hat, and he had seen one.'

At this very moment a giant pike from the lake below had chosen to swim upstream in pursuit of rainbow trout. Sensing danger, the little fish had sought safety in the frond-like shelter of Susanna's hair. But they had found their refuge too late, as the hungry predator opened its jaws and chased in after them, becoming horribly entangled in the golden strands.

Susanna was worried that she had been rude and was about to compliment the prince on his magnificent hat when she felt herself being dragged into the water by her hair. Clutching at the grass and rocks with her fingers, she called out for help just as her mouth filled with water. Furious at this interruption, she swung herself round under water and planted her feet firmly in the riverbed, which was fortunately not too deep. As she stood up, she grasped her hair with one hand as with the other she took out a knife that she carried to protect herself from wild animals. She was about to plunge the dagger into the offending fish when the prince misunderstood her intentions and yelled out, 'Stop!'

Susanna hesitated, as the prince added, 'It would be a crime to cut off such beautiful hair. I will come and disentangle you.'

Susanna started to reply that she had no such intention when the pike, summoning all its strength, swam violently, with such a jolt that Susanna dropped her knife and was dragged back under the water. This time Susanna was pulled out to the middle of the river and started to drift downstream. Struggling to the surface for breath, the young woman glimpsed the prince as he took out his sword and leapt into the fast-moving water.

As quickly as the trouble began, it stopped. The pike opened its jaws and swam free. Susanna, much relieved, waded ashore, bogged down as she was with wet clothes. Catching her breath she looked back and saw the prince being dragged ever further out into the flow and, swim as hard as he might, he was swept further away down the river. Susanna struggled onto dry land and then approached the prince's horse, thinking that she might use it to follow him more quickly. The animal shot her a reproving look and then bolted off along the riverbank in pursuit of its master.

The Fisherman's Daughter

Susanna tried running after the prince but it was hopeless. Exhausted and waterlogged as she was, she had to stop.

Wet, cold, and miserable, Susanna arrived at her grandmother's house, unable to stop thinking of the prince. She kept seeing his ostrich-plumed hat and emerald green eyes as he plunged into the water to save her. She went over their meeting a thousand times, thinking of all the brilliant things that she might have said to win the prince's heart. At other moments she thought that it would have made no difference. She was a fisherman's daughter and he was the son of a king. Now he was lost to her forever, and she didn't even know his name.

After a week of little rest, Susanna grew pale, her tousled hair lost much of its lustre and her eyes became red with sleeplessness. Her grandmother asked Susanna what was wrong, and the girl told her everything. She had kept it secret until then, thinking that no one would believe her.

'You have two choices,' explained the wise old woman, 'You must win the prince or forget him.'

'I could never forget him.'

'Then you must find a way into his heart. There is a wise man, on the far side of the mountains, who is famous for his magic and his worldly knowledge. You must go to him and ask how to make the prince fall in love with you.'

'But not with magic spells! I want him to love me for myself, as I love him.'

'I did not say to deceive him with a potion, but fate sometimes needs a little nudge.'

The next day, Susanna set off on foot into the mountains. She filled her basket with dried fish, fresh apples and some of the hard biscuits that the fishermen of her village used on long voyages. Each day she climbed higher and higher and the weather grew colder and more threatening. At night she would hide in one of the many caves, only slightly less afraid of being eaten by a bear than of freezing to death. During the day she

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clambered over crumbling boulders and stepped carefully across bridges of ice.

Five days after she had begun, Susanna arrived at the outer walls of the wise man's castle. Above her head she saw forty feet of vertical granite blocks crowned with a row of hideous gargoyles. Each was poised to gush boiling oil onto any attackers and slit windows threatened a hail of arrows. Susanna could see that escape from such a fortress would be impossible once she was inside it.

She steeled her nerves for the encounter to come, and cried out:

'Mordred, great wizard, I come here to ask for your aid.'

There was no reply. She tried again.

'Mordred, I have walked five days to ask this question of you. I am alone.'

With a sudden crack, one of the blocks of granite halfway up the wall slid backwards and then to one side. Mordred the Wizard peered out from the gloom within. He wore a magnificent blue cloak covered with alchemical symbols embroidered onto it in gold.

'What is it that you want?' he asked suspiciously.

'You must teach me how to win the heart of a man.'

'Show me your face.'

Susanna pulled back the hood of her cloak.

'Your face is pretty enough. You do not need my help.'

'But I have travelled far to get here.'

'In that case, here is my advice. Smile a lot. Laugh at his jokes. Don't be too easy or too difficult, and be kind to his dog. Men are fools when it comes to love.'

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‘But this man is a prince!’

‘Then you would have me give you an elixir of love, so that you can steal his heart and plunder his kingdom?’

‘I do not wish to trick him, but my grandmother said that fate sometimes needs a little nudge.’

The wizard paused.

‘And if I do help you, what can I expect in return?’

Susanna frowned. She hadn't really thought about that. It would have to be a great gift to be worthy of achieving her heart's desire. Further lowering the hood of her cloak she pulled out the tresses of her hair. They tumbled down like a waterfall of gold almost reaching the snow at her feet.

‘You may have my hair.’

The wizard felt a sudden quickening of the blood and his eyes flashed with fire.

‘If I am to teach you my secrets,’ he announced, ‘you must become my apprentice.’

‘Willingly,’ replied Susanna.

‘But to do so you must fulfil three tasks of my choosing within one year. If you succeed, I will teach you how to cast a spell to win the heart of a prince.’

‘And if I fail?’

‘You will become my prisoner to treat as I see fit.’

‘To what purpose?’

‘The nights are cold in the castle.’

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Susanna blushed at the effrontery of the old man, but she swallowed her reproof to him.

‘What are the three tasks?’

‘You will only find that out once you decide to try.’

‘That does not seem fair.’

‘Then walk back home and forget about your prince.’

Susanna knew that that was impossible but she still delayed. Seeing her hesitation the wizard softened his manner a little and said, ‘You must be cold. Come inside and sit by the fire, then you can make up your mind at your leisure.’

‘I will only go inside once I have decided. My freedom is worth more than warm toes.’

But Susanna already knew what she would do. She loved the prince but did not know how to win him and perhaps she could achieve the three tasks after all.

Mordred grew impatient.

‘I see that your pride is greater than your love.’

Burning with rage, Susanna controlled her rebellious tongue.

‘I agree to your bargain. Three tasks in less than a year or I am yours.’

‘To do with as I will?’

‘To do with as you will.’

The wizard rubbed his hands together in delight.

‘But if you try to force yourself on me, before the year is out, you will wish rather that all the harpies of hell had descended on your flesh, than that you should break your word to the daughter of a fisherman.’

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The wizard's triumphant smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

'You have my solemn oath.'

'And you have mine.'

As the wizard slipped from view, the stones at the base of the wall rearranged themselves into a magnificent entranceway. The newly revealed doors swung open and Mordred stood in the full light before Susanna. He was younger than she had first thought, with flecks of black in his greying beard. Taking her hand, the wizard swiftly led her back through layer after layer of the castle's defences. Between one set of walls was a deep trench filled with evil-smelling tar. The next held great machines built like horizontal windmills armed with swords. The one after that was filled with glowing volcanic lava, which oozed restlessly—awaiting its next victim. Finally, in the inner courtyard, Susanna was relieved to see plain stone slabs and a tall round tower.

'This is where you will live,' announced Mordred. Susanna and he went inside to a meagre supper eaten in silence.

The next day Susanna awoke bright and early. She washed up the dishes, swept the kitchen floor and moved the furniture around into a more convenient arrangement. Mordred was slow to stir, and when he did finally stumble into the kitchen, he looked tired and somewhat bleary eyed.

Susanna immediately asked, 'What is my first task?'

'There will be plenty of time for that. You should spend a few days settling into the castle.'

'That was not part of the bargain. If I only have a year, I should start straight away.'

'Very well.'

Mordred led Susanna to a room high up in the tower. It had a large arched window that revealed the walls below and a distant view of the mountains. There was a single wooden chair, an easel and some paints.

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‘Your first task is to paint a picture which is so realistic that I can eat it for breakfast.’

‘But I have never painted!’ protested Susanna.

‘Then you must learn!’ growled the wizard, and he left her to her work.

Susanna knew that it was hopeless. No one could paint a picture that you could eat for breakfast, but she felt that she owed it to herself to try.

For the next three months, Susanna applied herself with all the ingenuity she could muster. She experimented by mixing oils with different pigments and, with practice, she learned how to layer them into mirages of light and shade. But however vibrantly she painted oranges or meticulously recreated pieces of bread, she knew that the pictures stayed as just that. No thirst would be quenched by the drops of dew on her grapes nor hunger slaked by the waxy translucency of her cheeses. As winter turned to spring she threw open the great window to let in more light. The view that greeted her was forbidding. Not a plant grew. Not a single creature was in sight. The castle with its strange odours and stark walls had excluded any hint of life.

The young woman became lonely for her village and imagined the countryside around it bursting into song. She remembered her grandmother's garden drenched with flowers and the trees filled with apple blossoms. To calm her melancholy she painted watercolours of fine petals and recreated each branch using heavy oils, speckling the paint until it almost felt like bark. When at last the picture was finished, she crept to bed, with tears in her eyes and the conviction in her heart that she would be a prisoner forever.

The next day, when she returned to the room, she noticed two remarkable things. The first was a sprinkling of twigs that had appeared, out of nowhere, on the canvas, and the second was a fat, ponderous bee that was rubbing itself against the watercolour of her grandmother's flowers. The bee was, in fact, a queen, and after this unsuccessful attempt at one last meal, she settled herself in and began to build a hive in a corner of the room.

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Staying in the shadows, Susanna watched, over the next few days, hoping to find the secret of the magically appearing twigs. After waiting patiently for many hours, she saw a robin redbreast appear, carrying more twigs in its beak. The little bird set about building a nest on the picture of the branch that Susanna had created.

After a week, the sprinkling had been transformed into a springy cushion fit for the most precious of gems. The robin, proud of his work, sang with joy at the top of his voice, calling out for his lady love to blow in on the wind. She soon arrived, circling him and pecking suspiciously at his handiwork. After much delay, all seemed satisfactory and within a short time there lay two perfect eggs, nestled beneath the lovers' feathery warmth. Susanna went to look for the wizard in the dungeon where he used to sulk, surrounded by bubbling glass vessels and jars of mysterious powders.

'Mordred, the first task is done.'

'Ridiculous,' exclaimed the wizard, 'No one can paint a picture realistic enough to eat.'

He raced ahead of her into the room, frightening off the birds, which flew out of the open window.

'What is this?'

'I painted a tree, and the nest, with these two eggs, appeared as if by magic. And, if that is not breakfast enough to feed your appetite, here is honey made from watercolour blossoms.'

The wizard was flushed with anger. 'You will not trick me twice!' he yelled, and stormed out of the room. Susanna was secretly glad that the eggs had been left undisturbed. She very carefully placed the nest on the windowsill outside, so that love would find fruition in a family. The honey, however, she consumed with a little bread from the kitchen. She was still licking her fingers when she came downstairs to ask Mordred for the next task.

'Surely you should rest after your great labours,' he suggested bitterly.

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‘That was not in the promise,’ she reminded him.

‘Very well, but this time, no cheating.’

Susanna could have retorted that she had not cheated this time but she bit her tongue, which, after all, still tasted of honey. Mordred led her to a second room which, unlike the first, was completely empty.

‘Your second task is to build a chair that is fit for a king and which can support my weight.’

Susanna was delighted. This seemed easier than the first task. ‘What materials can I use?’

‘Only what is in this room.’

‘But it is empty!’

‘You may not leave the room until you either concede defeat or build the chair—and do not think that you can cradle me in your arms.’

Susanna glared at the old man as if that was the last thing in the world she had in mind but he continued with his speech. ‘There will be plenty of time for that when you fail. Just to be sure that there are no tricks this time, you must leave the room and close the door behind you, before I sit on the chair.’

The wizard then walked out, confident of his success. Susanna slumped down. Building a chair out of nothing was impossible, but she owed it to herself to try. An idea came to her. She bent down very low and carefully examined the stone slabs of which the floor was made. Perhaps she could pry one up and build a chair of stone. But all the joints were sound and the stones would have been too heavy to lift anyway. She scraped at the walls but those joints were even firmer, and the ceiling was a single expanse of immovable grey slate.

Perhaps she could make a hammock from her clothes! Then she noticed that in her haste to show the wizard the nest and honey she had only put on a thin slip and a few undergarments. She had promised herself not to reveal all her beauty to the lascivious magician unless she failed in her

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task; so undressing was out of the question. She leaned back against the wall with tears in her eyes.

Maybe it was impossible and she must admit defeat. She played idly with strands of her hair as images of an ostrich-plumed hat flashed before her eyes. When she came back to her senses she saw that she had made a braid like she used to do when she was a little girl. In a flash, she saw the answer. Being from a fishing village, her grandmother was an expert in tying rope into knots of different shapes. She was so skilled, in fact, that she could take a single strand of hemp and sculpt it into a basket for bread, or weave it into an undulating sea serpent to frighten the children.

With the knowledge gathered from all the days spent with her grandmother, Susanna knotted her hair into cords of great strength and beauty. Each strand had a different shape, sometimes breaking out into starbursts, at other times twisting into swirling patterns of spiral shells. Yet another was like a lover's ladder with footholds carefully crafted for a midnight tryst. Down below, the strands were woven into a seat of rippling braids. Each became a wave in an unquiet ocean on which a small flotilla of ships sailed with nets outcast—just resting on the surface of the water, waiting to catch the first fish of morning.

When all was complete, Susanna called out to Mordred.

‘I have done enough!’

The wizard gloated in his victory before even opening the door.

‘So you concede defeat at last!’

‘No, I have created the chair!’

‘What! Let me see.’

The door burst open and the wizard strode across the room towards her. He was then stopped in his tracks as a look of alarm and wonder flitted across his face. Examining the chair in detail, he marvelled at the intricacy of the design, and the skill of the craftsmanship.

‘Do you not think it fit for a king?’

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‘Indeed I do, but that does you no good. I said that you must leave the room, and shut the door behind you. I see no scissors in your pocket or knife in your hand, and even if you could cut your hair, there is nothing to hang it from.’

‘There is plenty to hang both it and you.’

Susanna walked over to the door, carefully draped her hair over the top of it, and then left the room, closing the door behind her. The wizard was furious but undefeated. He approached the chair as it hung there in its golden splendour. He must sit and try it. Perhaps the knots would unravel. Positioning himself carefully over the tranquil ocean, he sat down as hard as he could manage.

Now the door fitted only poorly to the top of the frame, and the full weight of the wizard tugged at Susanna on the other side. She was lifted a good six inches off the tips of her toes and she wanted, above everything else, to cry out in pain. But she was a fisherman's daughter. If the sea could not break her, she would surely not give in to the weight of an old man.

‘Do you concede defeat?’ she asked.

The wizard was lost in the fragrance of her hair. How sweet it smelled and how soft against his cheek. If she escaped his grasp he would never be content again. He resolved that the third task would be truly impossible—but he could savour this moment just a little longer.

Susanna bit into her hand to stop herself from screaming. She tasted blood in her mouth and felt as if her head would split in two. Just as she knew that she could stand the pain no longer the door suddenly opened and she fell in a crumpled heap to the floor and was covered over with the bedraggled remnants of her victorious throne.

‘The next one will not be so easy!’ yelled the wizard who then marched off more furious than ever. After he had left, and despite her triumph, Susanna lay there sobbing for an hour.

The following day Susanna was not so keen to find out about her next task. She had decided instead to make preparations. Wearing her baggiest

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cloak, she filled her pockets with two bottles of water, a barrel of biscuits, two pencils, a chisel, a book of mathematical tables and a coil of rope. When she was sure that all was concealed from view, she approached Mordred.

He looked at her knowingly, as if the cloak was invisible.

‘You won’t need any of the things that you have thought to steal from me,’ he announced.

Despite herself, Susanna blushed with embarrassment at being found out.

Mordred revelled in this small victory.

‘This time cheating is beyond even you.’

He grabbed Susanna’s hand and almost dragged her up a winding stairway, to the highest room in the tower. Despite her foreboding, Susanna found that she liked their destination. The ceiling of the room was made of a cartwheel of beams supporting a circular roof and, underneath, the young woman was presented with an array of dusty musical instruments. There were hunting horns, marching drums, silver flutes and an elaborately sculpted harp in the form of a mermaid.

‘Your final task is to produce a musical sound that destroys the walls of the castle.’

‘Even a thousand musicians could not do such a thing.’

‘So you concede defeat?’

‘I still have six months!’

‘Use them wisely, then. I shall be waiting.’

Susanna looked around in despair. She had heard stories of a soprano at court who could shatter a wineglass with her voice but destroying an entire castle was altogether different. The trumpeting of a hundred elephants would not disturb such stones and the strumming of a single girl seemed without all hope of success. Susanna sat idly down by the

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mermaid harp, admiring its delicate face and curvaceous tail. For the first time since entering the castle, she realised that she might never see the ocean again, or feel its spray against her cheek. To bring it fresh into her mind's eye she played a little sea shanty that she had learned from an old sailor. He used to stop by and bring her grandmother a bottle of rum at the beginning of each winter. Susanna's voice was out of practice but the room echoed richly and she grew more confident.

After it was done she wondered what to do next. She reasoned that, in six months, her life would not be her own. The wizard would have possession of her, and her time and freedom would be lost. She was not afraid of him but she did fear that she might forget her grandmother and the village and all those she held dear. To keep such thoughts alive she decided to compose a ballad, to tell the story of her life. In it she described the shipwreck that had left her an orphan. She extolled her grandmother's love, adored the handsome prince, and vilified the sour-faced wizard who longed to have her as his prisoner. Each verse, sung in a minor key, was filled with trials or thoughts of loss but the chorus was all smiles and trills as princely eyes looked kindly on a speechless girl.

Each afternoon Susanna climbed up onto the roof of the tower, with the mermaid harp as her companion. She sang her ballad to the mountaintops, as the wizard gleefully crossed off another day on his calendar. The castle walls mocked her music with a harsh, metallic echo and the last rays of hope dwindled in her heart.

As autumn turned to winter, this scene was repeated many times. The young woman knew that soon the snows would come again and the walls of the castle would shut in on her life forever. For a final time she went up onto the roof to conjure up her memories, and bid the sun a fond farewell.

Unbeknown to Susanna, a travelling minstrel approached the tower just as her song began. He was tired and cold, and dearly hoped that he might sing for his supper and bed down for the night. He was just about to announce his arrival when a soft melodious sound greeted his ears. Suddenly downcast, he knew that his poor skills would bring only jeers in such a place, for this castle was enchanted. Looking up at the darkening sky he saw the outline of two mermaids singing as one played fairy music on the other's hair. Perhaps they both conspired to lure

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lonely travellers to their doom. He should plug his ears and flee—but then he thought that he could stay and learn their secrets. Concentrating with all his might, he memorised the words and tune as they wafted down to him. He comforted himself with the thought that another, lesser court might think it grand if he could recreate the lilt of siren song. When all was safely in his head, he slipped away, thankful to be still alive. Susanna, cold and shivering, clambered down from the roof—sure that her days of happiness were at an end.

A week later the court rustled in an expectant pause. The new minstrel was to be the highlight of yet another banquet to find a bride for the royal heir. As the introduction began, the prince himself was in a melancholy state. Despite his mother's urgings, none of the ladies of the court seemed worth wooing. One was too vain, another too avaricious. All seemed more impressed with his prospects than with himself. If he was going to fall in love, he felt sure that it would be with a stranger, perhaps one of the country girls who so often took his fancy, but they were usually too timid to talk with him. Not really listening to the words of the song, his mind drifted back to the day when he was out hunting and had stumbled across a maiden as she lay with her hair in the river. He had gone back, two days later, to try to find her, but she had vanished without a trace. All at once, he saw that the words and the music were echoing his private thoughts, and he sat up with a start. His eyes widened as the girl in the song picked through snow and ice to reach the wizard's castle. His cheeks grew red with indignation as the wicked old man tried to ensnare her. As the last refrain faded into the rafters, there was barely a dry eye in the palace.

‘Where did you hear this sad lament?’ demanded the prince.

‘I composed it, Your Highness, to please the royal ear.’ The minstrel hoped that this would gain him greater favour with the prince.

‘And the girl you sang of?’

‘A harmless fancy, to charm your heart.’

‘And what of this ostrich-plumed hat? Would I be seen dead in such a thing?’

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'Your Highness, the prince was not intended to be yourself. Your eyes are emerald green, I must admit, but the hat was pure invention.'

'I often go riding in such a hat, when I slip away from court. I do this in secret, for safety's sake, and one day, I did meet a girl by a river. Tell me the truth about this music or you will suffer for it.'

'I was up in the mountains, Your Highness. I know not where. Two mermaids in a high tower sang this melody to entrap me. I memorised their words and stole away, hoping to find recompense in such enchantment.'

'Your payment will be the axe if you do not take me back there. It is monstrous that a girl should be imprisoned for loving a prince in his own kingdom. We shall lay siege to that castle and rescue her.'

The banqueting hall was abuzz with whispering. Half the courtiers thought the prince had been ensnared by mermaids' trickery. The other half realised that their hopes of a royal husband were at an end.

'Bring me my generals and my engineers! We shall make siege machines to smash the walls, and ingenious devices to overcome the perils which stand between this maiden and her freedom.'

And so it was that just two weeks after her final song, Susanna was awakened one morning by the sound of an approaching army. Going to her door, she found it locked. Mordred had bolted it from the outside as she slept. Going back to the window she heard Prince Henry riding up to the outer gate.

'Mordred the Wizard, you hold captive one of my loyal subjects. I demand that you release her immediately.'

'What makes you think that she is here?'

'This minstrel heard her plaintive song, and repeated it to me.'

'This minstrel lies, Your Highness. I turned out the rascal for stealing from me. He made up this story to be avenged.'

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Susanna cried out to let her presence be known. 'I am here, Your Highness. Mordred has bolted my door, but not my window.'

The prince became furious. 'Mordred, I am your prince. Release her now.'

'This castle is my home, and I am prince here. The maiden came to me of her own free will, to be apprenticed in my dark arts. If, by nightfall today, she has not completed three tasks, then she is mine forever, on her sacred oath. Then no prince can come between us.'

'The day is still young.'

'And so are you. You know nothing of the rain of horrors that will lay waste to your army and shatter your bones if you attack me.'

'I care nothing for your threats. By sunset we will know our fate one way or the other—but take care. If you harm this maiden, and victory is ours, you will die for it.'

The prince surveyed the walls and observed the evil gargoyles. His eyes were keen to their danger and he withdrew to begin the battle. At his instruction the soldiers hauled forward two huge catapults to bombard the outer defences. Made from the tallest trees in the kingdom, they were strong enough to throw boulders as large as houses against the castle. The first rock landed short of its target and smashed into jagged fragments on the ground. The second sailed out of view, producing little more than a distant plop as it sank into the river of tar. The third, however, struck home shattering the granite battlements into heaps of rubble. As the dust settled the soldiers were able to see great iron gears that had made the stonework shift as if enchanted. Heartened that the wizard's magic was merely mechanical they pressed on with the bombardment, levelling towers and ripping gates from their hinges.

The prince was especially keen that none of his subjects should be exposed to undue danger. This war was of his own making and he did not want his new-found love to be saddened by tragedy. Once he was content that the stonework posed no further threat he advanced at the head of his men right up to the river of tar. Protected by a wall of the soldiers' shields, the sappers tried pushing blocks of granite to build a

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road, but the stone was heavy. It sank into the glutinous morass within a few seconds. Fortunately, Susanna's song had been quite descriptive and the prince was armed with unusual supplies. Cartloads of bulrushes were carried forward and cast onto the blackness. Mixing with the tar they became a stable surface that squelched under foot, but was no longer dangerous. He and his men crossed to the second wall.

Moving quickly through a breach, they were confronted with the horizontal windmills, which swished great overlapping blades of steel through the air, threatening to slice in two anyone who ventured near. Before departing, the prince had dreamt up all manner of ways to defeat this lacerating monster. He had imagined acid to dissolve the metal, a bridge to span across it, fire to melt it, but finally he had settled on the simplest to arrange. Fishermen from Susanna's village carried forward two anchors that had been joined together with a thick iron chain. Heaving with all their might, the fishermen threw one anchor into the centre of the whirling knives. Immediately caught up, it wrapped itself around an axle, dragging the second anchor in towards it. A great scream of iron grinding on iron heralded the end of the device as muffled explosions were heard from deep within the earth.

After a moment, the men pressed on again, this time over the third row of defeated stones. Buoyed up by thoughts of victory they were unprepared for the sudden wall of flame that greeted them. Nearly roasted by its ferocity they quickly fell back, with many an eyebrow singed. It was later said that not a single moustache survived the battle against the evil wizard. Mordred stood on the roof of the central tower jeering at their failure. The building had been untouched by the catapults, for it contained Susanna and the prince's hopes.

Much chastened by this unexpected reversal, the prince and all his generals sat thinking what to do. There was little water round about and too few buckets to carry it anyway. The flames had stretched a hundred feet up into the sky, so ropes or any form of ladder would prove disastrous. Prince Henry, in much agitation, tossed a snowball from one hand to the other as he racked his brain for a new idea.

'There must be some way to quench this flame,' he muttered as he threw the snowball on the ground in his frustration. As it landed he was taken back to the time when he was a boy, playing with his grandfather in the

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depths of winter. They used to make snowmen in every shape and form sculpting them into heroic captains or hibernating bears. One time a great snowball, intended to be the toe of an ogre, had rolled away from them and careened off down the mountain gaining in size as it went.

The prince had his answer! Forming his men into a double column they marched up the slopes of the peak that overlooked the castle. Starting with a single handful they made a ball that grew and grew, until it was thirty feet high. Some men pushed from below, others brought lances and tree trunks to push higher up. It was huge, they had to confess, but maybe they had been too ambitious. As it neared the perfect launching spot, the ball stuck fast, wedged into immobility by a half-submerged rock. Heave as they might it would not budge. Finally one of the soldiers suggested building a fire on the other side to slightly melt their strange projectile. Straw was brought and rushes dipped in tar.

The fire roared and then exploded into steam as melting snow touched glowing wood. A final shove and at last it moved, majestically at first, but then with speed as it thundered down the mountain, absorbing snow and trees and debris as it leapt towards the tower. It finally sliced itself in two and drenched the river of lava with its melting slush. A plume of steam hid everything from view and for a terrible moment the prince thought that the castle, the wizard and Susanna had been swept away by this man-made avalanche. But as the clouds subsided he breathed again and rushed down the icy slopes to find her.

Susanna saw the battle from the safety of her bedroom window, but was forced to run under the bed as the snowball hit. After the impact, her room was filled with dripping trees and mud-covered rocks. Climbing over this sudden indoor garden, she went back to the window carrying a hastily constructed rope ladder. She had made it from strips of bed linen and pieces of wood prised from the framework of her wardrobe. Throwing the ladder lightly over the windowsill, she felt giddy seeing how far down she must climb, but her calculations had been correct and the end of the ladder just touched the ground. She started to descend as the prince ran up the heap of snow at the base of the tower. The would-be lovers were moments from reunion when Susanna glanced up and saw Mordred the Wizard glowering back. He began pulling her ladder, rung by rung, back inside the tower. The faster she climbed the harder he

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pulled. She was almost stationary against the wall of rock as step after step took her closer to the end.

Down below Prince Henry was frantic, certain that his heart's desire was about to be dragged from view. Susanna reached the end of the ladder, and dangled from the final rung, her feet scraping against the stones.

'Jump down to me.'

'It's too far.'

'I'll catch you.'

'No, you'll be hurt.'

'Now, before it's too late!'

Gazing up for a final time Susanna saw the triumphant face of Mordred the Wizard. He was working with unnatural speed and he had murder in his eyes. Trusting to the strength of her lover's arms, Susanna released her grip. As she plummeted down towards the prince, she saw that he had been rather optimistic in his predictions. As they collided, the well-meaning man was knocked onto his back and pushed several feet below the surface of the snow. Both were plunged into blackness. Some seconds later with her head aching, Susanna came back to consciousness.

'I killed him,' she muttered to herself as she distractedly stroked an ostrich plume with her hand.

Tears fell from her eyes and landed on the prince's cheeks, which were almost as pale as the cushion of snow beneath his head. Imperceptibly at first, and then with strength, Susanna realised that the prince was still breathing. Pulling him towards her, she rubbed his icy hands, hoping to return a little warmth to their ashen grey. Finally he stirred and within a few moments his eyes opened in a smile.

'Light as a feather,' he stuttered, in a faint attempt at gallantry.

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The whole army arrived with a great battering ram, ready to destroy the door of the tower. Within minutes it was shattered, and Mordred the Wizard stood before the recovering couple, with a sword at his throat.

‘Mordred the Wizard, you have resisted your prince and sought to imprison one of his subjects. It is my gift to her that she may decide your punishment. After that is settled, she will return with me to the palace as my bride.’

‘Kill me now, then, for there is no kindness in her heart.’

Susanna was very grave. ‘Mordred, what have you to say in your defence, before I pronounce your fate? Speak freely, for my mind is not yet made up.’

‘Very well. I consider myself to have done no wrong. The bargain that you entered into, you made freely, knowing the price of failure. If it was unwise, that was your mistake, not my wickedness. In the year that followed, I kept my word, never forcing my advances on you.’

‘Out of fear of my anger.’

‘That is your belief. I have my own view.’

Susanna looked unimpressed. ‘Do you have anything else to say?’

‘I would only add that in that time, I taught you well.’

‘Oh really, and what is it that you taught me?’

Mordred looked less wary.

‘I taught you that it was possible to paint a picture so life-like that it could be eaten for breakfast.’

‘True, although it was my skill that drew it.’

‘I taught you that a royal chair could be made from an empty room.’

‘I have my grandmother to thank for that!’

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‘And I taught you that you could make a musical sound that would bring about the destruction of my castle.’

‘So you agree that I fulfilled my three tasks?’

‘I do.’

‘I am curious, then. What great secrets would you have taught me once I had succeeded?’

‘That is for my own counsel.’

‘Come now, the tasks were fulfilled. The castle lies in ruins does it not? And your life hangs in the balance.’

With sarcasm in his voice the wizard answered her.

‘Since you insist so graciously, I will tell you. My great secret is that I have no secrets. When I was but twenty-five, I was no apprentice, but a knight at arms riding on a quest. On my travels I met Ilsa, a bewitching sorceress, who enticed me back to this castle and made me her husband. But on our wedding night this model of sweetness and seduction transformed herself into an evil hag who kept me prisoner. The spell she cast on me outlasted her life. I was trapped here until someone would come and destroy the castle walls. I am sorry if I made you miserable, but my freedom was at stake too. If you had really failed I would have released you, and all the sadder for me since I came to love you, but knew that it is hopeless for one my age to woo a girl in the flower of her youth.’

The prince and all his soldiers stared at the wizard in amazement. Susanna's expression more closely resembled disbelief. She walked up to the old man with fury in her eyes and said, ‘Here we see the wizard's true magic—a whispered spell that transforms a lust-filled gaoler into a hapless victim. In the tavern of my village, I have heard many a drunken farmer explain that they married a beautiful enchantress only to have her turn into a heartless witch who didn't understand them.’

The Fisherman's Daughter

Looking now with a steady eye, Susanna saw that the prince was indeed as handsome as she remembered, but she reflected, she hardly knew him and she owed it to herself to be cautious.

Turning to the prince she said, 'I would not have the same said of me. For that reason I will return to the palace with you, but not as your bride.'

The prince looked crestfallen.

Susanna continued, 'Despite how we both feel, we do not have love...'

The prince began to object, but Susanna silenced him with a finger to his lips.

'But we have the chance of love. One may grow from the other but it takes time and patience. If you love me in a year with half the ardour I see in your eyes today, and if one tenth of the love I now possess still lingers in my heart, then I shall count us blessed beyond compare, and gladly be your wife.'

The prince knew that he had met his match.

'I surrender to your terms, but such a bargain should be sealed with a kiss.'

'Indeed it should.'

And in the sweetness of that moment, Susanna knew that the coming year was going to be far more pleasant than the one just passed.

Turning again to Mordred she said: 'If you really loved me, you should have told me so and released me from my promise. In return I might have loved you too, for the prince was only a dream then—a man who might not even have remembered me.'

'Never!' protested the prince.

'And as for your story, do you remember this?' Susanna produced a small book of love poems written by Mordred to please the lady of the

The Fisherman's Daughter

castle as he sheltered there one night from a storm. Susanna had found it when rummaging through Mordred's things to find supplies for her final task.

Mordred flinched in recognition.

'Your punishment is this. The king's heralds will travel to every town and village to announce that Mordred the Wizard betrayed the memory of one who loved him in the hope of gaining his freedom.'

Mordred blushed with shame down to his toes.

'You will work for a year with the royal blacksmiths, teaching them what knowledge you have of crucibles and metal making. When you are done you must build a house here, as high as the tallest oak tree. Make it fit for the birds so that they may nest in peace, sheltered from the wind. And down below, plant fields of honeysuckle and apple trees, so that meandering bees might dine upon their blossoms.'

'This punishment seems a trifle light,' suggested the prince.

'That may be so,' smiled Susanna, 'but I would not have you think, for all the world, that I am cruel. Also, Mordred and I both know that his greatest punishment is the memory of a chair on which he can never sit again.'

Once they were married, the prince and his new princess went to visit her old village by the sea. After a happy week of celebrations, they tried to persuade Susanna's grandmother to go with them and live in royal luxury at the court. Despite their kindest arguments the old lady was adamant in her refusal.

'There are still nets to mend and children to teach. What would I do in the palace? Such a place is for the young, for dancing and for love.'

Reluctantly, they returned without her, promising to come back and visit the old woman every spring. Strange as it might seem, Susanna's grandmother never mentioned to strangers that she was related to royalty. She believed that, nudges aside, success in love was a matter of fate and no reason for boasting. But each winter, when her old friend came with

his bottle of rum, she would tell the story, with tears in her eyes, of how her granddaughter had outwitted Mordred the Wizard, and brought about the destruction of his castle.



Gregorin
and the
Three
Witches

Gregorin and the Three Witches

One night, during his exile, Gregorin the Dragon was finding it hard to get to sleep, so he stared out of his cave over the valley to see if anything was happening. He saw flickering, on the top of one of the nearby peaks, a fire that appeared to grow dimmer and lighter in a slow rhythmic fashion. He flew to the bottom of the adjoining valley and began to climb one of the shallower slopes to see what was going on. As he neared the top, he heard unearthly cries of glee as three witches circled their cauldron, occasionally casting obscure-looking plants into the pot. The overall aroma was tangy, but also temptingly intoxicating.

Suddenly, the witches stopped their wild motions and stared straight at the dragon. Gregorin, thinking himself invisible, was a little taken aback, but the three women did not seem hostile, so he crawled a little closer. As he approached, he noticed the differences between the witches. They introduced themselves. Bella Donna was the oldest and most beautiful of the three. However, Gregorin was a little puzzled by her manner. She was polite but with an ironical twist to her voice and Gregorin sensed a slight resentment to his presence. Ganish was gentler in her welcome and smiled at Gregorin openly and without any veiled hint of anger. The third, and for Gregorin the most interesting, was Fingle.

‘A fine dragon indeed,’ she whispered, ‘but a spoiled dragon, flabby and without the grandeur of the dragons of my youth.’

‘Thank you very much,’ replied Gregorin, somewhat put out. ‘And what might you be doing on my land?’

‘Your land, oh indeed, how is it your land?’ enquired Fingle.

‘Well, I live here and no one else does, so it must be my land.’

‘We live here too, so it must be our land as well.’

‘And what are you doing here?’

‘We are preparing a potion for weary hearts.’

Gregorin and the Three Witches

‘Really,’ thought Gregorin, ‘I could do with some of that.’ He was feeling rather sorry for himself. ‘And how is it going?’

‘It’s excellent stuff so far,’ responded Bella Donna, ‘but we still lack a few vital ingredients.’

‘Yes, this is my first time,’ added Ganish, ‘it’s all most exciting.’

‘Can I try a bit?’ asked Gregorin, with a mixture of curiosity and charm.

‘What do you think, sisters? Shall we let this apology for a dragon try some of our elixir? Perhaps it might build him up a bit.’

Gregorin shot Fingle a condescending glance of rebuff. Raising himself up to his full height, he walked over to the cauldron and took a large gulp. The effect was as spectacular as it was swift. A burning, tingling sensation passed down his throat and out along his limbs until his claws shivered with pleasure. For a while, his loneliness was forgotten and he swished his tail with delight.

‘There, dragon, perhaps that gives you a sense of what you’ve been missing.’

Fingle walked up to Gregorin’s spinning head and examined both his face and limbs in some detail.

‘Not as bad as I first thought,’ she observed, ‘but the problem, sisters, with modern dragons, is that they don’t know how to fly properly.’

‘Of course I can fly,’ insisted Gregorin struggling to his feet. ‘Watch!’

He took off and swept up and down the valley in long, graceful glides. Well satisfied, he came in to land on the mountain, but the potion slightly affected his judgement, and he came down with a bump.

Gregorin and the Three Witches

‘Exactly as I said,’ continued Fingle. ‘These long sweeping movements are all very well for the birds, but a real dragon should be able to somersault and barrel roll rather than your childish attempts.’

‘If you know so much about it, you try then,’ taunted Gregorin with a certain amount of satisfaction.

‘Right!’ Fingle clambered up onto Gregorin’s neck, and before he realised what was happening, he was in the air. Fingle taught him how to dive at the ground and at the last minute to open his wings and pull up sharply to do a loop-the-loop. He also learned how to pull in his wings alternately, leading to twisting sinuous motions through the night sky. Gregorin had the best fun he had had in ages and, having bid good night to his new neighbours, he crept back to his cave for a long, contented sleep.

The next day Gregorin was drowsy until well into the morning, when Fingle peeped her impish face round the corner of the mouth of his cave.

‘Good morning,’ she announced in a singsong voice.

‘Is it?’ asked Gregorin with a groan.

‘Yes,’ replied Fingle. ‘I have come to help you with your work. You’re probably as unskilled at that as you were at flying. But first, aren’t you going to offer me a seat? Really, your manners are terrible!’

‘Sorry,’ responded the still muzzy dragon, ‘I haven’t had company for so long....’ With a powerful claw he rolled a large rock over for Fingle to sit on.

‘I am now going to teach you how to make real metal,’ she declared, and teach him she did. Fingle explained to Gregorin some of the metallurgy that he had only understood as recipes before. She told him about making coke from coal, and how to use this to turn his rather brittle metal into something tougher and much more useful. Fingle was privately quite impressed with Gregorin’s ability to learn, although she was all too aware that he had been badly taught beforehand.

Gregorin and the Three Witches

The lessons went on for many weeks and gradually Fingle learnt about Gregorin's life. But even though Gregorin found Fingle entertaining and helpful, when he was alone he reflected on how strange it was that he never felt that he got to know her any better. The sorceress was masterly at using conversational sleights of hand in response to any questions of a personal nature.

'It's better not to ask, Gregorin,' she would say. 'Try to enjoy the present. The future may not happen, and the past probably never did.'

The mountaintop midnight sessions with Ganish and Bella Donna continued. Gregorin, with Fingle's help, would perform aerial acrobatics whilst the other two cheered or booed depending on the success or failure of the attempts. As the occasions recurred, Gregorin became a little uneasy. Something seemed to be strangely awry. Ganish, whom Gregorin liked but did not get to know very well, would sometimes stare at him with a look of sadness, almost pity. Bella Donna, on the other hand, occasionally looked at him with a glare of loathing, when she thought he was asleep, but Gregorin would keep his eyes just slightly open to watch her. Also, and most alarmingly of all, the three witches appeared to Gregorin to be growing older much faster than the humans whom he had known.

One afternoon, Fingle mentioned to Gregorin that that evening the three women were to prepare a special treat for him. She insisted that he would enjoy it much more if he had nothing to eat beforehand. However, Gregorin's temperament was not one greatly able to resist temptation so, having persuaded himself that just a few lumps of coal could surely do no harm to his appetite, he ended up having a substantial meal.

On the mountaintop, the three witches greeted him with the usual bravado, but seemed a little tense.

'Come on Gregorin,' implored Bella Donna, 'This special potion will be like nothing you have ever tasted.'

Gregorin felt rather unsettled. The new mixture smelt different and slightly metallic, but he gulped it down to please his friends. Almost instantly he began to feel drowsy, and in a moment, his wings drooped, his tail was still and his weary head sank to the ground. He felt awful.

Gregorin and the Three Witches

‘And now sisters,’ announced Bella Donna exultantly, ‘we have within our power the means of our rejuvenation!’

Sadly, it was the fate of the three witches that they could live for only forty years before they rapidly aged and died. Their only hope was to feed on freshly shed dragon scales. This was why they had set up their cauldron near to Gregorin’s cave and were intent on poisoning him, or should I say, two of them were. It was Ganish’s first time and she was still troubled by the deceit of the whole enterprise. She eyed her poisoned javelin warily and asked, ‘You are sure it won’t hurt him? I mean only his scales will come off?’

Bella Donna replied with reassurance, ‘In most cases that is all that happens. The scales come off. He has a headache for a few days, and that’s that.’

‘What do you mean “in most cases”? What about the others?’

‘Well, I suppose his teeth might fall out.’

‘And his claws,’ added Fingle.

‘And his claws, of course. Very rarely other than that, things do go wrong. Say one time out of a hundred....’

Ganish began to look alarmed.

‘Come on, Bella Donna, what does happen in one case out of a hundred?’

‘Well, the dragon ends up sort of dead.’

‘Dead!’

‘Yes.’

‘How could we do such a thing?’

Bella Donna became angry.

Gregorin and the Three Witches

‘Dragons are evil creatures, Ganish. One almost killed me once with its treacherous flame. They deserve to die.’

Gregorin began to revive from the drugged aperitif, but he was sensible enough to lie still and listen. He knew that he was going to die and that the last friends he had in the world had just betrayed him. Feeling very alone and without anger he concentrated on the lively debate that was reaching his brain through a mist of confusion.

‘I thought you said only one in a hundred die.’

Bella Donna looked a bit taken aback.

‘Actually, thinking about it...’ she counted on her fingers, ‘maybe more like one in five, or so.’

Ganish looked outraged. Fingle realised that her friend was wavering, so she decided to turn her against the dragon once and for all.

‘My dear, Gregorin is a very dangerous animal you know. One minute he is playful and quiet as a lamb. You’ve seen him with us like that, but the next minute he turns on you and blasts you with flame. One time he burned down all the trees round about so he would have a better view of his enemies coming. He wrought untold havoc and was exiled to that cave as punishment.’

Gregorin was wretched and motionless, knowing that he could escape, but that he did not want to. He deserved to die so he must let the witches play out their ceremony. Fingle saw that Ganish was being swayed, so she decided to embroider the truth a little.

‘And when I was up in his cave once, in a hollow near the back, I came across chewed and broken human bones, victims of Gregorin’s anger. He caught me searching and threatened to blast me into ashes if I whispered a word of what I had seen. I was so scared that I kept silent until this moment for fear of what might happen. But now you see the sort of wicked animal you are up against.’

‘Hold on a minute,’ thought Gregorin, ‘what’s she talking about? What human bones?’

Gregorin and the Three Witches

Gregorin's diet was strictly coal and flint and the very idea of eating people was horrifying to him. He remembered the inhabitants of the forest whom he had scared in his younger, thoughtless days, and of his promise to make amends. He cast a look in his mind's eye over the carefully prepared furnaces and kilns in his cave. He felt he had to finish his work and not let the effort of the previous year go to waste.

The three witches stood round him in a circle, chanting their sacrificial anthem. Closer and closer they came, each holding a jagged tipped spear of death. The chanting grew louder and louder, and faster and faster. The witches drew nearer and nearer and clearer and clearer. Gregorin was being deafened by their screaming ravening howls until suddenly they stopped. He opened his eyes and was confronted by the sight of all three of his foes poised to unleash their terrible artillery into his face.

For a split second he stared straight into Fingle's eyes. In the perfect silence of that moment he saw an empty hunger that spelled his own destruction. He leapt into the air as three shafts of pointed steel plunged into the ground where he had been instants before.

Gregorin climbed to about one hundred feet and set off for his cave. Three bolts of lightning burst through the night sky and sent him tumbling to the ground. Gregorin knew that a long flight was not possible, with such powerful enemies in range, so he took to the air, barrel rolling and weaving from side to side to make himself a more difficult target. Finally, he landed on a stony beach that was next to the lake at the bottom of the valley. He gulped down several gallons of water and then gurgled for some time.

Ganish, Fingle, and Bella Donna crept stealthily through the forest in search of Gregorin. They were very frightened of what he might do next, and Ganish and Fingle, at least, felt a little guilty. Gregorin burbled and hiccuped for several minutes more until a thick white fog began to pour forth from his mouth, which was exactly what he had intended.

He let the artificial mist seep down to the water surface, and it spread out over the lake. Once a considerable bank of cloud had built up he tiptoed down to the beach and dipped a timid foot into the water. Gregorin hated swimming when it was cold, but he made the effort on this occasion. The fog bank appeared to move out over the water, to reach the other side of

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the lake, and then to slide up the opposite hillside. This would have seemed very odd to the witches if they had thought about it, but they were too preoccupied with the idea of an attack from the air.

Gregorin, still dripping wet, slid into the mouth of his cave and crouched there, staring out until daybreak. The next night he stole up to the mountaintop to see what the other three were up to. They looked much older than on the previous night as they wearily circled the still bubbling but rusting cauldron.

Gregorin slunk back to his cave to have a think. Now that the danger was over he felt very sad that the last company he had known had turned against him. In future, when he found a new trick or technique for his metal work, he would have no one to show it to. In this doleful state he sat puffing away at a furnace to keep it glowing at the right shade of bluish white for the steel he was making. After a few minutes absorbed in this way he scratched his left side with his hind leg to overcome a particularly persistent itch. To his surprise a very remarkable thing happened. Some of his scales went clattering to the floor. He rubbed a bit more and even larger ones became dislodged. Gregorin had reached the age of one hundred and two when some dragons lose their scales, only to have them replaced by grander shinier ones.

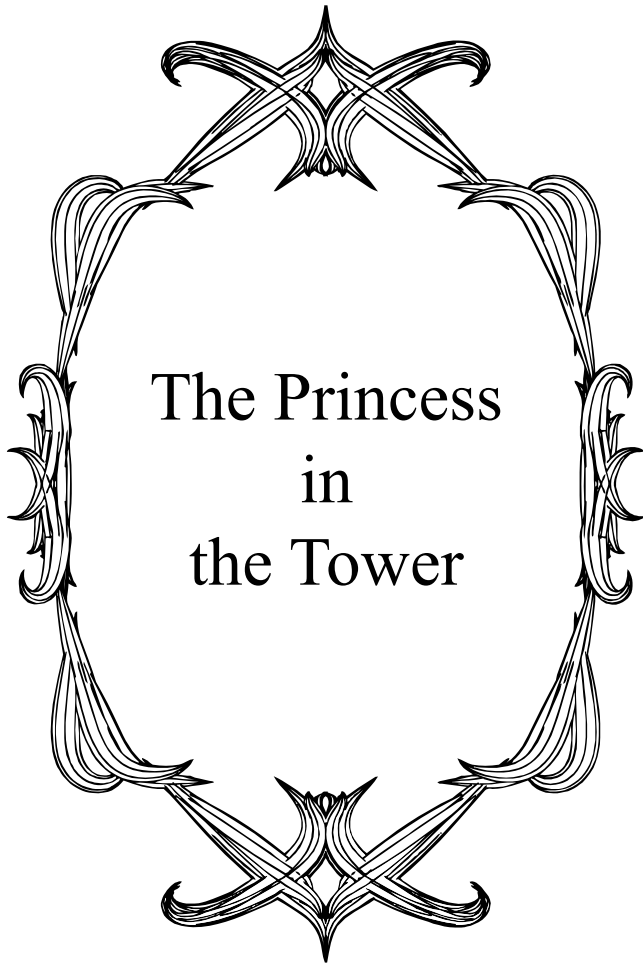
Bemused, but not alarmed, Gregorin gathered the ceramic plates of his protection into a pile near the mouth of his cave. He wondered what to do with them. No much good as wall decorations or carpeting, he thought, but they would make rather nice presents as doorstops.

He told himself off for being flippant and steeled his nerves for what he had to do. He took the scales in a large sack and set off for a final time to the mountaintop. The witches were sitting now, exhausted and ancient, resting themselves against the cauldron. Bella Donna saw Gregorin coming, but she was too weak to summon up another thunderbolt. She stared with incredulity as Gregorin dropped his bag of scales into the simmering pot.

Ganish rose to her feet and drank a ladleful of the brew. Immediately refreshed, she rushed to aid her friends with more of the liquid. They stirred and looked brighter within a few moments. Ganish then sent Gregorin a smile which he never saw as he raced off into the night. He

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was fearful that the anger of the three might return with their growing strength. But he need not have worried since the next day no trace whatever was to be found of the witches, the cauldron or the spears. Gregorin was sad but relieved to see them go and, within a few months, he had a brand new coat of scales that were shiny black, with a lustrous hint of blue near the tips.



The Princess in the Tower

Once, long ago, at the time of the crusades, there was an orphaned princess who lived on an enchanted island in the middle of the Mediterranean. Her father had been a famous alchemist and it was widely known that he had used his skills to turn tin and lead into great piles of gold. When news of this easy fortune reached the courts of Europe, hopeful knights set out in great numbers to storm the wizard's castle. Arriving in windswept fleets of wave-tossed ships they constructed towering machines to topple the ramparts and dug tunnels deep below the walls to undermine them. But all their efforts were in vain. The ramparts of jet-black rock had been reinforced with magic. Large projectiles bounced off harmlessly, and battering at the gates brought down nothing but a hail of arrows.

Eventually, the knights gave up the siege and went home empty handed. So notorious was their failure that stories even reached the court of King Richard the Lionheart, camped as it was, outside the gates of Jerusalem. There followed a lively debate about what the knights had attempted. Sir Steven DeVere, one of King Richard's courtiers, complained that the men had behaved like cowards, sending a whole army against a single woman, and he declared that he could win the treasure using fine words rather than force of arms. So outrageous was the claim that many of the gathered throng burst out laughing and, in a moment of merriment, King Richard challenged Sir Steven to make good on his boast and to bring back the treasure within a week. The next morning, before the King had time to change his mind, Sir Steven departed in a small sloop, relieved to get away from the disease and misery of the stagnant battle.

When Sir Steven arrived at the island of the princess, he washed his face in a local spring, put on his best suit of armour and strode up to the gate. Looking up at the intimidating edifice he cried out 'Princess! Princess!' most imploringly.

Much to his delight, the sunburned face of Princess Julia did eventually appear between the crenellations of the outer walls.

'What do you want?' she asked, in a frosty but civil manner.

The Princess in the Tower

Sir Steven gave a low bow. ‘Princess Julia, I have been sent by King Richard of England, to ask you for your treasure so that we may continue our war in the Holy Land.’

Julia sniffed in contempt at his words. ‘And what if I refuse to give it to you, as I intend to do?’

Sir Steven peered up using one hand to shield his face from the sun. ‘Then I am supposed to insist.’

The princess was unmoved. ‘You are not the first man to want to steal my fortune. My father was a great sorcerer and he left this island impregnable to attack.’

‘So I have learned.’

‘Then how will you succeed where whole armies have failed?’

Sir Steven sat down on a nearby rock. ‘Princess, when the stories of your great fortress reached the court of King Richard, I upbraided those cowardly knights for attacking you. To send a whole army against a single woman was most unchivalrous. They talked much about your magical defences but I, in a moment of bravado, claimed that I could win your treasure single-handed. It was foolish, I now admit, but a knight’s word is his bond, so here I am. King Richard gave me a week to see what I could accomplish. Then I must sail on to join him at Jerusalem.’

Julia sounded only partially convinced. ‘Why do you still wear your armour if you come in peace?’

‘So that an angry arrow from you may not kill me.’

‘I will do you no harm, so long as you do not climb the walls.’

Sir Steven nodded. ‘I understand.’

Julia turned round and disappeared behind the parapet.

‘Princess Julia?’

The Princess in the Tower

The princess returned, a little exasperated, 'What do you want now?'

Sir Steven started to take off one of his boots. 'Well Princess, since I am to be here for so such a long time, can we pass the time by talking to each other?'

Julia crossed her arms. 'What could we possibly talk about for a whole week? We are strangers to one another.'

Taking off the other boot, Sir Steven asked, 'If you will indulge me.... Tell me which is the more beautiful, the blue of the sea or the blue of the sky?'

'The sky of course, its subtle colours and variation exceed the palettes of our finest painters. The blue of the sea is just a distant echo of the beauty of the heavens.'

Steven leapt to his feet. 'But Princess, the sky is just a lantern to the beauty of the waves as they glitter in the dusk of evening. Surely it is the canvas, and not the candle, which holds the true secret of the painter's heart.'

Julia looked at the knight with renewed interest. 'What is your name?'

'Sir Steven DeVere of King Richard's court.'

Julia could not help but find the barefoot knight a little endearing. 'Well, Sir Steven, if we are to talk like this much longer, I shall lose my voice. Because of this, I am going to let you into the first courtyard, but remember if you try to harm me, you will not leave the castle alive.'
'Of course.'

'But if you are a gentleman, we may talk some more about the colour blue.'

Sir Steven put a clenched fist to his chest. 'I accept your terms.'

A gate in the walls was soon opened and Julia ushered the knight into a bare courtyard filled with stone projectiles and barrels of oil.

The Princess in the Tower

Julia subjected Sir Steven to a severe scrutiny. ‘I see you have rather fine blue eyes. Was that really why you asked the question?’

Sir Steven looked away. ‘We can discuss a different colour if you like.’

Julia seemed to take him at his word, and walked over to a stone ledge in the shade and sat down smiling. ‘Very well, which is the most perfect shade of green?’

‘The green of emeralds glittering in a crown of gold.’

Julia’s smile faded to a frown. ‘Come, come, a very dull answer.’

‘Forgive me. Which is your favourite green?’

Julia leaned back against the wall. ‘The best green is a blazing green—the green of a field of grass on a bright summer’s day, after a night of rain. The field beyond the outer walls was once a lush meadow—then the knights came and trampled it to mud.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Julia sat up straight. ‘You needn’t be. I am used to the dust by now. But we are becoming melancholy. Let us choose another colour. Red, that’s it, which is the purest red? And no talk of rubies or you shall leave the castle and never return.’

Sir Steven peered intently at a flagstone at his feet. ‘I fear that roses would also incur your displeasure, so I shall use cherries to champion the most passionate of colours.’

Julia was delighted. ‘In that we agree. Before these walls were built there was an orchard here. We had apples and peaches and oranges, and the reddest cherries you have ever seen. Only one tree now remains—deep in the heart of the castle. I draw water for it from the well by the tower. The tree is suffering, poor thing, from a lack of sunshine, but it does still blossom and bear fruit. Would you like me to bring you some?’

‘That would be very gracious of you. I’m famished.’

The Princess in the Tower

Julia took out a great ring of old keys and opened a small door. ‘I won’t be long,’ she said and left Sir Steven to his thoughts. ‘How lonely she is, and how gentle. The knights, who attacked sword in hand, would have done better to bring flowers.’

Julia returned carrying a small dish of blood-red cherries. ‘Here you are. I think these are the best ones—and I brought you some wine.’

Sir Steven drank thankfully. ‘Delicious, thank you,’ he said, as he thought to himself, ‘but a pewter plate. She does not trust me with gold.’

Raising his cup he added, ‘And the wine is outstanding. But I’m afraid that it starts to grow dark so I shall bed down for the night, here if you don’t mind.’

‘As you will.’

Sir Steven paused for a moment. ‘Might I make a request?’

‘What is it?’

‘May I tie a blue ribbon to this door in celebration of our discussion?’

Julia stood up in annoyance. ‘So that you may find your way out again one day.’

‘No. Well, yes.’

Moving quickly to the little door she added, ‘You are quite safe here Steven, and you can leave whenever you like.’

‘Of course, I’m sorry.’

Julia looked up at the greying sky. ‘No need. You are new to the castle. It must make you uneasy.’

‘I’ll be fine.’

Julia looked at Steven over her shoulder as she walked away. ‘Well, sweet dreams then.’

The Princess in the Tower

‘Good night.’

As it turned out, Sir Steven had been a little too hopeful about his resting-place. Despite the hot day, the night proved to be icy cold. The knight moved several times trying to find a flagstone that still retained a little of the day’s heat, but with no great aid to his comfort. As he lay there awkwardly, he imagined the luxurious apartments that must exist somewhere within the castle, with soft cushions on fleece rugs warmed by the glowing embers of twilight fires. In one of the rooms must be the princess, sleeping now, her burnt-amber hair tumbling over a white pillow fluffed up with goose feathers. How he longed for such a pillow. The knight wondered if, after all these years, he was starting to grow soft. Troubled by the thought he finally drifted off to sleep as the stars shone brightly overhead.

Given his fitful slumbers the knight was still fast asleep when Princess Julia crept into the courtyard to look, for a moment, before waking him. Her mother had once said that one could learn a lot about a man from the way he slept. Princess Julia had rarely had the chance to try. Summoning up her full voice she proclaimed ‘Good morning!’ and Steven rolled over as if to avoid the day.

‘I enjoyed our conversation yesterday,’ she continued, ‘but today I am General of the castle again. We may talk, if you wish, but do not think that I can be charmed into giving up my treasure.’

Steven finally awake replied, ‘I would not dream of it. Princess, I have been on many quests and none of them were quite so hopeless, nor conducted in such charming company.’

‘You can’t keep my interest with mere flattery, Steven. Do you have no more questions for me? Surely the topic of beauty is not so easily exhausted.’

‘Indeed I do. Which is the more beautiful, the melody of bird song or the strumming of a lute?’

Julia thought the question hardly worth asking. ‘Bird song, of course. The birds are free. Their whole body becomes an instrument of their health and love. A lute, on the other hand, is an unnatural prison for the

The Princess in the Tower

fingers—a hollow box taut with catgut. How can there be any comparison?’

Sir Steven stood to his feet. ‘Bring me a lute, and I will show you.’

‘I will.’

Returning from a noisy rummage in one of the towers, Julia handed the instrument to her would-be troubadour.

‘I’m afraid it’s a little out of tune.’

‘Never mind about that.’ Steven sat tuning up the strings, wondering how he would make good on his claim. ‘This reminds me of my serenading days.’

‘I’m sure it does.’ There was a slight tinge of annoyance in her voice.

‘Let me see. Ah, I know the one.’

Sir Steven then sang and played a lilting melody in which the thrushes, wrens and cuckoos of an English forest sang out from his fingertips. Expecting the applause that he usually received for such a feat, he was surprised to see instead that Princess Julia was on the verge of tears.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing, only you reminded me that before the walls were built, the trees were full of birds. They used to fly up to my window every morning and sing until I awoke. I always buried my head under the pillow and wished that they would go away. I was only little then. I didn’t understand. Now that they’ve gone, I miss them terribly. I’m sorry Steven. It was a beautiful song. I don’t want to ruin it for you. I should go now.’ She got up to leave.

‘Will I see you tomorrow then?’

Julia looked down at him; his hands still poised over the strings. ‘We’ll see.’

The Princess in the Tower

The next day, Sir Steven was awake with the dawn worried that he might have frightened off his new companion, but his fears were happily allayed when he heard Julia's cheerful voice ringing from one of the tower windows.

'Good morning!'

'Good morning,' Sir Steven echoed back, 'you look happier today.'

Julia ran down a spiral staircase to the next window. 'Yes, I have had time to think. You are very clever Steven, with your stories and music of the world outside but you are still a knight and I do not trust you.' She disappeared again.

Sir Steven spoke out in a loud voice, unsure whether his words would reach her. 'I did not mean to upset you yesterday. When I'm away on a crusade, I sing that song to remind me of home. That was why I thought you would like it. Please forgive me for making you angry.'

Julia came to a third and larger window. 'I never said I was angry with you. I said I don't trust you. That's quite different.'

'May I ask just one more question then?'

'If you insist.'

Steven changed his tone as if asking the question in confidence. 'Have you ever been in love, Princess?'

'I don't see why you want to know, but yes, twice. What about you?'

Steven looked at the sky as if counting the clouds. 'Oh many times. Sometimes happily, often hopelessly, once just before a battle, and always just before I had to go away.'

'I see,' sniffed the Princess, disapproving but intrigued.

'But love is too private a thing to shout to the rooftops.'

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‘Well, come into the next courtyard. There are comfortable benches there where we can talk.’

In a moment, Julia had opened a third gate and ushered Sir Steven through. She sat down on one of the promised benches and patted the space next to her. As the knight sat down on the chosen spot he whispered, ‘So you said twice.’

‘Did I? Oh yes. Well the first one was Federico, the head of the palace guard. I was very young—only fourteen and he was tall and strong and brave—and my mother wanted me to marry him, so that I would be safe. No other kingdom would have me without an exorbitant dowry—and my father thought the money was better spent on fortifying the castle.’

‘Did you love him?’

Julia sat on her hands. ‘I’m not sure. I was very much in awe of him—and when he was killed in one of the attacks, I cried for months.’

‘And what about the other one?’

Julia burst into a girlish smile. ‘Oh Edmund was delightful. He used to serve us at dinner. I think it started on his first day as squire at the court. He was serving me vegetables and I saw that his hand was shaking. I felt so sorry for him that I whispered in his ear, “Don’t be afraid. I love you.”’

‘He nearly dropped the spoon. I don’t know why I said it. My father would have killed me if he’d known. I think he took my fancy, but part of it was pure mischief. Well, after that, Edmund often lingered over my plate, dishing out the carrots as lovingly as a miser counting up his gold.’

The reminiscing princess demonstrated the gesture. ‘Sometimes, when he was feeling very daring, he would brush my hand with his sleeve. I really was in love with him by then, so it used to thrill me to distraction. One day he dropped a tiny note into my hand and I hid it instantly, knowing what it might propose. We met high up in the castle, in a room used for storing arrows and crossbows.’ She pointed at one of the distant spires. ‘It seemed like a fitting place for Cupid to run free and we kissed many times. Federico had always been stiff and respectful. He kissed my hand

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once, but more out of duty than pleasure. Edmund, on the other hand, was like putting a buttercup to my lips and finding them golden. He was so gentle; I could have kissed him forever. Then, of course, the guards came.'

'Oh no.'

'Quite. I had been missed by my mother and she was searching room by room until she found me.'

Steven hesitated to ask, 'What did they do to him?'

Julia's voice lost its tones of sweet recollection. 'My father wanted him executed—but I pleaded and pleaded, saying I would kill myself if they hurt him. Eventually my father did relent and banished Edmund to a far-off island. I wrote reams of letters, of course, but no one would take them for me. I never heard back until, one day, a note came from his father saying that Edmund was now married and living quite happily as a farmer.'

'I'm sorry.'

'There's no need. It was all a long time ago.'

Steven turned to look at her 'But why no one since then? Were you too heartbroken?'

Julia's face took on a brittle smile. 'You are sentimental, Steven. No, that wasn't it. You see the attacks came in earnest after that—knights in armour with massive machines trying to smash the walls. Sometimes there were suitors—but when I refused their 'love' they used to return in anger at the head of an army.'

Steven looked away. 'You must hate us then.'

Julia stood up. 'Not really. I'm just tired of warlike men saying I'm the only woman they've ever loved.'

Steven leaned back on the bench onto one elbow. 'Well, I won't do that. I've been in love lots of time.'

The Princess in the Tower

Julia sat down on the next bench. ‘I can imagine. Who was your first love?’

Steven arched his neck to look at her. ‘It rather depends on how you define it.’

‘Let’s start with a yearning ache that takes away all other hungers and banishes you from sleep.’

‘Oh that! Well, when I was thirteen, I was in love with my cousin Isabella. She was a rather distant cousin and three years older than I was. I used to worship the ground she walked on. The problem was how to tell her without being laughed at. I thought about what to say for many weeks. Finally, after much agonising, I had a brilliant idea. I went to Isabella and said that one day I hoped to be a great knight, fierce at arms and a perfect gentleman with the ladies.’

‘Very commendable, I’m sure.’

‘That was the idea, so I asked her to teach me how to be charming. We could pretend that I was her suitor. She would rebuff me, as she would a real lover, but afterwards she could explain to me what she was really thinking.’

Julia had leaned forward to catch every detail. ‘You were a rather cunning thirteen.’

‘Well, maybe I was fourteen. I don’t really remember. Anyway, Isabella explained that the way to a young lady’s heart was to go out on a quest and bring back priceless treasures. She also noted that I was quite ignorant about the herbs and wild flowers that grew near the castle. Each day, to test my resolve, she would ask me to bring her a particularly obscure flower or curative plant. If I succeeded, she would allow me a single kiss. If I failed, I suffered the cruellest of punishments—I was barred from her presence for three days.’

Julia was sympathetic. ‘A subtle cousin indeed, enhancing both your ardour and your learning at the same time.’

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‘That seemed to be the plan. Unfortunately, I was always occupied learning heraldry or studying horsemanship. To save myself the bother of finding those elusive herbs, I used to employ a stable boy called Anthony. He was a veritable magician at rustling up whatever obscure plants my cousin wanted. Well satisfied, I gave him a farthing every time he helped me.’

Julia decided to tease the wistful knight. ‘You can’t have really been in love then, to have deceived your beloved in such a way.’

‘Oh, but I was! The fear of not seeing her for three whole days drove me frantic with despair.’

Julia slapped her knees in impatience. ‘So how did it end?’

‘One day, I came to Anthony earlier than expected—and found him lying in the hay with Isabella. They were obviously in love and were joking about the flowers that she should ask me for that day. Knowing how lazy I was, Isabella had thought up her clever plan. She had found a way to give her lover a little money without offending his dignity.’

Julia turned away, as if in disgust. ‘I don’t know who was more despicable, you or your cousin.’

‘I was a mere pawn, a go-between. Think of my age.’

Turning back she added, ‘A rather knowing pawn.’

‘Better a knowing pawn than a dead king.’

‘So what happened to your cousin and Anthony? Did they marry?’

Steven took out a handkerchief and wiped away a mock tear. ‘Sadly no. She was swept off her feet by a wealthy knight, who carried her off to his castle, and was never seen again. Anthony died from the scratch of a poisoned rose.’

Julia was unconvinced. ‘I’m not sure that I believe any of this, you know.’

The Princess in the Tower

‘Well, what do you expect? If I told you about my later loves it might make you angry or jealous.’

Julia decided to let the word ‘jealous’ slip by unchallenged. She recognised a trap when she heard one. ‘So you made it up?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Well, to atone for lying to me, if you did, I command that tomorrow you must tell one of your recent adventures. If it fails to be both exciting and scrupulously truthful, I shall ban you from seeing me for three days.’

‘A cruel fate indeed.’

Julia burst into a smile. ‘And no less than you deserve.’

The next morning, Sir Steven could not wait for the princess to come to him. He had an even longer story to tell, and was impatient to see her.

Cupping his hands into a trumpet he cried ‘Princess! Princess! Are you awake?’

Julia threw open a large window made of diamond sheets of leaded glass. She yawned extravagantly and rubbed her eyes before indulging in a high stretch. ‘I could barely sleep. I kept thinking of what tales of valour might unfold today.’

‘If you really don’t want a story, we can always talk about something else.’

Julia’s eyes brightened. ‘What do you suggest?’

The knight took on the pose of a philosopher. ‘Let’s see. Answer me this: is it men or women who fall more deeply in love?’

Princess Julia did not hesitate. ‘Women, of course. There is no room for discussion.’

‘But I claim it is men.’

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The young woman rubbed her hands together. ‘Then I see we have a battle on our hands.’ She glided down the stairs to the other side of an inner wall and opened the gate. ‘Come through and state your reasons.’

Sir Steven paced up and down as if presenting a case in a court of law. ‘A topic such as love is very complicated, so I shall start with an obvious fact. It is widely accepted that women are beautiful creatures who far surpass men in both softness of skin and grace of movement.’

‘Undoubtedly.’

Steven threw up his hands in confirmation. ‘Then it is the male heart which is more often swept away with tender feelings. Women may find us charming, but men are practically forced by nature to be in love.’

Julia sat like a judge, passing sentence. ‘A very dubious argument. It is the fickle nature of men’s hearts that forces us to become more beautiful. Women love far deeper qualities in men than their appearance. The best of men may be brave but gentle, and artful but true.’

Sir Steven wagged his finger. ‘And what is it that makes the warrior gentle, or the trickster sincere? It is the alchemy of love that transforms our fickle hearts into gold.’

‘Ah, you are clever—but false. You claim that women only love in men that part which loves them first. The more we love you, the more it shows that you love us.’

Sir Steven sat down next to her. ‘Isn’t that right?’

Julia looked deeply into his eyes. ‘Oh Steven! A woman can love a man before he even thinks of her, and long after he has forgotten to do so. Women are the raisers of children. Their hearts do not waver in the wind of temptation. They plant a tree and nurture it and help it grow. They don’t just ravish and move on.’

‘And what about men?’

‘Men love because they are vain. The more beautiful the beloved, the prouder they will be to show her off to their friends. If men love more it

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is because they are thrilled by the prospect of using a woman as a mirror to their own greatness.’

Sir Steven crossed his arms in satisfaction. ‘So men do love more, even if it is out of vanity—so I win the argument!’

Princess Julia was suddenly very angry. ‘That isn’t the point, Steven.’

Sir Steven, realising that he had touched a nerve, looked apologetic. ‘Oh, I thought it was. Well, anyway, what shall we talk about next?’

‘Something safer, I think.’

The knight looked up at the sky and chose a well-worn topic. ‘How about the weather?’

‘The weather is anything but safe. Since the trees were destroyed, we’ve had nothing but dust storms and burning heat.’

The knight remembered the fields of desolation through which he had walked on the way to the castle. ‘Yes, I’m sorry, I forgot about the meadow.’

‘No need, it isn’t your fault. Let’s change the subject.’

Sir Steven considered carefully before making his next suggestion. ‘Well, Princess, answer me this. Is it better to fall two hundred feet to your death or to be slowly tortured in a dark dungeon?’

Julia laughed at the odd question. ‘Neither prospect sounds very enticing. Why do you ask?’

‘That was exactly the dilemma I was faced with during the siege of Acre.’

Julia relaxed. ‘I sense an adventure about to unfold.’

‘A small one, perhaps.’

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Julia leaned against the knight's shoulder for support. 'Well start from the beginning and tell it properly. Remember, it must be truthful and exciting, otherwise the ultimate penalty.'

Steven let his arm move round to support her a little. 'Three days of seeing you makes three days of not seeing you seem like an eternity.'

'Charmingly put. Please continue.'

'With the story or the compliments?'

Julia sat up. 'With the story, of course.'

'Very well. King Richard and his army were laying siege to Acre on the way to Jerusalem and we were confronted with a dangerous problem. Many of our own supplies of food had turned rancid and the local people had burned the fields and taken their livestock into the city.'

'So you either had to attack or starve.'

'Exactly. Now by a great piece of good fortune, we had in our army two Turks who knew the city intimately. One of them revealed to King Richard that there was a secret passage that led right up into the city behind the fortifications. He was not sure where the passage ended nor could he say whether its existence was known to the Sultan. Since this passageway might be of great advantage to us in storming Acre, King Richard decided to send one of his men into the tunnel to see what he could discover.'

'That must have been very dangerous.'

'Indeed it was. The man had to be chosen very carefully—any mistakes could be fatal to our cause. Now, King Richard was aware that I was one of the last remaining Knights of St. George.'

'Which meant what?'

Steven's voice dropped to a whisper. 'We are a secret brotherhood of knights. We pride ourselves both on skill at arms and stealth in movement. This allows us to travel silently towards an enemy in near-

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total darkness. Originally, of course, such stealth was vital when creeping up on a dragon as it slept on its piles of treasure. Lately, though, such pursuits have fallen out of fashion.

‘Most knights content themselves with clanking armour and flashing blades. They claim that silent walking is unmanly. Fortunately for our cause, King Richard knew the value of surprise, so he chose me to find out what I could.’

Julia sat up anxiously. ‘Weren’t you afraid?’

‘I was a little. Being alone I had no hope of fighting my way out if I was discovered. It was agreed that if I did not return, our army would give up the passageway as lost and make a frontal assault on the city.’

Julia turned to look at him. ‘So what happened?’

Sir Steven stood up to act out his part tiptoeing around the courtyard. ‘The chosen hour came, and I entered the tunnel. I’ll spare you the details of the rotting skeletons and man-eating rats.’

‘Thank you.’

‘After picking my way along the murky pathway I came to a large stone door which opened silently to my touch. I peered round it and saw that I was in a lavish courtyard containing an ornamental garden. In the garden were fig trees and flowers and sparkling fountains of fresh water. The trees cast leafy shadows on the ground and in this oasis of silence I saw silken couches fit for a king. I realised to my horror that I had stumbled into the harem of the Sultan of Acre.’

Julia was enchanted by the description of the flowers, being so different from the barren military square in which they were sitting. ‘How did you know it was a harem?’ she asked.

Sir Steven approached Julia again, gesturing to her to lie down on the bench to help him to tell the story. ‘Well, on one of the couches was a very beautiful woman. She couldn’t have been more than twenty—and she had lost herself in a luxurious slumber. She smiled as she slept and it

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was as if the garden she dreamt of was even lovelier than the one in which she lay.’

Julia propped herself up on one elbow. ‘So you very sensibly turned round and went straight back to King Richard.’

Sir Steven shrugged. ‘I should have, I know, but I couldn’t help myself. I walked a little closer. Enraptured by her restful breathing I became clumsy, made a noise and woke her. Now I knew that any man found in the harem would suffer a terrible death—and this would be doubly so for a Christian spy—so I fell to my knees in terror. She was about to cry out, when, in a moment of tender panic, I looked into her eyes and kissed her hand.’

The knight lifted Princess Julia’s hand to his lips and kissed it. Before she had time to protest, Sir Steven continued with his story.

‘Now to my great good fortune she had never seen a man with blue eyes before. She had been taught since childhood that we Christians were ugly monsters who raped and pillaged and murdered with no mercy. But here was a man on his knees kissing her hand, and then her other hand—indeed showing her a gentleness and tender affection which the aged Sultan had long since abandoned in his arrogance.’

Emboldened by her lack of protest, Sir Steven kissed Princess Julia’s other hand and was about to plant a third kiss on her elbow when Julia pulled herself away.

‘You’re a very ardent storyteller.’

‘I was just trying to bring the story to life.’

‘Well, being too vivid can spoil the effect.’

Sir Steven dropped his hands to his sides. ‘As you wish.’ The knight seemed lost in his own recollections.

Julia, breaking the silence, asked, ‘So what did you do next?’

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Sir Steven snapped back into motion. ‘Seeing that she wasn’t going to give me away, I gradually rose to my feet. I was about to hazard a real kiss when we heard guards approaching. She took my hand and led me to a great urn into which I slipped as she placed the lid over my head. The guards came on their inspection, but did not discover me. I then had to wait some time for my new lover to return.’

Princess Julia sat up in a huff. ‘You do fall in love quickly.’

‘Under the circumstances, it seemed like the sensible thing to do. To my great surprise, when my protector returned, she brought all the other ladies of the court with her. They gasped to see my strange appearance and stared at me with frightened eyes. Some of them giggled and then one of them came forward. To my great relief she was a Byzantine woman who had been taken prisoner. She even spoke a little English.’

‘Was she pretty?’

Sir Steven’s face lit up with a glow of happy memories. ‘They all were really, although this was in a time before I met you.’

Princess Julia was not so easily won. ‘Stop it, you rogue. On with the tale.’

‘She asked me what I was doing in the harem. I answered that I was on a secret mission for King Richard. I explained that I intended them no harm and it was only beauty that had uncovered my plan, otherwise I could have crept away unnoticed. I said I had come to steal away their secrets, but instead the young girl had stolen away my heart.’

‘Which they believed, of course.’

‘I’m not sure, but the lady in question laughed very prettily and told me that her name was Jasmine. I said ‘Jasmine’ many times, and most wistfully, which seemed to have the desired effect. Then I asked very politely whether I could leave. I said it would be punishment enough never to see Jasmine again.’

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Julia frowned, and Sir Steven was not sure if she was in earnest. ‘To give up your new lover so soon. Really Steven, this isn’t a tale to charm a woman’s heart.’

He shrugged. ‘Well, at the back of my mind, I couldn’t help remembering the horrible tortures I was risking.’

‘I see.’

‘Anyway, the ladies held a conference. The Byzantine woman explained to me that the women had great sympathy for my plight. In many ways they were prisoners themselves. On the other hand, they were loyal to their master and could not let a spy escape to help the king of their enemies. My heart sank, and I was torn between trying to climb down the city walls or killing as many guards as I could before I was taken.’

Princess Julia added with drama, ‘Your terrible dilemma.’

‘Just so. However, the Byzantine woman continued. As long as I was not free to return, it seemed to the women, that I would serve just as well trapped in the harem as in a dungeon.’

Julia put her hands on her hips. ‘I think I can see where this is going.’

‘Perhaps. Well Jasmine was the youngest of the women, and had come to the harem when she was still a child. She had never known true love—merely the fumbings of an old man—and she had rather taken a fancy to me. The ladies were prepared to hide me and feed me well so long as Jasmine’s ardour flourished.’

Julia was playfully sarcastic. ‘Oh poor prisoner.’

‘Indeed, but I adjusted. Jasmine was the sweetest girl I ever knew. She was generous, kind and playful; and she spoke no English whatsoever, so we never had any arguments.’

Julia suspected that Sir Steven rather liked arguments, but she decided not to take the bait. ‘How long did this go on for?’

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‘My sweet incarceration lasted for six days. Alas, after that, tragedy struck.’

‘What happened?’

‘King Richard, despairing of my life, launched a frontal attack on the city. One morning I awoke as knights poured in through a breach in the walls and found me in the arms of my beloved.’

Julia stood up and tied an imaginary noose with her hands. ‘I would have strung you up to the nearest tree.’

‘In fact, they were quite understanding. They took me to King Richard who welcomed me as if returning from the dead. In gratitude for my safety in the harem, I placed all the ladies of the court under my personal protection. I’m glad to say that this prevented any of those appalling atrocities so common in a conquering army.’

‘And what happened to Jasmine?’

‘When the siege was over, she pleaded with me to stay, but my first loyalty was to the king. I like to think that she helped to protect the Christian women when the city was retaken, two years later, by the Saracens.’

Julia sat down again, as if deflated. ‘Is that it? Your great story.’

‘Wasn’t it exciting? Danger and adventure mixed with beauty and charm.’

Julia looked up sternly. ‘But how truthful was it?’

‘Ah.’

‘You would have been thrown to the wolves in five minutes. Knights of St. George indeed. I heard you coming from over two miles away.’

Sir Steven looked disappointed. ‘So you didn’t like it?’

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‘Exciting and truthful were my requirements, on pain of three days banishment. What have you to say in your defence before I pass sentence?’

‘How long do I have?’

Princess Julia was magnanimous. ‘Take as long as you like.’

Sir Steven took on a more serious, intimate tone. ‘Well firstly, I have been a knight since I was eighteen, and a squire before that. My life has consisted of war or preparation for war, for as long as I can remember.’

‘Which left you with no adventures to speak of?’

‘As you know, war is mostly dust and waiting, with brief moments of terror in between. I don’t enjoy killing, and I would never brag about it simply to entertain a lady.’

Julia blushed. ‘I’m sorry. You’re right of course.’

‘Secondly, tales of romance are much more enchanting than tales of valour.’

‘Quite true.’

Steven hesitated before continuing. ‘And thirdly, much as it breaks my heart to think about it, I have to leave tomorrow.’

Julia sat up in surprise. ‘I thought you said we had a week together!’

‘I said King Richard gave me a week, but it’s a long journey to Jerusalem.’

Julia was upset. ‘That isn’t fair!’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, you’ve done most of the talking.’

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‘But Princess, one of your sentences is worth ten of my lengthy speeches.’

Julia smiled faintly. ‘A cunning answer.’

‘And tomorrow shall be dedicated to you.’

Julia was suddenly sad again. ‘And the day after will be filled with Jasmine or whoever the next one is who comes along.’

Steven dropped down on one knee. ‘If Jasmine tries to enter my dreams she will find them filled with thoughts of you.’

Julia turned away. ‘Go to bed Steven. I’ve had enough of this.’

Sir Steven used a gentle hand to turn her face back to look at him. ‘Forgive my silly stories. I was just trying to make you smile.’

Julia stilled his lips with a slender thumb. ‘Don’t worry, you did.’

The next morning the mood of Princess Julia was different again. She burst into the courtyard as if the castle was under attack. ‘Steven, wake up! The Sultan’s guards are coming!’

The knight struggled to make himself wake up. ‘What? Oh, it’s you.’

‘Yes. Now do get up. Today is dedicated to me if you remember.’

The knight sat up and dropped his stocking-covered feet onto the cold stonework. ‘Of course, I hang on your every word.’

Julia sat down next to the yawning knight. ‘I’ve been thinking about that, and I’ve decided to ask you some questions for a change.’

Sir Steven shrugged. ‘Whatever you like.’

‘Well firstly, did you really have a cousin called Isabella?’

‘She wasn’t exactly my cousin, but I was in love with her, and so was my older brother. He was the one who kissed her, while I had to go off and

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find the flowers. He was bigger than I was and a terrible bully. That was why I decided to become a great warrior, so I could get my own kisses. Of course life never quite works out the way we plan.’

Princess Julia put a hand on her breast. ‘Such a tale would break my heart, if it were true, but the answer is satisfactory.’

‘And what about Jasmine?’

‘Every word was true except...’

‘Except?’

‘Except for the rats. I made that bit up to make it more exciting, as you requested.’

Julia hesitated a moment. ‘Well my third question is most unselfish—and since today is dedicated to me, you must answer it honestly.’

‘As if I would do anything else.’

‘Won’t it be more dangerous for you to travel if you set out from here later in the day? You could be set upon in the dark and killed.’

Sir Steven wrinkled up his nose. ‘The danger is slight. I am a knight at arms, after all, and if they captured me, I could always talk them to death.’

Julia smiled at the joke, but then became very still. ‘Or talk them to life as you have with me.’

‘When you speak with your heart, my words seem feeble in comparison.’

Julia lightened again in an instant. ‘What a shame then, that a woman’s love is a poor tarnished weakly thing compared to a man’s.’

Sir Steven looked distraught, as if he had been hen-pecked about that same topic for the last ten years. ‘Oh not that again! I wish that I’d never brought it up. Both love equally, at different times in different ways. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

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‘You didn’t, and I shouldn’t harp on it, but I do have another question. Don’t answer if you don’t want to.’

‘I shall try, of course.’

Julia took Sir Steven’s hands in hers. ‘My question is this. If you hate fighting so much—and love life—why do you go on crusades? You know that they gain little and bring about great suffering.’

Sir Steven, in turn, became serious. ‘I fight not for the cross, but for Richard. He is a brave and just man who would be a great ruler if he only stayed at home. His brother John, on the other hand, is a greedy tyrant who ravages the land when Richard is away. I believe that if John ever became king, he would drive my countrymen to the point of rebellion.’

‘So you fight to protect Richard?’

‘If I can. I am his shield in battle and the bane of his assassins. I check his food and taste his wine. He is also my friend, and I would give my life to save him.’

Julia gave his hands a loving squeeze. ‘Well, try to save both lives, if you can.’

‘Of course, life has many joys for me,’ and he looked at Julia as if she was chief amongst them.

‘I have a last question for you.’

‘Very well.’

Julia swallowed before asking. ‘Since your first day here you haven’t asked me for treasure to help your crusade. Why not?’

Sir Steven looked away. ‘Once I got to know you, it didn’t seem polite.’

‘A rather evasive answer.’

The knight smiled with a roguish grin. ‘A sense of mystery is part of my charm.’

The Princess in the Tower

‘Maybe your charm is a mystery.’

‘Thanks very much.’

Julia hazarded a compliment. ‘But you do leave me deeply mystified.’

The knight sighed, as if the weight of the world was once again on his shoulders. ‘If things were different, I wouldn’t leave you at all—but time is passing, so I must ask two questions of my own.’

‘Very well. What is the first?’

Sir Steven frowned. ‘This is very embarrassing.’

Julia was intrigued. ‘Never mind. I promise not to laugh.’

‘In that case... no I really shouldn’t.’

‘Come on!’

Sir Steven breathed heavily. ‘If I must—how do I get out of the castle?’

Julia tried to control a smile. ‘I thought you might ask that. I don’t know if you realised it, but we’ve been circling the walls never getting any closer to the centre. The angles make it rather confusing.’ She added bitterly, ‘It’s all part of the brilliance of our defences.’

‘I see.’

‘If you go through that gate and turn left you should find your piece of blue ribbon.’

Sir Steven smiled in relief not to be teased about that. ‘Thank you.’

‘And the second question?’

Sir Steven bowed low, as he had on the first day that they met. ‘Tell me Princess, which are more beautiful, the tears of laughter or the tears of farewell?’

The Princess in the Tower

‘The tears of farewell since they carry distilled within them all the laughter and tenderness of our friendship.’ Despite her best efforts Julia’s own tears ran down her cheeks to splash onto the unfeeling stone. ‘I didn’t mean to cry. I promised myself that I wouldn’t cry.’

‘So did I.’

Princess Julia turned away from the knight to hide her tears. ‘You should go now. Dusk will come all too soon.’

Sir Steven lingered, hoping she would turn back to him. He went to take her hand but she pulled it away.

‘Goodbye then. Try to be happy,’ he said.

As he reached the gate, Julia did turn to face him. ‘Take care, Steven.’

The knight smiled back, wondering if he would ever return. ‘I will.’

* * * * *

Two years had passed and the relentless isolation had taken its toll on Princess Julia. Quite often, now she found herself talking out loud to imaginary friends—people she had once known or read about in books. Her favourite of all these ghostly companions was Sir Steven De Vere, the man who had stayed for so brief a time, but had crept into her heart. On this particular day she stood on top of the highest tower, looking out at the horizon.

‘Oh another sandstorm—a cloud of dust rising to the heavens. Well, Sir Steven, what do you say to that? To the inexperienced eye, one might think of travellers—a magnificent parade of elephants carrying a famous king. But we know better don’t we Sir Steven? This is a desolate isle, unvisited for many years. It is most cruel of the dust storm to try to trick us like that. It is even said that the wind can mimic the sound of a loved one’s voice. The wind lashes the rocks with harsh blows and they cry out for mercy.’

The Princess in the Tower

As if to illustrate her words, the mounting storm raised up distant cries as if carrying the words ‘Princess! Princess!’ over the sand towards her.

‘There you see! I can almost hear him calling to me. Madmen say if you talk to the wind, it will answer you.’

In doleful playfulness she cried out ‘Steven, where are you?’

To her surprise she heard the now-clearer voice of the English knight answer ‘Over here!’

Stirred from her melancholy she started to believe that he was really there. ‘Steven! Over where? Keep calling. I’ll come to you.’

The wounded knight replied. ‘Over here. I can’t see you. I’ve got sand in my eyes.’

Julia could see him through the dust storm, a ragged figure, staggering against the wind. ‘Don’t move. I’m coming!’

‘I won’t.’ The knight stood his ground, exhausted.

Princess Julia wrapped her head in a cloak to keep the sand away from her eyes and leaning steeply against the swirling gusts made her way to the blinded man. ‘Take my hand,’ she cried.

As the wind subsided the knight could hear ancient hinges being opened in front of him. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Into the passageway.’

She led him through, and with the closing of the door, the storm was made suddenly distant, like the far-off churning of an ocean.

‘What passageway?’ Sir Steven slumped down to the ground, and started to rub his eyes. ‘I think I can see a bit now.’

Julia put her arms round the knight. ‘Oh Steven, you came back to me.’

Sir Steven winced in pain.

The Princess in the Tower

‘You’re hurt!’

‘It’s nothing. If I could just sit down for a while, I’ll be fine.’

Julia helped him to his feet again. ‘Of course. I’m sorry. Follow me and be careful. It’s dark.’

‘I will.’

Julia led Sir Steven down the passageway, and holding him up with one arm, took him to her bedchamber where, for the first time, she could see the extent of his wounds.

‘You’re bleeding!’ she cried in alarm.

‘Am I? I thought it had stopped by now.’

Julia started to tear up her bed sheets to make bandages. ‘What happened to you?’

‘It was stupid of me. I was so glad to be back here that I let my guard down. Two robbers jumped me from behind and one plunged a dagger into my arm.’

As the bleeding stopped, Julia began to calm down. ‘I did tell you about the robbers.’

‘Well two years is a long time, and I forgot.’

Julia finished tying the bandages. ‘Two years is a very long time. It seemed like forever.’

‘I know.’

Julia ran her fingertips over Sir Steven’s new beard. ‘I thought I would never see you again.’

The knight took her fingers in his hand. ‘I wanted to come back sooner, but things happened.’

The Princess in the Tower

Julia dipped another piece of cloth into a jug of water and started to clean his face. ‘What things?’ she asked, ‘Tell me everything.’

‘Where shall I start?’

Julia went round behind him and started on his neck. It was caked with dirt. ‘The crusade, start with that. How is King Richard?’

‘It went well at first. The Saracens were driven back to the gates of Jerusalem. We could see the domes and rooftops on the other side of the wall, but it was hopeless. We couldn’t get to them. A stalemate ensued and weeks turned into months of no progress.’

Julia noticed that Sir Steven looked thinner than she had remembered. ‘Was there enough to eat?’

‘Hardly—and the water was awful. Many of us became ill and winter closed in. I was struck with fever and lay delirious for four days. When I woke up, they told me that King Richard had received bad news from England and had set off as fast as he could. He went disguised as a musician to take a short cut through Europe.’

Julia had a sudden recollection of Sir Steven playing her lute, but putting that aside she asked him ‘Wasn’t that dangerous?’

‘Indeed it was. The Emperor caught him in Vienna and demanded a huge ransom for the king’s release. England is being torn apart looking for gold.’

Julia started to suspect why the knight had reappeared. ‘And they sent you out to find it.’

‘As usual.’

‘Oh Steven, I wish I could help you. I just can’t. These simple things are the only treasure I possess. My father used up all our gold building this castle. The larger it grew, the more men came to steal what they thought must be inside. To keep them off we spent all our money on moats and towers and fortifications.’

The Princess in the Tower

Sir Steven turned round to look at her. ‘Don’t you think I know that? You are the treasure in the castle, poor, orphaned and lonely as you are. You are why I came back, not for gold.’

‘Do you really mean that?’

‘Of course.’

Julia’s tearful smile slipped once again into sadness. ‘But what about the king? You can’t let Richard lie in prison whilst we are happy. That would be horrible.’

Sir Steven took the soiled cloth from Julia’s hands. ‘Oh Richard will get his money soon enough. I went to every castle in England asking for it. They threw insults at me when I came, and sometimes worse than that. But they gave me the money eventually.’ He stood up in front of Julia, his strength returning. ‘As I stood there in the rain, vilified and miserable, I couldn’t help thinking of you and the lovely things you had said to me. I promised myself that I would come back one day and stay with you if I managed to raise the king’s ransom.’

Julia looked down at his vest of chain mail. ‘How long will you stay this time?’

Sir Steven lifted her chin up to look at him. ‘Forever, if you’ll have me.’

Julia looked away once again. ‘But how shall we live? The castle makes everything so barren and desolate.’

The weary knight put his arms round the lonely woman, and pulled her close to him. ‘We’ll tear down the castle walls and plant cherrystones from your beloved tree. We’ll grow orchards and meadows and wild flowers.’ From inside his leather jerkin he pulled out a rather crushed bouquet of wild flowers. Many had lost their petals but they still had seeds in them. Princess Julia took the tattered fragments from the knight, and touched each one tenderly.

‘But my father’s magic is too strong for us. Many have tried to breach the walls and failed. The castle is indestructible.’

The Princess in the Tower

The knight was confident in his reply. ‘With our kisses, your father’s magic becomes your magic. You can change his plan into your own. You are a queen now, and I love you.’ He kissed her sweetly on her lips for the first time. His new beard tickled, and Princess Julia tried not to laugh. ‘And one day your magic will become our children’s magic—so we had better teach them all we’ve learned.’

There was a long pause. Finally, Sir Steven asked ‘Julia?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not saying very much.’

‘No.’

Steven went down on bended knee, wondering if his directness had offended her. ‘You do love me just a little don’t you?’

Princess Julia threw her arms around his head. Bending down to kiss his hair she whispered ‘Oh Steven. I did miss your silly questions.’

‘And I missed your beautiful replies.’



The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

Gregorin was now a much-changed dragon. Since his rather ill-conceived attempt at burning down the forest to make his tower more secure, he had had to labour long and hard at making steel in his cave. Once started, he took a great pride in his work, ensuring that exactly the right materials were bought and used, and he had won the respect of the local miner through his knowledge of various ores. Despite his hard work and genuine desire to make amends, he was still unpopular with the people of the forest and this grieved him. When not working, he used to lay his head at the mouth of his cave and cry. The tears would stream down his face and drop onto his nose where they would burst into steam. His wings would droop and his tail would balefully swish from side to side. He was a pitiful sight.

He had no friends in the forest except for one exceptionally beautiful deer who used to come and talk to him in a soft and gentle, but light-hearted way, because she felt sorry for him. He used to call her 'Warmheart' and he looked forward to her every visit. She would comfort Gregorin in his loneliness by telling him about her growing family and her magnificent husband, Ashenfield.

Warmheart had not been to visit Gregorin for some time, and he was feeling particularly wretched. He lay prostrate, squinting out at the evening storm, dreaming about a rather lovely green female dragon whom he had known in his dragonhood. Her name was Cassandra and she lived with her two large, blustering brothers on the other side of the mountains. Since his youth, his riotous way of living followed by his disgrace had meant that he had not seen her, and he regretted that greatly. In fact, it had been because he felt too awkward to talk to her that he had skulked off to his unhappy life of villainy. A dragon, frustrated in love, behaves in unfortunate ways. His miseries on this particular evening were compounded by the roof of his cave leaking.

A sheet of lightning illuminated the whole valley and he could see the new-grown trees reflected in the lake. A moment later and they were gone. Water dripped onto his wings and, in annoyance and melancholy, he crawled to the back of his cave and drifted off to sleep, only to dream of happier days and more frequent company. He snored gently away and, unbeknown to himself, blew little smoke rings that rose in the damp air

The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

to hover and disappear into nothingness. He convulsed twice and was wide-awake. The Octophilly had suddenly appeared in his dream. Gregorin had been caught by surprise on the ground and was still struggling as he awoke. The Octophilly was the most evil creature in the entire forest. It had three heads and three long whip-like tendrils. One of its heads had the eyes and mouth of a giant snake with which it could squirt venom at a victim from over a hundred feet away. Of the other two heads, one was that of a pike, which the Octophilly used to hunt fish and the last head was the most terrible of all. It resembled no living creature and had horrible, ripping fangs, with which the Octophilly would rip out the throat of its prey.

Gregorin did not know why he should dream of this grotesque animal and he sat, musing on the idea. Quite why the Octophilly chose to call itself that was never entirely clear to the people of the forest. In fact, it was trying to associate itself with its more illustrious salt-water cousins, but they snubbed its company, so the bad-tempered creature haunted rivers and lakes, doing what mischief it could.

‘Eight legs may be better than three,’ it would say to itself, ‘but then again, three heads are better than one.’

Unfortunately for the Octophilly, this was not entirely the case. The three heads often quarrelled with each other; each convinced that one of the other two should do all the thinking. However, from the stories that Gregorin had heard, the Octophilly’s lack of general intelligence had only heightened its cunning as a fighter.

The frazzled dragon was just dozing off to sleep again when Warmheart appeared at the mouth of his cave, completely distraught. Tears streamed down from her eyes and Gregorin asked whatever could be the matter. And so it was that Warmheart related the story of Ashenfield’s courageous stand against the Octophilly. Earlier that day, Ashenfield, Warmheart and their family had been grazing by the lake, commenting on how the grass was much improved, when Warmheart let out a cry. A horrible, three-headed creature had arisen from the water and gripped her body with one of its tendrils. Ashenfield did not hesitate for a moment. He leapt forward straight at the Octophilly who, being taken by surprise, released Warmheart.

The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

‘Back, keep back,’ he cried to Warmheart.

‘Oh Ashenfield—this vile monster will kill you! Let me stay and fight it too.’

‘Go—take our family and go. I can engage it in battle for a while yet.’

‘I can’t leave you to die like this. Oh Ashenfield!’

‘Seek help from Gregorin. He is the only one who can help us. The woodcutter is too old and...’

Two of the tendrils were grappling with Ashenfield’s antlers. He pulled and kicked and struggled but could not break free. Fearing that Ashenfield’s impending death would be in vain, Warmheart gathered her fawns and they raced off to safety. Stopping for a moment to gaze back at her husband, she saw him being dragged down into the lake to a watery death. She was overcome with grief and even her children could not console her as she wept through the sunset and on into the night. Even the sky itself seemed to cry out in sympathy and to mourn with thunderous outcries. As the ground beneath her hooves softened into mud, she hardened and resolved to have vengeance on this loathsome creature that had carried off her dearest love to the murky depths and out of her life forever. So, she had climbed up the mountain to Gregorin’s cave and related her story. While he listened to the tale, Gregorin seethed and boiled and finally, on hearing of Ashenfield’s ignominious death, he let out a roar of flame in anger, the first since his going into exile. He vowed to avenge Ashenfield, even if it would cost his own life. At this Warmheart had certain misgivings. Gregorin was a mighty dragon, but the Octophilly was cunning and unprincipled. She did not want to lose two of the creatures she loved to one foe, so she vowed secretly that she would get help for Gregorin if she could. They parted at dawn, with Warmheart making her determined way towards the rising sun, and Gregorin preparing for battle.

Gregorin realised that if the fight was going to be as fair as possible, he had to goad the Octophilly out of the lake. So he flew in long, sweeping glides over the water crying ‘Come out and fight, tri-worm!’

The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

After hearing this terrible insult, the Octophilly was furious and huge bubbles of foul smelling air rose to the surface. The Octophilly itself became visible as it made its way to the shore.

‘Come out of the air and fight, two-eyes!’ it cried in a mocking imitation of Gregorin’s voice.

Much to the Octophilly’s surprise, Gregorin did just that. He landed on the lakeward side of the Octophilly and gave it a huge blast of flame. The Octophilly had a special slimy surface that was resistant to heat. Even so it found fire unpleasant and, with two of its tendrils, it dragged itself backwards and away from the lake.

‘You can’t hurt me with mere flame, dragon,’ it said. (They were not on first name terms.) ‘Not after a good meal, especially one of venison!’

Gregorin grew so angry at this reference to poor Ashenfield that his next jet of flame had sparks in it, which temporarily blinded the Octophilly. Dragons, of course, only eat coal, with the occasional flint as hors d’oeuvre. Gregorin leapt into the air and landed a hundred yards away. He took a great rock in his front claws and, choosing the right moment carefully, he dropped it straight onto the Octophilly who nimbly caught it and threw it back.

The rock hit Gregorin on his head and he went tumbling into the lake. When he crawled out he looked so furious that the Octophilly slithered backwards with Gregorin in hot pursuit. This tactical retreat turned into what appeared to be flight, as the Octophilly charged off towards the Gladed Gorge. The gorge itself resembled a huge gash left in the side of the mountain by a giant’s axe. With a towering rock face on either side, the Octophilly was well protected from attack by Gregorin, but Gregorin had equally well trapped the Octophilly. Both sat for several hours, seething with rage and cursing each other.

The Octophilly taunted Gregorin about his foolishness with regards to the forest. He said that the reason that the woodcutter was popular, and that Gregorin was not, was because the woodcutter was handsome—unlike Gregorin. This was patently not the case, Gregorin was a fine-looking dragon, as dragons go, but it angered him nevertheless.

The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

It was as the sun was setting that Gregorin resolved to end the battle. He took a huge boulder in his claws and breathed on it until it was red hot. Gregorin then flew up the Gladed Gorge and was just about to drop the rock onto his foe, when the Octophilly's snake head squirted a jet of venom up into Gregorin's eyes, which blinded him instantly. He could not see where he was flying and went straight into a cliff face. He felt it crumble on impact, and then he was falling, with rocks all around him. His thoughts as he fell to his certain death were much too private to be related here. Let it be said, however, that they were of a noble sentiment. His wings were too bruised from the battle and the collision for him to be able to save himself. The wind roared in his ears as the ground was rushed up to meet him. His death was only moments away when two powerful claws gripped his shoulders and let him down gently by the lake. Warmheart had managed to reach Cassandra and her two brothers, Ivan and Petrov. It was Ivan who had caught him as he fell. Petrov had watched with satisfaction as the Octophilly was buried by the landslide, never to be seen again.

Cassandra lay down by Gregorin's side with tears in her eyes. Gregorin was very weak.

'Oh you've come to me at last,' he whispered, 'Or are you just a vision before I die?'

'No, I am real, Gregorin. I have missed you terribly, but my brothers maintained—it hurts me to say this—that with you in exile I should not see you. They would not let me see you. I wanted to, I really did. It will be allowed now, of course, because you are a hero, Gregorin.'

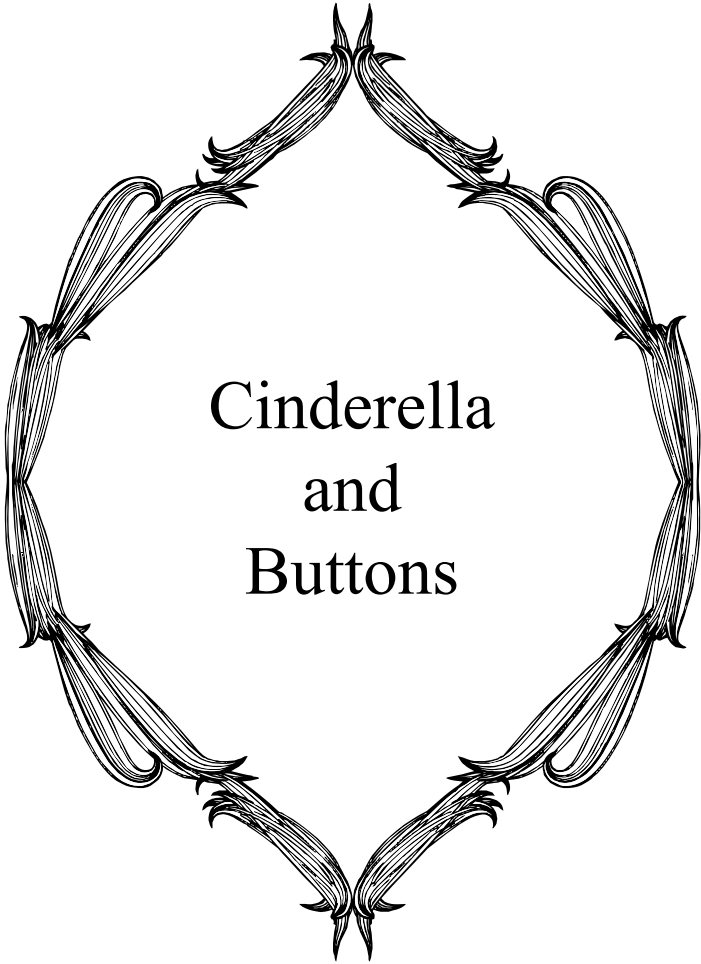
'No, don't cry. I am a happy...' he coughed, '...dragon. I have been a bad dragon, but I hope that I have made amends. I am weak...I have not long to live but, if you love me, then I die a happy Gregorin.'

At which his head slumped to the ground. Warmheart began to weep quietly, and, at such a sight, even Ivan and Petrov burst into tears, whose combined steam caused a regular fog. They had all been sobbing for some minutes when the woodcutter appeared.

'I don't know why you are all crying. He's only passed out. Gregorin, with a little nursing from a loving lady dragon, will be fine.'

The Battle of the Gladed Gorge

They all stared at him with incredulity, and then at Gregorin. Not a movement was to be seen, except, was that an inwards breath? Not a sound could be heard in the entire forest, then Gregorin's right claw twitched and a loud snore rose into the air.



Cinderella
and
Buttons

Cinderella and Buttons

Some stories are so familiar, and are told so often, that they wear away like old coins. They feel smooth in the palms of our hands and their very age makes them seem true. But time can play tricks on us. That cherished sovereign, handed down from father to son, is nothing more than an old penny, cleverly plated by an artful jeweller. Or that tarnished farthing, thrown aside by the hasty, reveals, with a little rubbing, a heart of gold. Cinderella is just such a story. We all know about the crystal slippers and the magic coach. Every little girl dreams about going to the ball and meeting a prince. But handsome is as handsome does, as the saying goes, and all that glisters is not gold. Was the prince really as good as he was handsome? And did he and Cinderella live happily ever after?

On the day on which our story begins, Cinderella had much to do, and Buttons, the footman, was not exactly helping. Buttons, in his finest clothes, knelt down at the feet of Cinderella, as she stared down patiently awaiting his request.

‘Now that Your Majesty is a queen at last, how will you reward me, your trusty servant, who stood by you in time of trouble?’

Cinderella lifted up her head to announce to the gathered throng, ‘Ah yes, Buttons, loyal, dependable and even a little handsome. In sign of our Royal Gratitude, we shall bestow on you half of the Northern Estates, a fine house in the city for you to entertain your friends, and three horses, of your choosing, from the Royal Stables.’

Buttons smiled. ‘Your Majesty is most gracious.’

‘Do these gifts please you well?’

‘In truth, Your Majesty, I would trade them all for one kiss of your Royal Lips.’

Slipping for a moment, from Royal Decorum, Cinderella brushed her hand down the young man’s face. ‘Oh Buttons, you’re so sweet.’

The footman, as if struck by a horse, rolled on the ground in agony.

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Ah not that most terrible of words, Your Majesty. It pierces me to the heart with despair.’

Cinderella was suddenly worried that this clowning might disturb her stepsisters, and tugged on her friend’s arm.

‘Oh do get up, I haven’t scrubbed the floor yet.’

She put down the wooden spoon that she had held as a sceptre and pulled off the paper hat that Buttons had saved for her from the last party at the palace. Cinderella’s worst fears were realised as the strangled-ostrich voice of Griselda came echoing down the stairs into the kitchen.

‘Cinderella! Just when are we to get our supper?’

‘Sorry Griselda, I was just coming.’

Unconvinced, Griselda strode imperiously into the room, her wide dress swishing against the furniture. ‘Really, and what has happened to that good-for-nothing? He looks half-dead.’

Buttons, still playing the part, looked meaningfully at Cinderella.

‘I was struck by Cupid’s arrow, tipped with a poison of deadly sweetness.’

Griselda grew even more impatient.

‘Honestly, half the time I have no idea what you’re talking about. But I do know this. If that carriage isn’t completely repainted by the end of this week, you’ll be out on the street without a penny. I have a prince to catch.’ She swept out of the room, as if the hapless royal might be passing by the front door at any moment.

Buttons whispered under his breath ‘You’d better shoot him in the leg first.’

Unexpectedly, Griselda’s voice came roaring into the room as she returned. ‘What did you say?’

Cinderella and Buttons

Cinderella placed herself in front of her stepsister, stammering. ‘Buttons said that he should, um, shake a leg, and fast, if he’s going to get it done in time. Didn’t you Buttons?’

‘Something like that.’

Griselda, unconvinced, shot daggers in her looks as she made her position clear. ‘And you had better do it or there will be hell to pay. Supper in my room in ten minutes! That should give me time to make myself beautiful.’

Buttons cupped his hands to whisper to Cinderella ‘It’ll take a lot longer than ten minutes.’

Griselda’s shrill but distant voice echoed down the hose that carried orders to the kitchen. ‘I heard that!’

Cinderella started to cut vegetables in a hurried, agitated manner. ‘Buttons, you should really be more careful. Griselda could fire you on the spot you know.’

Buttons reclined on a wooden bench, not thinking to help with the chores. ‘A good footman is hard to find, and anyway, what do I care? I have my savings. I don’t have to bow and scrape to anyone—except to you, of course, Your Majesty.’ He made a faint attempt at a bow and doffed an imaginary hat. ‘Oh stop it!’

Buttons finally returned to the subject that they had been discussing. ‘But just think of it—a palace ballroom lit with crystal chandeliers. The quiet rustle of silk dresses. The heavenly music with couples dancing. The men all tall and handsome, the women glittering with diamonds, and everyone laughing and drinking champagne. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to go to the ball?’

Cinderella sighed wistfully. ‘You know it would.’

‘Then go!’

‘How can I? The dress alone would cost a year’s salary, and then there

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are the shoes and the gloves, and it would all be ruined without a carriage to stop it being splashed with mud.’

Buttons paused for a moment. ‘There are always my savings...’

‘Don’t you dare even think of it! One day you will find the right girl, and then you’ll need that money to buy a nice little cottage to be happy in together. I would love to go to the ball, more than anything, but not enough to hurt my best friend.’

Buttons far from looking hurt decided to change the subject. ‘Well don’t despair. Sometimes miracles do happen. In fact, I know just such a story about a princess and a frog.’

Cinderella moved on to washing the cabbage. ‘I think I might have heard it.’

Buttons sat up, and Cinderella knew that she would hear this story whether she wanted to or not.

‘Not this one, it’s quite original.’

Cinderella, quietly delighted, knew that she had to hurry her friend. ‘Go on then, but don’t take too long. Supper is nearly ready.’

‘I don’t have to tell it, if you’re in too much of a rush.’

‘I’m sorry Buttons. I will listen, now please begin.’ Cinderella had learned to her cost that these preambles could go on for hours.

‘Well, once upon a time there was a princess.’

‘Was she beautiful?’

Buttons brought a lighted candle over to Cinderella and held it inches from her face. ‘Like an angel. A radiance of goodness shone from her eyes and she had golden hair.’

‘But was she happy?’

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Buttons put the candle down and began to munch on a carrot. ‘Sadly no. In fact, she was very lonely. She had tutors and bodyguards and gardeners, but no friends her own age to talk to. When she was feeling particularly melancholy, she used to go down to the pond in the garden and talk to the frogs.’

Cinderella closed her eyes to imagine. ‘Were they handsome frogs?’

‘No, they were green and slimy and had warts all over their skin.’

‘Yuck.’

Buttons pulled his legs up under him onto the stool and bent forward with a croak. ‘But there was one particular frog who had beautiful, sympathetic eyes. He would sit and listen to the princess for hours as she told him about the handsome prince of her dreams. She told the frog how he would be dashing and modest, gentle and brave, generous and rich—all the impossible contradictory things that princesses look for in a lover.’

‘Men do it too!’

‘Of course, but, unfortunately for the frog, being green and slimy was not what the princess had in mind.’

Cinderella started to stoke the fire under the pot. ‘Poor thing.’

‘Well, towards the beginning of autumn, the princess started to feel particularly sad. She had had no visitors for the entire summer and she was feeling that life was passing her by. Suddenly an idea struck her. She had once heard that a princess could sometimes kiss a frog and turn him into a prince.’

Cinderella looked up ‘I’ve heard the same thing—mostly from lecherous toads.’

Buttons nodded, acknowledging her wit. ‘Quite so. Anyway, this idea made her look at the frog with renewed interest. He did have nice eyes, after all, and he listened to her every word, which was more than she

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could say for the people she knew. She wrinkled up her nose and bent down and kissed the frog on the forehead. She stepped back full of expectation, but nothing happened. The little frog just looked a little perplexed, which was not the transformation the princess had hoped for, so she placed him back on the lily pad and wandered away feeling really rather disappointed.’ Buttons took out a file and started to manicure his nails.

‘Is that the end of the story?’

‘Not quite. Autumn was nearly at an end, so to forget his sorrows the little frog curled up into a ball and went to sleep. When he awoke, it was the following spring. He rushed over to the pond to have a drink, and found to his great surprise that he had been transformed into a human being.’

Cinderella wished that her winters could pass that quickly. ‘Was he handsome?’

‘It didn’t matter, he was freezing. He had to find some clothes or he would die. He was shivering with the cold, so he made his way into the herb garden where the servants’ clothes were hung up to dry. It took him half an hour to work out how to put on a shirt, but at last he looked respectable so he set out to find the princess. It was one of the bodyguards who arrested him.’

‘Oh no...’ The pot started to boil over and Cinderella threw in the carrots and cabbage to calm it down.

‘They brought him before the princess to explain himself. Luckily, the princess knew immediately who he was. Those eyes were unmistakable. As for the rest of him, he was a man, she had to confess, but the transformation had not been miraculous. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but somehow he just wasn’t her type. The truth was, in fact, that during the winter she had met a man who was very handsome and he had won her heart. They were very polite to the man-frog, and they entertained him for some days, but finally, against his heartfelt wishes, he said goodbye to the princess and set off to find a new love somewhere else.’

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‘Buttons, that’s horrible. How could you do that to the poor frog?’

‘Well there was a version of the story in which the other prince gradually turned into a frog, but the witnesses were unreliable, so I discounted it.’

Cinderella was quite impassioned now. ‘I think it’s a rotten story.’

Buttons was secretly pleased with her reaction but pretended to be puzzled. ‘Why? The princess finds a prince. The frog becomes a man, and who’s to say that he didn’t find someone else who made him very happy?’

Cinderella was insistent, ‘But it’s a fairy tale. It’s not supposed to end like that.’

Buttons bowed graciously to his favourite audience. ‘Very well—the prince ran away. The princess married the frog. And they all lived happily ever after.’

‘Good. Now I can get on with supper.’ Cinderella handed Buttons the soup for him to take upstairs to the others.

Later that night, Buttons crept into the drawing room after Cinderella’s stepsisters had gone to bed. In contrast to the poorly lit and badly ventilated kitchen, the rooms upstairs were sumptuous. They had the latest sofas from France, exquisite satin curtains from Italy and a finely crafted English writing box inlaid with silver. Looking at this room you would never have guessed that Cinderella’s stepsisters were on the verge of ruin. They had put all of their efforts, and most of their money, into becoming sophisticated ladies, hoping to catch the eye of one of the local gentry, so far to no avail.

Buttons crept towards the writing box, a single candle sputtering in his hand. He placed it down gently onto a handkerchief so that no telltale drips of wax would be left on the table and then he carefully inspected the box. Pulling on one of the vertical dividers he popped open a secret drawer. There, inside was a pile of the most expensive notepaper from London, tied together with a blue ribbon. Carefully extracting three sheets he laid them gingerly on the sloping open face of the box. Buttons opened his jacket pocket and took out his own quill pen. One day, once

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he was free of servitude, he dreamed of becoming an author, cherished by the people and celebrated by the courts of Europe. This writing implement was one of his proudest possessions. After sharpening it, he dipped the nib judiciously into a silver inkwell and started to rub the underside of his chin with the other, feathery end of the device—something he always did when preparing himself for the arduous task of writing.

To Messrs. Crimpin and Arbuthnot,
Purveyors of Fine Silks and Dresses to the Aristocracy,

Please find enclosed fifty gold pieces for the procurement of your finest ball gown, size 6, suitable for the department of a lady of quality. Please also include one pair of your finest crystal slippers, to the value of twenty-five gold pieces, this amount to be paid for monthly over the next two years. They should be wrapped discreetly in unmarked boxes.

Yours sincerely,
Albert, 'Buttons' Trevelyan.

P.S. It is imperative that these items arrive by this coming Saturday at the latest.

Dear Cedric,

Thank you for your hasty response to my request for the loan of your master's coach on the night of the ball. I understand that the coach cannot be used beyond midnight for fear of discovery and your consequent dismissal. I will devise a suitable explanation for my friend, which will leave her none-the-wiser as to its true origin.

Of course, this gracious act on your part erases all memories of a certain indiscretion in his lordship's carriage on a now unmentionable occasion.

Your sincere friend
Buttons, 'The Nose' Trevelyan.

Cinderella and Buttons

Dear Sir,

As proprietor of Sedgewick and Smythe, theatrical suppliers By Appointment to his Majesty the King, etc. etc., I wish for you to provide me with one ballerina costume, extra large, a blond wig, large, and a magic wand made of silver. I also wish to acquire two tubes of glittering dust to be used to effect the appearance and disappearance of mythical, magical and other such imaginary personages.

Your devoted servant,
Buttons, 'The Stage' Trevelyan.

A week passed and, in eager anticipation, the stepsisters began their painterly preparations for the night's festivities. Left alone in the kitchen, with nothing much to do, Cinderella whiled away the time, imagining what it might be like going to the ball. Since real princes were in short supply, she consoled herself by peeping coyly at the up-ended face of a kitchen mop. This less-than-royal stick had a rather sorry look to it. However, as it stood silently before her, this frizzy-haired companion took on all the qualities that Cinderella longed for in a suitor.

'But Your Highness, you are too kind.' She curtsied, the mop bobbing with approval as she did so. 'Why I would love to dance. I must warn you, though, that I am a little out of practice. Why Your Highness dances like an angel—or should I say a river sweeping me off my feet towards the horizon.' She and the mop circled the room as an ethereal orchestra filled the air with music.

She stopped herself abruptly. 'No don't say that it sounds stupid.' She held herself stiffly, as she imagined a real lady might, and feigned indifference.

'Your Highness is too kind. Balls can be so frightfully tedious without amusing company—in my father's palace, of course, we have Hungarian gypsies to liven up the dull moments with conjuring tricks and sword fights. One gets so bored the rest of the time.'

She stopped again, and thought to herself 'No, not like that Cinderella, he'll hate you.' She paused.

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‘What do princes like? Smile a lot. Don’t say too much. Swoon slightly at the end of the dance. He’ll sweep you up into his arms and kiss you. Oh Your Highness, we shouldn’t. We have only just met. It isn’t proper.’

Then she became the prince, talking in a deeper voice and speaking with great authority. ‘I am the heir to the throne. I define what is proper. No one would dare speak against the woman I would have as my wife.’

Cinderella drew closer to the mop. ‘Oh Your Highness, I have dreamt of such a moment as this. Kiss me again.’

Just as Cinderella closed her eyes in a blissful swoon, her two stepsisters burst into the kitchen.

‘What *are* you doing?’ boomed Griselda, snapping the young girl out of her reverie. Cinderella saw that the two sisters were both dressed up in their brightest clothes, and she noted, with a little bitterness, that they both looked lovely.

‘I thought I saw something in the mop. I was wrong. Sorry.’

Griselda looked around the room as if this was just the sort of thing that could be expected of a scullery maid. She then changed the topic to more important matters.

‘Where is that good-for-nothing Buttons? We need him to help with the coach.’

Cinderella was not sure what had happened to Buttons. He had been smiling mysteriously for the last few days, and now was nowhere to be found. Cinderella thought it was best to make something up.

‘He was taken ill with the paint fumes. Lead poisoning he said. He can’t move a muscle.’

Griselda was furious. Playing the fool was one thing. Sometimes Buttons could even be quite amusing, but The Ball was another thing entirely, and she was not going to let a servant ruin it for her. ‘Oh he can’t, can’t he. Wait until I get my hands on him. He’ll wish he’d never been born.’

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Cinderella tried to protect her friend. ‘But Frederick is here to drive the coach.’

Drusilla, sensing her sister’s anger decided to chime in, ‘The disgrace of it! No footman to open the door.’

Cinderella became even more anxious. ‘But the prince must have footmen at the gate to welcome people.’

Griselda would hear none of it. ‘That’s no excuse. I want Buttons out on the street first thing Monday morning.’

‘But have pity Griselda, by that time you could even be living in the palace. Any hint of scandal might spoil your chances.’

Drusilla, not wanting her sister in a bad mood for The Ball, decided to change the subject. ‘You are quite right my dear. Now tell us, what do you think of our dresses? Aren’t they simply ravishing?’ She and Griselda, suddenly girls again, did a little twirl.

‘I’ve never seen anything quite like them.’

Griselda and Drusilla looked at each other. ‘Aren’t they divine?’

Griselda, who fancied that she was a rather accomplished young lady, began to recite one of her poems.

‘She walks as beauteous as the night,
With cloudless charms and starry eyes,
And all that’s best of rich and bright,
Look to her bosom and her sighs.’

‘It is a bit low cut,’ suggested Cinderella.

‘Never mind about that. I want you to have the whole house spick and span by the time we get back. Princes can be most particular, you know.’

Cinderella curtsyed. ‘Yes, Griselda.’

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Drusilla took out an over-sized jewel-encrusted pocket watch. ‘Well, we must be off. Do have a good evening. Cleaning can be quite therapeutic, or so I’m led to believe.’

Cinderella, in melancholy defeat, decided to avoid an argument and said ‘Thank you, Drusilla.’

Drusilla added, ‘Now don’t go feeling sorry for yourself. If you came along to The Ball with us, you would only get ideas above your station. We’re just trying to save you from a lifetime of wishful thinking.’

‘I see.’

Griselda, herself noticing the time, took her sister by the hand. ‘Come on, we should go.’

As they wafted up the stairs Cinderella could hear the distant progress of their conversation and she followed up silently behind them to catch the tail end of it.

‘Such a sweet girl, but plain as a dishcloth,’ lamented Griselda.

‘Well, what do you expect from a foundling?’

‘Why our father took her in is a mystery to me. Anyway, no time for that now. The prince will be needing someone to dance with.’

Drusilla burst into a phrase of song, ‘To the palace!’

Griselda sang back ‘To the stars!’ They giggled as they swished away to the front door.

Cinderella went back down to the kitchen, and picked up the mop, but somehow she couldn’t bring herself to play with it. Startled by a sound at the door she looked up only to be dazzled by a flashing cloud of sparkling light. As the smoke subsided there stood before her a strange-looking woman in a glittering dress holding a silver wand. Cinderella thought that she *must* be dreaming.

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The woman declared in a cackling voice, ‘Behold, I am your fairy godmother, come to make your dreams come true.’

Cinderella was a little suspicious, ‘But I don’t have a fairy godmother. In fact I don’t have a mother at all, just two stepsisters and a nice friend who...’

The woman interrupted, ‘Well you do now, so be quiet and listen.’

Cinderella, still a bit confused, sat down on the stool. ‘If you insist.’

‘I do. Now because of the kind nature of your heart, the *Powers That Be* have seen fit to grant you a miracle.’

‘What kind of miracle?’

‘The best kind. You will remember it forever.’

‘I can hardly wait.’

Undeterred by the girl’s lack of enthusiasm, the fairy godmother walked across the kitchen and tapped two wooden cartons with her magic wand.

‘Behold! These boxes which once contained tawdry household goods now glisten with the aura of Royal Majesty.’

Cinderella was unconvinced ‘They look just the same to me.’

The fairy godmother rustled over to where Cinderella was standing and gave her a little push.

‘Well open them dear, open them! The big one first.’

Cinderella opened the box and found the most beautiful dress she had ever seen.

‘Oh fairy godmother, it’s wonderful. Does this mean I can go to the ball?’

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The fairy godmother folded her arms. ‘Patience dear, patience. Open the small one.’

Cinderella did so, and there in her hands was a pair of crystal slippers, which even in the dimly lit kitchen sparkled with dancing rainbows. ‘How did you know? I was saying to Buttons just the other day that these are my absolute favourites. I had seen them in the shop window but never imagined...’

The fairy godmother gave a little nod as if to say that making dreams come true was all part of the service. ‘Well don’t just stand there. Go to the ball!’

Cinderella went to stand up, but then, remembering something, sank back down onto the kitchen chair.

‘How can I? It’s miles to the palace and even if I walked there my clothes would be ruined.’

The fairy godmother tut-tutted. ‘As if I wouldn’t think of that. Look out of the window Cinderella.’

The young girl glanced over and was swept up with delight. ‘Oh, a carriage. How beautiful it is. Thank you fairy godmother. Now I must rush or I’ll miss the prince.’

The fairy godmother became very stern. ‘Just two things before you go.’

‘Yes fairy godmother.’

The fairy godmother paused, and then cleared her throat, as if aware that Cinderella was dangling on her every breath and longing to rush out of the room.

‘The first is that, for reasons which are beyond your understanding, my magical powers wane at midnight. If you are not home by then, the carriage will turn into a pumpkin and you will be stranded. But if you are home, all will be well and you get to keep the dress.’

Cinderella squealed with delight.

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The fairy godmother continued. ‘The second thing is more serious. Are you listening?’

‘Yes, fairy godmother.’

The fairy godmother looked Cinderella straight in the eyes.

‘The prince is very handsome.’

‘Oh, so I’ve heard.’

‘And he’s very rich.’

‘Well that can’t do any harm.’

The fairy godmother’s voice appeared to crack with emotion. ‘And, what’s more, he’s a man. And, as we fairy godmothers say, men mean trouble.’

‘But surely not the prince,’ objected Cinderella.

‘Especially the prince. Fall in love with him if you must, but don’t marry him until you know him as a friend. Do you promise me?’

Cinderella, seeing the sense in it, agreed. ‘Yes, fairy godmother.’

‘Very well, you may go.’

Cinderella couldn’t believe her luck. ‘Thank you, fairy godmother.’

She grabbed the dress and slippers, and hurriedly plopped a kiss on the fairy godmother’s cheek. As she rushed out of the room Cinderella called back to the old woman ‘I’ll change in the coach.’

Reaching up with a tired hand the fairy godmother tugged on her hair, at first in distraction but then with vigour. Finally she pulled off the powdery wig. It revealed the much rouged but contented face of Buttons the footman. Happy that his plan had worked, he still felt a little strange about the speed with which Cinderella had rushed off to the palace. Buttons steadied himself with the kitchen table and stepped gratefully out of his uncomfortable shoes.

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‘Well I won’t need that second tube of glitter after all.’

He felt suddenly tired and, having pulled off his sequin-covered stockings, he drifted off to sleep by the fire.

At eight o’clock the next morning he was woken by the clumsy sounds of Griselda and Drusilla as they returned from the ball. Buttons, still wearing the dress, crept up the stairs and listened at the keyhole of the main bedroom to find out what had happened.

Griselda sounded furious. ‘Wait until I find the little witch, I’ll have her guts for garters.’

Drusilla equally cross, backed up her sister. ‘What I want to know is where she got those shoes. Crystal slippers cost a fortune.’

Griselda started to seethe. ‘There I was, finally talking to the prince. I’d been waiting by the caviar all night. I knew it was his favourite dish and that he’d have to come to me. There *he* was at last, just summoning up the courage to ask me to dance when in walks the little hussy, practically falling out of her dress.’

‘Feet glittering like a Christmas tree.’

‘And she had the nerve to come up and stand right next to me, her own stepsister. I’ve never heard of such a thing.’

Drusilla’s voice took on a dreamy quality. ‘And HE asked her to dance.’

‘Exactly. And, as if that wasn’t enough, she took on the shyest most innocent look you’ve ever seen.’

Drusilla decided to play the part of Cinderella, doing a mocking imitation of her voice ‘Oh Your Highness, I’m not sure that I can dance in these shoes.’

Buttons drew himself closer to the keyhole so that he could peer in. This was difficult without rustling the dress, but the two livid sisters were immune to any distractions. ‘Never had a dance lesson in her life and she dances like an angel.’

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Drusilla, still in caricature, added, ‘Another dance, Your Highness, surely you do me too much honour.’

‘Then, just as he’s getting really interested, she says she’s awfully tired and has to go home. A prince! She stopped dancing with a prince to go home to bed!’

Buttons could see Drusilla acting out a mock yawn, followed by a curtsy and an exaggerated exit like a ballerina. For an awful moment Buttons thought that Drusilla would run over to the door and open it, but then, her faux-dramatics faded and she went back to sympathising with her sister.

Griselda was still grinding her teeth. ‘Well, of course, it drove him wild with desire. And as she left, those undress-me eyes of hers even had tears in them. When most people cry they look all puffy and horrible. But when she cries, she melts, and her clothes practically slide off her.’

Drusilla returned to her usual voice, but was no less angry than before. ‘I know, Griselda. I was there. But what are we going to do?’

Griselda pronounced the sentence with relish ‘Roast the little cow on a slow spit. I’ll do the basting.’

‘I have a better idea. She must have got the money from somewhere. I think you’ll find the law will punish her quite sufficiently.’
Warming to the idea, Griselda added, ‘A few weeks in the stocks should take the smile off her face.’

They looked at each other with conspiratorial glee as they yelled at the top of their voices, ‘Cinderella!’ and were then puzzled to hear a flurry of rustling outside the door.

Cinderella answered from her small attic room ‘Coming!’

Buttons, who was now hiding in a servant’s passageway, heard Cinderella walk into the room, yawning. Griselda’s voice then sounded as though she was Queen of the World.

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‘Well, young lady, would you like to explain exactly what you thought you were doing at the ball last night?’

‘Oh that.’

Drusilla yelled, ‘Yes that!’

Cinderella pretended not to see why they were angry. ‘Well, I understood that everyone was invited. I found this nice dress and I thought it would be a shame to miss it.’

Drusilla became the minister for the prosecution. ‘You did, did you? Someone left the latest fashions just lying around so that any old scullery maid could go off to the ball.’

‘Not exactly. A fairy godmother appeared in a dream and gave it to me.’

Inside the pantry, there was the tinkling of a bell from the front door. Buttons, still straining to hear the conversation, changed out of his dress and quickly put on the garb of a footman.

Drusilla continued to taunt her victim. ‘A priceless dress and crystal slippers just appeared out of nowhere?’

‘That’s right. It was like a miracle.’

Griselda spoke again. ‘Well Miss Twinkle-Toes, you don’t have to convince us. You can tell it to the judge.’

Buttons entered the room in his best stately manner. ‘You can tell it to the prince if you like. He just arrived.’

Griselda was suddenly panicked. ‘The prince here? Now? This is terrible! My make-up! My bodice! Drusilla, how do I look?’

Drusilla decided that honesty was the best policy. ‘The same as you always do.’

‘Not that bad surely? This is a disaster!’

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Prince Rudolf strode into the room. He was a tall man with jet-black hair and an impressive chin that commanded great authority. On either side of him stood two bodyguards, themselves formidable men, but carefully chosen to be two inches shorter than the prince.

Drusilla, Griselda, and Cinderella all curtsyed, and the prince nodded in acknowledgement. Griselda was the first to speak. ‘Your Majesty.’

Prince Rudolf looked around the room, a trifle disappointedly.

‘I came looking for the girl in the crystal slippers. She left this behind. There was only one pair sold in the last six months and they said to try here.’

Griselda decided to hazard her luck. ‘It was me, Your Majesty. I may look different in this light, but I am the woman you love.’

Prince Rudolf looked a little closer at Griselda’s face and then down at her feet. ‘I hardly think so, but you can try it on if you like.’

Griselda pushed with all her might, but soon reached the point where either her bones would break or the shoes would. ‘It doesn’t fit. Damn the little minx. She even has smaller feet than I do.’

Prince Rudolf was relieved. ‘Madam control yourself.’

Buttons gave Cinderella a little push towards the prince, which helped her to summon up the courage to speak. ‘I left the slipper at the ball, Your Highness. It is most gracious of you to return it to me.’

‘And who are you?’

Griselda tried to make the best of a bad outcome.

‘She is our sister, Your Highness.’

The prince ignored her. Seeing Cinderella’s clothes he asked, ‘Why is an angel of beauty like you forced to do menial work in these ugly surroundings?’

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Cinderella replied, 'It is to help my stepsisters, Your Highness. They are much older than I am, and they don't have time to do such lowly work. If I had known you were coming I would have dusted the living room and changed out of these rags. This dressing room is no place to receive a prince.'

Prince Rudolf took her hand, bowed and said, 'Any room which you are in becomes a palace in my eyes.'

Cinderella blushed. 'Your Highness is too kind.'

Prince Rudolf looked up and announced to his men, 'But I will not allow this injustice to continue. Beauty like yours was meant for finer things. Come and live with me in the palace, where you can blossom into the rose that is clearly within you.'

'Your Highness is teasing me, I think.'

Prince Rudolf went down on one knee. 'I am in deadly earnest.'

This exceeded even Cinderella's hopes. 'Do you mean marriage, Your Highness?'

'If you can find it in your heart to love me.'

Cinderella gave the prince her other hand. 'How could I do anything else?'

Prince Rudolf stood up, beaming with delight. 'I will wait in the carriage for you.'

He then waved his hand in a vague, all-embracing gesture. 'I am sure you will wish to say goodbye to your family.' He bowed to the gathered women, all of whom were, in their own way, suffering from astonishment. The Prince added, 'Ladies' and left the room.

Cinderella rose to her feet, and offered her just-kissed hand in parting to her stepsisters.

'Goodbye Griselda and Drusilla. Try to be happy for me.'

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Griselda did not hesitate. ‘Drop dead.’

Drusilla looked Cinderella up and down before giving her pronouncement. ‘I give it six months. The prince will tire of you and you’ll be begging for us to take you back.’

This hurt Cinderella, but it was no worse than she had expected. ‘Thank you for your concern Drusilla, I will miss you too. Goodbye Buttons. You were my favourite friend.’

Buttons had kept silent until now, something that he found unusually difficult. ‘Be careful Cinderella. The palace is a dangerous place.’

Cinderella stroked his cheek with the palm of her hand. ‘I know, but I can’t help myself.’

Buttons sighed. ‘Write to me then.’

Cinderella burst into a smile. ‘Of course I will. Goodbye.’
‘Goodbye.’

Three months later, Cinderella tiptoed into the Royal Library as secretly as she could. As she gently pushed open the door she was once again struck by the fact that, like everything else in the palace, it was far grander than the even the drawing room at Griselda’s house.

There were rows and rows of books, some of which dated back to the Middle Ages. They had been hand-copied and lovingly illustrated but were now chained to their shelves along with the ideas that they contained. Cinderella sat there trying to read one, but it was all in Latin, and the pictures only seemed to show people being put to death in different ways. As she sat there struggling with the text, her eyes kept glancing over to a writing desk that the prince used to organise the affairs of state. At least, that was what Cinderella assumed, since he was always so secretive about it, ushering her out of the room whenever he needed to do any ‘work’.

Finally Cinderella could resist her curiosity no longer. She went over to the locked cover and took out a diamond-encrusted pin that she had already bent to a suitable shape. Pushing on the levers and tumblers of

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the lock, she was finally rewarded with a satisfying click. She pulled up the cover and was greeted by a row of leather-bound volumes each embellished with neat gold lettering.

She thought to herself, ‘There we are. Good old Buttons. Not many princesses have such an excellent education in how to pick locks. Of course, Rudolf, if you spent more time with me, I wouldn’t have to do this. What is so secret about a few dusty old books?’

She started to read the titles out loud.

‘Revolutions and How to Suppress Them. That can’t be why he creeps in here late at night. What about this one *‘How to win at cards without exactly cheating.’* Useful, but hardly a great secret. Ah, this must be it. *‘The Witty Prince by Raymond Nasarovich, advisor on etiquette to the Emperor of Austria. What every prince should say under any circumstances. Seductions and denials a speciality.* Rudolf, how could you? You must have bought it as a joke. Now let’s see.’

She moved on to the table of contents. *Anecdotes for Formal Occasions.* That one sounded much too stuffy.

How to Avoid Dancing with Ugly Women. Cinderella was sure that Rudolf knew all about that.

How to Start a War When You Really Want One. She would save that chapter for later.

And then Cinderella found one chapter with pages that had been dog-eared for easy reference.

How to Seduce Servant Girls in Humble Surroundings. Her face started to turn a little red, and she thought to herself, ‘This should be interesting.’

The beginning of the chapter went as follows:

When seducing women of the lower classes, a prince has a number of natural advantages. Wealth and prestige usually dazzle the ambitious girls, whilst the more conventional ones

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dream of marriage, a palace and royal children. The greedy girls part with their virtue for a few trinkets, a bracelet of diamonds will usually do the trick. On the other hand, the more home-loving women will present more of a challenge.

Cinderella had never read anything quite like this before, but the fact that Rudolf had done so, somehow didn't surprise her. The book went on as follows:

'You were meant for better things' is always a solid approach. Hint at your great wealth and suggest that she can be free of her ugly surroundings by simply casting off her inhibitions. Remember, you are a prince. The everyday to you is magical to her.

'Any room that you are in becomes a palace to me,' should help to melt her resolve. Follow it up quickly with an enveloping kiss to sweep her off her feet. Knock her

slightly off balance so that she has to trust you both physically and emotionally. Stare into her eyes to maintain the giddy effect, and then kiss her again, with a touching mixture of fervour and tenderness.

Cinderella stopped reading and fumed to herself, 'Well, he certainly knows how to do that anyway. Oh Rudolf, how could you be such a monster?'

She was just about to read some more when Prince Rudolf himself, dressed in his hunting clothes, burst into the room.

'Darling!' he announced exuberantly.

'Go away.'

'No darling, that's not quite right. I say 'Darling'. You say 'Yes darling.' We kiss. We have dinner. We flirt a little over dessert. I besiege your honour. You resist me. I besiege a bit more. You crumble. And we all live happily ever after.'

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Cinderella answered bitterly. ‘I know. I read the book.’

Rudolf was puzzled. ‘Which book?’

Lifting up the volume Cinderella said, ‘This book!’

Rudolf was momentarily lost for words. Then he replied, ‘Oh that book. I do hope you didn’t read it cover to cover. It’s more the sort of thing you dip into when you have a speech to write.’

‘Or a girl from the lower classes to seduce.’

Rudolf looked nervous. ‘Ah, you read that bit.’

Cinderella turned to the appropriate page and began to read aloud ‘Every room you are in becomes a palace to me.’

Rudolf scratched his nose. ‘Did it say that?’

‘You know it did!’

Rudolf’s voice took on a distant almost abstract quality. ‘What a shame. I knew that it wasn’t original, but I couldn’t quite remember where it came from.’

Cinderella grew more and more furious. ‘Well if you think I’m going to marry a prince who can’t even write his own love letters, you are very much mistaken.’

Rudolf sat down next to her on the sofa. ‘But darling, I must marry you.’

Cinderella was unconvinced. ‘Why? I’m not *that* beautiful you know.’

Rudolf took her hand and began, ‘When I look into your eyes I’m swept away by a wave of emotion which breaks over me and... and...’

‘That’s in the same chapter Rudolf!’

Rudolf shrugged and let go of her hand. Picking up the book he said, ‘Damn, so it is. But I do love you. Why else would I want to marry you?’

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Cinderella replied, ‘I really can’t imagine. It’s not for my money. I haven’t got any.’

Rudolf put his hand on her knee. ‘Darling, don’t talk like that. It’s so squalid to talk about money. Look, I’m sorry I wooed you with other men’s words. It was wrong of me.’

He threw the book onto the ground in a grand gesture of disgust, as if rejecting everything that it stood for.

‘Perhaps I’ve been surrounded by flatterers for so long that I’ve forgotten how to be sincere. But I love you. I know it’s been said a million times before, but that doesn’t mean that it isn’t true. My heart does melt when I look at you—and you are the woman I want to be the mother of my children.’

Cinderella found it hard to still be angry with him. ‘Really?’ she asked.

‘Really. I would marry you tomorrow if you would have me.’

Cinderella sat up straighter. ‘I can’t. I made a promise.’

Rudolf sat up too and took on a slight tone of exasperation. ‘To your fairy godmother. I know. I am what you want aren’t I? I love you. I will look after you. I have a nice house and a good job. What more can I do to convince you?’

Cinderella looked into his handsome eyes. Her resolve was beginning to melt. ‘You could kiss me without trying to sweep me off my feet, as a friend would.’

Rudolf brightened at the mention of kissing. ‘As a friend, but more than a friend.’

‘Yes.’ She leaned over and kissed the prince. She couldn’t say why, but after everything, she was the one feeling guilty.

Rudolf responded to the kiss with another of his own and followed it quickly with the whispered words, ‘Oh darling.’

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As she rested her head on his manly shoulder, the handsome prince of Cinderella's dreams started to compose a limerick dedicated to himself.

Being a prince I'm so charming,
The girls find my smile quite disarming.
They melt at my kiss,
And that leads to this.
My success rate is almost alarming.

Being a prince I'm so rich.
I love diamonds and rubies and glitz.
The crowds are all grumbling.
The palace is crumbling.
So I dine with my friends at the Ritz.

Being a prince is the thing,
With maidens galore in the spring.
I eat ambrosia and honey,
Bought with other men's money,
And then when it's over, I'm king!

Cinderella became curious at the prince's silence. She was worried that he might still be angry with her. 'Darling, what are you thinking about?'

Rudolf replied, 'Just a poem darling, but I shouldn't tell it to you. You'd say I was being too romantic.'

Cinderella squeezed the prince a little harder. 'I'm sorry Rudolf. Sometimes I don't know what's good for me.'

* * * * *

After six months had passed, Cinderella finally decided to send a letter to Buttons. At first she hadn't wanted to write, feeling self-conscious about her good fortune. Knowing that Buttons had once loved her too, it didn't seem fitting to show off about her own happiness. And then things had started to trouble her and she was not quite sure how to put it into words. But now the Queen was insisting on a date for the wedding and Cinderella had to write to her old friend, to seek his advice. So she crept once again into the palace library, to write the letter in private.

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Dear Buttons,

Sorry that I haven't written to you for so long. It's just that I'm so unhappy and I don't know why. I really love Rudolf. He is handsome and witty and he claims that he loves me too. He keeps telling me that he wants to marry me, but then he goes off drinking with his friends, for hours and hours. Why would he say that if it wasn't true? I'm so confused.

Write to me soon and tell me all your news.

Your devoted friend,

Cinderella.

Just as Cinderella was about to place the letter in an envelope, she heard a noise, looked up and saw the frowning, determined face of Queen Alexandra looking at her round the side of the door.

'Ah, there you are. Keeping in touch with your old servant friends I imagine. How sweet.'

Queen Alexandra strode right over to the writing desk and snatched the piece of paper out of Cinderella's hand.

Cinderella curtsied low and said, 'Your Majesty' while trying to work out how to get the letter back before the queen had read it.

Queen Alexandra took on an informal tone. 'Yes, yes, enough of all that. Now do get up and sit over here. I want a word with you.' She sat down on the sofa and patted the seat next to her.

Cinderella took on an innocent air. 'Is it something that I've done, Your Majesty?'

Queen Alexandra looked archly at the troubling young woman. 'It's more a matter of something you haven't done.'

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‘What do you mean?’

The queen leant back on her cushion and the sofa groaned menacingly. ‘Rudolf tells me that you still refuse to marry him.’

‘I don’t refuse, Your Majesty. I merely asked him to wait until we know each other a little better. You see, I promised...’

‘Your fairy godmother, I know. It’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Stories like that may go down well with the chambermaid, but please don’t insult my intelligence. Maybe the palace isn’t to your liking?’

Cinderella didn’t expect this. ‘No, no, it’s very, err, nice.’

‘Can’t stand the place myself. Too many paintings of dead people. Most of them ugly. All of them relatives. But the king got terribly upset when I tried throwing them away.’

Cinderella chose her words carefully. ‘It is not the palace, Your Majesty.’

Queen Alexandra took one long disapproving look around the room.

‘Fair enough. Just asking. Maybe it’s another man.’ She started to read the letter, ‘This Buttons sounds rather intriguing. Handsome brute is he?’

Cinderella snatched the letter back. ‘Buttons is just a friend. How dare you try to ruin my reputation with the prince!’

Queen Alexandra sat up straight again. ‘Don’t misunderstand me. After you are married, you can have as many affairs as you like. But do get on with it. Rudolf is getting impatient.’

Cinderella went scarlet and stood up in rage. ‘I am not, and never have had an affair with anyone. How dare you suggest such a thing?’

Queen Alexandra, pleased with the effect of her suggestion added, ‘Then why not marry him?’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Because he doesn’t love me!’

Queen Alexandra started chuckling to herself. ‘Is that all? You really are an old-fashioned girl. Don’t worry about Rudolf. He loves you well enough. He just isn’t very good at showing it.’

Cinderella started to calm down. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, yes. He talks about you all the time. How beautiful and sweet you are. How you never want any presents—just to spend time with him. He even named his favourite horse after you.’

Cinderella frowned. ‘And that’s a good sign?’

‘It certainly is. He spends more money on horses than he does on women.’

‘What do you mean?’

Queen Alexandra started to fan herself with a nearby book. ‘Never mind. Anyway, he loves you and you love him, so you can get married next Sunday. And afterwards, you can both live happily ever after.’

‘Do you think we will?’

Queen Alexandra nodded in slow reassurance. ‘Take my word for it. After all, he is what you want isn’t he?’

‘I suppose so.’

Queen Alexandra rose to her feet. ‘Good. I’ll make the arrangements. Remember, next Sunday, from two ‘til six. Don’t forget now.’

Cinderella muttered to herself. ‘As if I would.’ Looking down at the letter she thought, ‘Oh Buttons, am I doing the right thing?’

* * * * *

When the day of the wedding was announced there was much rejoicing throughout the land. After all, everyone would have a feast that day, and

Cinderella and Buttons

this happy occasion would help the people forget the years of strife from which the land was still recovering. Whole villages had been destroyed in the war, but this was a new age, with a young and beautiful woman about to marry the heir to the throne. There were more than a few women in the kingdom who shed a tear at the prospect of a royal wedding, but not everyone could marry the prince, after all.

On the day of the wedding itself, Cinderella crept into the Royal Conservatory. She thought that if she hid among the orange trees, she would have a quiet moment to read the letter from Buttons that she had just received. It was written on the best notepaper and Cinderella was taken back to happy lectures given by Buttons on how to forge a master's signature, or how to alter a will so as to leave the whole estate to the servants. In retrospect she wasn't sure that she believed half of what Buttons had claimed to know, but at the time she was convinced that she was living in the company of a master criminal. The letter was short but written in his neatest hand.

Cinderella and Buttons

Dear Cinderella,

By the time you read this, it will be your wedding day. I can't pretend that I didn't once hope that you would be my wife. I couldn't have made you a princess, but I would have treated you like one. Thank you for sending me an invitation, but please understand why it is that I won't be able to attend. I really can't afford the expensive clothes that you will be used to by now in the palace. I would stand out horribly from your new friends.

And I don't want to hold you back from your new life. Be happy Cinderella.

Your friend,
Buttons.

Cinderella hoped he wasn't really just kept away by not having the right clothes. She, of anyone, wouldn't have minded that. The young woman kissed the letter and felt her eyes welling up with tears. But before she had time to have a really good cry, there was a knock on the French doors that led out to the garden. Standing there was a stooped-over old lady in a drab-looking cloak. Cinderella had never seen the old woman before, but she did not seem dangerous, so she walked over to the doorway to let her in.

'You don't know me, Your Highness, but I am Esmerelda, Prince Rudolf's nanny when he was young.'

'Please come in.'

The old woman walked with a stick and made slow progress into the room, as Cinderella patiently held the door open for her.

The old woman stopped, as if to catch her breath, and then whispered in Cinderella's ear, 'I hear that you have a few concerns about marrying him.'

Cinderella blushed, thinking that the Queen must have sent this old lady as a spy or emissary. 'I was just being silly, but that's over now. I'm getting married today, but you must know that.'

Cinderella and Buttons

The nurse came to a halt in front of the bench, and then with a series of elaborate shuffles, turned herself around as a prelude to sitting down.

‘Yes indeed. That’s why I came—to tell you a few things that will help you to understand your new husband.’

Cinderella was curious. ‘Go on.’

‘If I might have a seat. These old joints of mine aren’t as supple as they used to be.’

Cinderella rushed over to help. ‘Oh, I’m terribly sorry. Please sit down. Can I get you a cushion?’

The nurse replied, ‘No, this is quite satisfactory. Now where was I?’

‘Telling me about Rudolf.’

Having sat down, the old lady suddenly brightened, as if remembering happier days. ‘Ah yes, Rudolf was such a lively little boy. Always breaking things and drawing on the walls. Quite a little bundle of energy he was. He loved horses you know.’

‘Apparently he still does.’

The nurse waved her stick in the air. ‘Yes, he’s a bit rough with them, but they respect him for it.’

The nurse let the stick settle to the ground and then peered intently at Cinderella. ‘Of course, you know about the tragedy.’

‘No, what tragedy?’

The nurse relaxed again; glad to have caught the girl’s attention. ‘If it hadn’t been for the tragedy, you wouldn’t be sitting here today.’

Cinderella had no idea what the old woman was talking about, ‘What do you mean?’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Well, once upon a time, this country was ruled over by two ancient families. They had been feuding for generations until finally the people became sick of the bloodshed and demanded that the two principalities be joined together into one kingdom. Luckily, one family had an only son and the other had an only daughter. It seemed like a match made in heaven. Rudolf and Anne-Marie were betrothed on Rudolf’s second birthday. A contract was signed joining the two families forever. But then, tragedy struck. Anne-Marie’s father died suddenly and the little girl disappeared. Wicked rumours circulated that Queen Alexandra had had something to do with it, but whatever the truth of the matter, Anne-Marie’s mother withdrew from public life.’

Cinderella was truly shocked. ‘How terrible. What became of the little girl?’

‘The king sent out his men to search far and wide—but they didn’t have much to go on. A pretty baby girl, just two years old with a birth mark on her left shoulder.’

‘Well, marks like that are very common. Even I have one of those.’

The nurse lowered her speech to a whisper. ‘Quite so. Common as a dishcloth. But the remarkable thing is, my dear, that you do bear a striking resemblance to Anne-Marie’s mother. In fact, on the night of the big dance here, I overheard the king saying as much to Queen Alexandra. She told him he was a sentimental old fool and stormed off in a rage to pester her son.’

Cinderella was astonished. She had expected some surprises on her wedding day, but not this.

‘You don’t think I could be, do you?’

The nurse raised her voice again. ‘Well honestly, what does it matter? Anyway, soon after that the prince noticed you himself and the rest, as they say, is history—or it soon will be.’

Cinderella stood up in a rage. ‘So that’s why he wants to marry me. To safeguard his inheritance!’

Cinderella and Buttons

The nurse put her hand over her bad teeth. ‘Oh, I do hope I haven’t said anything out of turn.’

‘No, don’t worry Esmerelda, it was most enlightening. Now tell me, how exactly did the other king die?’

‘With a sudden pain at dinner. Some people thought it was due to poisoned wine, but a very reliable doctor assured King Henry that...’

All of a sudden, King Henry himself entered the conservatory accompanied by a blast of trumpets. He was a short, round man with hazel eyes, a jolly smile and a big hunting horn that he took with him everywhere.

‘Oh, I do hope that I’m not interrupting, Cinderella, but aren’t you supposed to be getting married today? The Queen is turning the place inside out trying to find you.’

Cinderella liked the king but had never had a chance for a really good talk with him. ‘Well, Your Majesty, it seems that my name isn’t Cinderella after all.’

The king seemed less surprised than he might have been. ‘Who are you then?’

‘Princess Anne-Marie.’

The king slapped his hands together. ‘Ah. I rather thought you might be.’

‘Then why didn’t you say something?’

‘Well, you looked happy enough, and Rudolf seemed to be doing the decent thing, even if it was for the wrong reasons.’

Cinderella felt the anger growing within her. ‘But he lied to me.’

King Henry shrugged. ‘You have me there.’

‘And his mother probably killed my father!’

Cinderella and Buttons

King Henry sighed a tired sigh. ‘Yes, I suppose it’s time I did something about that. Such a lovely woman when I married her—but people change. That was why I had to squirrel you out of harm’s way, and then we lost your address. It was all most unfortunate.’

‘You!’

‘Yes, people blamed the Queen. It was rather funny really, one of the few crimes she didn’t commit. But she would have tried to kill you eventually.’

Cinderella found her anger melting into curiosity. ‘So why didn’t you punish her?’

King Henry started to pace up and down as he revisited a hard decision from years before. ‘The country was just coming out of the civil war and the prospect of another one was too terrifying. But now seems like an opportune moment to strike. You are sure you don’t want to marry Rudolf?’

‘Quite sure.’

King Henry took the marriage scroll from one of his guards and tore it up. ‘Well, so much for that.’

Cinderella started to realise the enormity of what was happening. ‘What are you going to do?’

After further pacing up and down some more, King Henry announced with satisfaction, ‘Banish the Queen on a charge of murder.’

‘After all these years?’

The king looked delighted, ‘Why not? Do you know, she even tried throwing away all my lovely paintings?’

Nurse Esmerelda stirred from her silence. ‘And what about Rudolf?’

King Henry looked at the old lady and bowed. ‘Ah madam, I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Cinderella stepped over to introduce them, thinking that the king did not recognise the old nurse.

‘King Henry, Nurse Esmerelda.’

King Henry bowed again. ‘Charmed I’m sure.’

Cinderella then asked on her own behalf, ‘So what *will* happen to Rudolf?’

King Henry smiled a broad grin. ‘He takes far too much interest in his appearance for my taste. He can muck out the stables for a year. That should knock the polish off him.’

‘Well, he does love horses.’

‘Exactly. Now if you will excuse me, I have a lot to do. Oh, by the way, you get half the kingdom back. It’s in the contract. Fair’s fair after all.’ And before Cinderella had a chance to say thank you, the trumpets sounded again and the king marched out.

Cinderella turned to look at the old woman. ‘Esmerelda?’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Don’t you think it was odd that the king didn’t recognise you?’

The nurse started to fidget in her seat. ‘Not really. He has a lot on his mind.’

‘But to not recognise a woman who brought up his son for twenty years?’

The nurse started to play with her worry beads. ‘Perhaps it is a little strange.’

Cinderella was finally convinced. ‘Come on Buttons, it’s you isn’t it?’

Cinderella and Buttons

The old woman straightened in her chair, and her voice dropped an octave. ‘All right, I confess. It’s me.’ Buttons then removed his wig, which had become intolerably hot and was giving off a bit of a smell. Cinderella beamed with delight. ‘Why didn’t you say so?’

Buttons looked at the ground. ‘Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I thought that the bad news coming from someone else would seem more convincing.’

‘But I trust you.’ Cinderella took his hand. She marvelled at the make-up with its drawn veins and glued-on wrinkles.

‘I know, but I thought you might think I was being petty or jealous.’

Cinderella took his other hand. ‘Well, were you?’

‘What?’

‘Jealous, I mean.’

Buttons nodded. ‘A little.’

‘So you do love me then?’

Buttons looked confused. ‘I used to.’

‘And now?’

‘Well I’ve been trying not to love you for so long that I...’

Cinderella felt tears welling up again. ‘You’ve given up!’

‘I don’t mean that, but you don’t love me anyway. You love Rudolf.’

Cinderella decided that there should be no more pretending. ‘But who, other than you, would dress up as a fairy godmother so that I could go to the ball with someone else?’

‘Ah, that. Well I didn’t think you’d take my presents unless I made them magical.’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘And in your letter you said that you hoped that I would be your wife.’

It was Buttons’ turn to be upset. ‘Don’t be like this Cinderella. You can’t ask me to be just your friend for two years and then suddenly say that you want to marry me.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well it’s not fair, and we haven’t even ever kissed each other.’

Cinderella burst into a smile. ‘Well that’s easily fixed.’ And she kissed him, like she had never kissed anyone. ‘It doesn’t hurt so much does it?’

‘I could get used to it, I suppose.’

Cinderella decided to do a little fishing. ‘And you still love me?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘And you want to marry me?’

Buttons shrugged. ‘I always have.’

Cinderella stood up and walked over to a chrysanthemum bush and picked a flower from it, which she handed to Buttons. ‘Well, there’s a rather nice wedding planned for today, but they seem to be short of a bridegroom.’

‘We couldn’t do that.’

‘Why not? You are forgetting, I am queen of half the kingdom.’

This was too daring even for Buttons. ‘But the scandal would be terrible.’

‘So what? We deserve it. After all it seems a shame to let all that cheering go to waste.’

Buttons stood up and puts his arms round the waist of Cinderella.

Cinderella and Buttons

‘You’re a mad woman Anne-Marie.’

Cinderella whispered in his ear. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

Buttons replied ‘Anything.’

‘You know that mark on my shoulder?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I got it from a hot stove when I was three.’

It was Buttons’ moment to be astonished. ‘So you’re not Anne-Marie!’

Cinderella danced around a cherry tree. ‘That’s right—but the king was sure that I am, and I so hated to disappoint him.’ Coming to a stop she offered her arm to the still dizzy footman. ‘So Lord Buttons, will you accompany me to the prince’s chamber where you can dress for the wedding?’

Buttons looked down at his tatty old dress. ‘Can’t I get married in this?’

Cinderella laughed. ‘Then the scandal *would* be appalling.’

Buttons stopped for a moment. ‘Tell me Cinderella, will *we* live happily ever after?’

Cinderella was imperious. ‘Of course. I command it to be so.’

Buttons took a long bow with arms spread wide. ‘Well in that case, Your Majesty, I had better get changed.’

* * * * *

A year had passed since the wedding, and at the house of Griselda, things were going from bad to worse. The clamour of the creditors had finally started to puncture the lofty dreams of the two sisters. Certain expensive items had already been returned to the merchants for a fraction of their original value. Griselda saw, in the mirror each day, the slow march of wrinkles across her face and she had started to despair of finding any

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husband, let alone a wealthy one. Younger men wanted apple-cheeked beauty and the older ones were already married. Drusilla had become vexing to her and Griselda wondered how her own life would end. Night times were the worst, with dreams of being trapped in a milliner's shop as the last candle flickered in a dish. In her nightmare she would sew feverishly, hoping to finish a final piece of lace before the candle sputtered out and she was plunged into darkness forever.

It was during just such a dream that Griselda was woken from her unhappy slumbers by a loud pounding at the door. Griselda felt furious to be woken in the middle of the night and she was determined to give the unwelcome visitor a piece of her mind.

'All right, all right. I'm coming.' She yelled. 'No need to break the door down.'

As she pulled it open, Griselda suddenly wondered whether it was wise to open the door in the middle of the night to a complete stranger, but she kept up the pretence of anger. 'Who are you and what do you want?'

The dripping figure lowered the cloak to reveal the face of Queen Alexandra.

'It is I!'

Griselda was thrown into confusion. 'I had no idea, Your Majesty. Please forgive my rudeness.'

Queen Alexandra smiled a brittle smile. 'You are excused. Now get out of my way and let me in.'

Dressed as she was, Griselda wondered what the queen must think of her. 'The footman would usually answer the door, but he sleeps so soundly. He is not a young man you see, but he's the best we could find. Frederick! Frederick!'

The Queen rebuked her in a harsh whisper. 'Be quiet! It may have escaped your notice, but I was banished on pain of death. I hardly think waking the servants is such a good idea.'

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Griselda frowned. ‘But I thought, with Rudolf finishing his punishment, that you would be free to return.’

Queen Alexandra walked into the drawing room and plopped herself down on the one remaining, slightly fragile chair. ‘Oh no! The king was quite adamant about that. Banished for life.’

‘Then surely it is dangerous for you to be here.’

Queen Alexandra shot Griselda a withering look. ‘How perceptive of you.’

‘Then why did you come?’

Queen Alexandra stood up and poured herself a brandy from the decanter. ‘Being in exile was driving me mad. Just imagine an entire year spent with my relatives! They used to talk about me in hushed whispers. ‘Yes, that’s the one. Always was too big for her boots if you ask me.’ Well I’ll show them!’

Griselda was still bemused. ‘I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but I don’t quite understand.’

‘My banishment was for life, by proclamation of the king. Well life cuts both ways—either my life, or his. Once my son is on the throne, I shall return in triumph. Then people can laugh at me if they dare.’

Griselda felt as though she could do with a brandy herself, but decided to keep a clear head. ‘But I don’t quite see what you mean. The king is in excellent health.’

Queen Alexandra sat back down on the chair and took a long slow sip.

‘Well we may have to do something about that.’

Griselda was genuinely shocked. ‘Your Majesty, that would be treason!’

Queen Alexandra snorted. ‘I’ve done worse in my time. A little poison here, a little dagger there. It all helps the ship of state to glide more smoothly through a sea of troubles.’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘But Your Majesty, to kill your own husband would be horrible.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense!’

‘And you would never get near him without being arrested.’ Griselda had a horrible idea that she could see where this was going.

Queen Alexandra suddenly sparkled. ‘That is where you come in.’

‘Me, Your Majesty? What have I got to do with it?’

The queen stood up and towered over the now trembling woman. ‘You are going to poison my husband for me.’

‘Why should I? I have no grievance against the king.’

Queen Alexandra took on a more conversational tone. ‘Well, for one thing, he gave half of the kingdom to that spoiled brat of a sister of yours.’

‘Hardly a reason for murder, surely.’

‘Also, it would make me very happy. And if I’m happy, my son might be very grateful.’

Griselda stopped objecting and started listening. ‘Go on.’

Queen Alexandra changed her voice, to that of a trustworthy friend. ‘I promise that if you help me to kill the king, my son will marry you as a reward. Hail Queen Griselda. How does that sound?’

Griselda had stopped trembling now. ‘What makes you think he would marry me?’

The ferocious queen chuckled with reassurance. ‘He is my son after all. He knows better than to cross me.’

Griselda sat herself down on the chair. It had a new creak that hadn’t been there before. ‘This is a lot to think about.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Queen Alexandra dug a hand into the pocket of her cloak. ‘You must decide now. Here is the poison. Slipped into red wine it is quite undetectable. There is no danger to you, and my son and I will be in your debt.’

Griselda added as an after thought, ‘What about Cinderella?’

‘Poison her too? No, I’ve thought about that. She and that damned Buttons are too popular. A nasty revelation followed by a public trial should do the trick. She isn’t Princess Anne-Marie. Any fool can see that. The senile ravings of a demented king shortly before his death. Once she has been exposed as a fraud, we can have a nice little execution. Decapitation is my preference, but I leave the final choice up to you.’

‘You’ve thought of everything.’

Queen Alexandra stood with her left arm outstretched showing Griselda the deadly fluid. ‘So will you do it?’

Griselda took the flask and looked away. ‘I don’t see how I could refuse. Your Majesty’s displeasure so often proves fatal.’

‘Excellent, we understand each other. Now I must go before I am discovered.’

After the queen had left, Griselda sat biting her lip, staring at the vial of poison, asking herself over and over again, ‘What am I going to do?’

The next morning at the palace, Cinderella and Buttons were sitting having breakfast. They usually did this in one of the state rooms, but as it was a year since their wedding day they had decided to move breakfast to the conservatory, where Buttons, or was it Cinderella, had proposed marriage.

It was supposed to be a special occasion, but Cinderella was annoyed. ‘I don’t see why you have to go to work today. It *is* our anniversary.’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘I know darling, but it’s also harvest time. You know what scoundrels the prince appointed to collect the taxes. If I don’t go now, you’ll be cheated out of half your income.’

‘I don’t care. I’m rich enough already. I just want to spend time with you.’ Cinderella reached out and held Buttons by the wrist just as he was half way to reaching for a particularly delicious piece of egg.

‘But we need the money to make the roads we promised. Splitting the kingdom in two again will be very expensive.’

Cinderella was unconvinced. ‘But what about me? I only ever see you when you’re worn out. What happened to the stories you used to tell me?’

Buttons was still looking at the egg with a wistful longing. ‘I still do, sometimes.’

Cinderella released his arm. ‘All right then, what was the last one about?’

‘It was err...’ Buttons swallowed a hasty mouthful. ‘I know. It was the one about the giant who choked to death on a dwarf.’

‘That was months ago,’ complained Cinderella.

‘Yes, you’re right. But what about last week, I told you about the miner who put a boy at the bottom of a well to pull on a plumb line. He made the people think he’d dug a deeper well than he really had. The miner overcharged the villagers two gold pieces.’

Cinderella raised both hands in a gesture of vindication. ‘Don’t you see? The old Buttons would have thought it the most boring story he’d ever heard. No romance. No intrigue. All this talk of money, it’s so dull.’

Buttons looked up with a fire of enthusiasm in his eyes. ‘But it *is* exciting. For the first time I feel that I can actually help people rather than just making fun of their misfortune.’

‘Well, I do good things too.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Buttons nodded in recognition. ‘Of course you do.’

‘And my reward is a palace full of people I don’t trust, and a husband who is never home.’

Buttons came round the table and knelt down next to his wife. ‘I will be home, I promise. Now I must rush. The farmers have been up for hours already.’

Buttons pecked Cinderella on the cheek and rushed out of the room. Cinderella sighed. Breakfast had gone just as she had feared it would. Thinking that maybe she had been too hard on her husband, she dug down into her bag and took out the copy of *The Witty Prince* that she had discovered so long ago. She flipped through the pages until she found the chapter that she was looking for: *How to Start a War When You Really Want One*. She was just settling down to a good read, when Prince Rudolf walked in, dressed well, but in a more subdued manner than before his punishment. He looked very formal, and asked in a polite tone, ‘I do hope that I’m not disturbing you.’

Cinderella looked up in surprise. ‘Oh, it’s you. What are you doing in the palace? Shouldn’t you be...?’

Prince Rudolf finished her sentence for her. ‘In the stable? Well, yes and no. It’s a year since my disgrace, so my father has now relented. I am once again a prince.’

‘So why aren’t you out on the town celebrating with your friends?’

‘They didn’t prove to be such good friends when I was in trouble.’

Cinderella relaxed. ‘Maybe you have learned something after all.’

Prince Rudolf replied, ‘I hope so. I did have a lot of time to think. Sitting for nights on end with nothing to do made me realise what a fool I’ve been. I had happiness in the palm of my hand and then I threw it all away.’

‘Well you’re a prince again now, so you can make the most of it.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Prince Rudolf looked a little hurt by the frostiness of the reply. ‘That isn’t what I mean. True happiness is only found in the arms of someone who loves you.’

Cinderella wasn’t going to give in so easily. ‘Well judging from your reputation, you should be the happiest man in the world.’

Prince Rudolf sat down in the chair previously occupied by Buttons.

‘Cinderella, this year seems to have hardened you.’

‘Perhaps.’

Prince Rudolf picked up a piece of toast and asked casually, ‘What is it like being married?’

‘Why do you ask?’

Munching it down with some jam he added, ‘Oh, I was just wondering—just in case I ever tie the knot one day.’

Cinderella rearranged herself in her chair. ‘Marriage is very nice. Buttons, I mean Prince Albert, is a wonderful person. He cares about the poor and the farmers. He tries to help the old people and the sick. In fact he loves everybody.’

Prince Rudolf picked out one of the best strawberries and started to de-stalk it. ‘Which doesn’t leave much time for you, then.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. It’s just that that first magic can’t last forever.’

Prince Rudolf suddenly went down on one knee, almost knocking over a coffee pot.

‘I thought about you every day.’

‘What?’

‘Every night, before I went to sleep, I would dream about the times we spent together—exquisite times, erotic times.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Cinderella blushed to her shoes, and hoped dearly that no one else was listening.

‘Please, I am a married woman!’

‘Don’t you think I know that? When you loved me, I was a fool. I had the confidence of an idiot. Why wouldn’t everyone love me? I was a prince. But now I know that you were the only one who really cared. Anyone else would have married me straight away, but you only wanted my title if you could also have my heart.’

Cinderella wondered at how she had changed in just a year. She could still remember feeling that way about this man who had now become a stranger to her. ‘I’ve grown up a lot since then.’

Prince Rudolf could see that he was having an effect on her. ‘But don’t you still feel some of those same feelings? A fire like that can never completely die.’

Cinderella squirmed in her seat, wishing that she could get up and just walk away, but something held her there. ‘It was a long time ago.’

‘But tell me you still feel something. Say my year of suffering wasn’t completely wasted.’

Cinderella stuttered. ‘Something, yes of course. But it is too late Rudolf. I married Buttons and he loves me ... and I love him.’

Rudolf went down on the other knee. ‘One kiss is all I ask.’

‘No!’

Prince Rudolf wobbled a little closer. ‘One kiss—not as a lover, but as an admirer. You see I still love you, even after you’ve forgotten me.’

Cinderella sat back in her chair. ‘I had no idea.’

Rudolf looked down as if in penitence. ‘So you forgive me then?’

‘For what?’

Cinderella and Buttons

The prince looked up with puppy eyes and said ‘For this.’

Before she knew what was happening, Prince Rudolf, Cinderella’s old love, had enveloped her in a lingering kiss. She meant to pull herself away, but she was still angry with Buttons for leaving on their anniversary, and a little voice inside her head said, ‘You should really stop this, soon, quite soon now...’

Unfortunately, it was just at this moment that Buttons returned to the conservatory. He was holding a toy frog and a bunch of wild flowers that he had picked from the fields near the palace. Buttons could see Cinderella’s dress round the side of the fig tree, and he started to apologise as he arrived.

‘You were right darling. We should spend the day together. Oh...’

Rudolf and Cinderella looked up at Buttons. One was delighted, and the other realised that she had just been lured into making an enormous mistake.

Buttons turned ashen white, and seemed to lose all emotion. He dropped the flowers to the floor and said, ‘I hope you’ll be very happy together,’ and marched out of the room.

Cinderella turned to the grinning prince, who was still kneeling at her feet, and slapped him.

‘What have you done?’ she asked.

Despite the stinging of his cheek, Prince Rudolf gloated in his victory.

‘I just wanted to see if the old charm still works. You always were a soft touch, Cinderella.’

Cinderella spoke as much to herself as to him. ‘How could I have just sat there and let you kiss me?’

Prince Rudolf started raiding the breakfast table again. ‘I’d run after him if I were you. These ex-footmen can be quite old-fashioned about adultery.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Cinderella picked up her dress and started to run to the garden. ‘I’ll get you for this later!’

Prince Rudolf plunged a silver spoon into one of the untouched grapefruit halves. ‘Not if my mother has anything to do with it. Now let me see. Seems like time for another limerick.’ He started to write on the tablecloth with a piece of charcoal.

Once I’m the king of the castle,
All the girls’ dresses will rustle.
The maids won’t refuse me.
Their beaux will excuse me...

The prince paused. ‘And then something ending in tussle... or muscle. I don’t know. I’ll have to work on this one.’

Unnoticed by the prince, Queen Alexandra had crept up behind him as he worked. ‘You’ll do no such thing!’

‘Mother! I trust I find you in good health.’

‘Excellent, thank you. Your father, on the other hand, has been taken ill. Griselda invited him to dinner last night, and he seems to have eaten something that disagreed with him.’

‘Nothing temporary I hope,’ beamed the prince.

‘The royal physician assures me that he will not outlast the day.’

Prince Rudolf felt suddenly anxious. ‘Is he sure?’

‘He has always proved most reliable in the past. This physician is a man who takes great pains never to be wrong in a diagnosis, especially a pessimistic one of such national importance. His zeal is most commendable.’

‘And his fee, now doubt, will cost me half the kingdom.’

‘Stop whining Rudolf. It’s time you were a man and took what belongs to you with both hands.’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Right!’

‘Well get on with it then.’

Prince Rudolf looked up at the goading matriarch. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Arrest Cinderella of course.’

‘Don’t you think we should take our time? She is queen of half the kingdom.’

Queen Alexandra smiled proudly. ‘By an amazing coincidence, our half of the kingdom has all the weapons. I’d like to see them try something. Then the blood would flow! Just announce that new evidence has come to light that Cinderella is an impostor. Two years ago she murdered Princess Anne-Marie and took her place.’

Prince Rudolf looked genuinely surprised. ‘I didn’t know that.’

‘I have an idiot for a son!’

‘Sorry, mother. I wasn’t thinking.’

The Queen took a deep breath. ‘Anything else?’

‘Well there was one thing. I know you promised Griselda that I would marry her if she was, err, helpful. But she is awfully dull, so do I have to? Can’t we just pay her off or something?’

Queen Alexandra looked sympathetically at her son. ‘Of course not. After the trial we must kill both her and Cinderella.’

All smiles the prince replied, ‘You really are the best mother a prince ever had.’

‘I don’t know why I bother. One careless night with the footman and I have a lifetime of mopping up after you.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Prince Rudolf only half caught what she was saying. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Never mind! Now get on with carving out your destiny.’

After the initial shock was over, Cinderella reflected that the arrest had happened very quickly. One minute Cinderella was running through the palace to tell Buttons that she was sorry, the next she was being carried bodily down a flight of stairs to the dingy dungeon in which she now found herself. The one consolation was that the guard did seem respectful but he was under very strict instructions not to release her. Cinderella tried one last time. ‘I want to speak to the king.’

‘I’m sorry Miss. I have orders not to let you see anyone.’

‘But I am queen of half the kingdom. Who has the authority to arrest me?’

‘Well Miss, I mean Your Majesty, seeing as it’s you, I can let you in on a few little secrets. But don’t tell anyone or I’m done for.’

‘That’s very kind. Thank you.’

The guard sat down on a stone shelf, to take the weight off his feet. ‘Well, the way I see it is this. King Henry is on his deathbed, and Prince Rudolf and his mum are all for taking over straight away—before the body’s cold as it were. Now it seems as though you’ve been telling fibs about being Princess Anne-Marie. It’s a shame, ’cause we all liked you. But royalty is royalty, and it’s not to be messed with. Once the queen proves her case against you, there’ll be an execution and that’s that.’

Cinderella had a terrible thought. ‘What about Buttons?’

The guard did not look optimistic. ‘Prince Albert you mean. Yeah, a bit of a shame about him. Conspiracy or something, they said. I didn’t quite understand all that legal stuff, but he’s for the chop too, sure as falling off a log.’

Cinderella slumped down next to the guard on the bench. ‘When was he captured?’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Well that’s the rum thing. He stormed off this morning, said he was going to drown a frog. No one knew what he was talking about. Hasn’t been seen since.’

‘Poor Buttons. I hope he did run away. He’ll be better off without me.’

The guard tried to be encouraging. ‘Chin up Miss. My wife thinks you’re great. Not stuck up like the other royals. And you told that Prince Rudolf where to go when he wanted to marry you.’

Cinderella perked up. ‘Did I ever meet her? Your wife I mean.’

‘Not really miss. She only does the washing. Big woman she is.’

Cinderella did vaguely remember someone. ‘Freckles and red hair?’

‘That’s right. Carrot-top Mary they call her.’

Cinderella realised that she had spent her time as a princess getting to know the wrong people.

‘She always seemed so cheerful. I wish we had been friends.’

‘Bit late now I’m afraid, Miss.’

Cinderella bit her lip in thought. ‘How many days will it be before I’m put on trial?’

‘One or two I should think. They’ll probably wait for the king to snuff it first.’

Cinderella sat up with a start. ‘Death seems so ordinary when you talk about it like that.’

The guard realised he had been a bit tactless. ‘Don’t mind me miss. I was in the civil war you see. Too much killing hardens a man. I can’t say that I like what’s going on in the palace, but it isn’t worth fighting another war over.’

‘So I have to die?’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Afraid so, Miss.’

‘Let’s change the subject. How did you meet your wife?’

‘You don’t want to hear about that.’

‘No, I do really.’

The guard warmed to the task and started on his favourite story. ‘Well Miss, I was coming back from the war. My leg was all bandaged up and I needed some baggy trousers to go over the...’

Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door, and the guard stood up and peered through the peephole. ‘Who’s there?’

A gruff voice answered along with a hand holding an official letter carrying the king’s seal.

‘I’m here to give the prisoner her execution rehearsal.’

Cinderella objected. ‘But I haven’t even had a trial yet.’

The door was opened by the guard, and in walked a man in a dark hood carrying a large wooden axe. He walked over to Cinderella.

‘Don’t worry about a little thing like that Miss. Concentrate on the main event. That’s what I say. There’s a lot for you to think about. What to wear. How to stick out your neck. All very complicated you see, and it’s not as if we can mess it up and then ask to have another go, now can we?’

Turning to the guard the executioner added, ‘So if you wouldn’t mind leaving, we can get on with it.’

The guard was not about to leave his post. ‘This isn’t regulations. What makes you think you can come in here and throw your weight around?’

The executioner turned suddenly towards the guard. ‘My orders are straight from the queen. ‘Talk to the little witch,’ she tells me. ‘Explain that death can be quick or lingering. Show her how, if she makes a fuss at the trial, things can get really nasty.’ Can’t say I like that bit. A

Cinderella and Buttons

professional axeman such as myself takes great pride in his work. Been in my family for generations. ‘We cuts it, and we cuts it clean.’ That’s our motto.’

The guard was not impressed. ‘I don’t care who you are. I’m not going to let you hurt the prisoner.’ And he gave Cinderella a reassuring look.

The executioner was undeterred. ‘Any objections can be taken straight to the queen.’

The guard decided to call his bluff. ‘I think I’ll do that right now!’

‘Buzz off then.’

The guard walked over to Cinderella and whispered, in a way that he was sure could be overheard ‘Excuse me Miss. If he does anything to you, I’ll get ’im for it, ’onest I will.’

Cinderella seemed resigned to her fate and was strangely calm. ‘Don’t worry. They wouldn’t cheat themselves out of the satisfaction of killing me in public.’

‘If you’re sure Miss. I’ll leave, but under protest.’ As he departed, he locked them both in the cell.

The executioner clapped his hands together. ‘Good riddance. Now, to get all the formalities out of the way, what should I call you?’

Cinderella stood up slowly. ‘Your Majesty should suffice.’

‘Well, *Your Majesty*, there’s a lot to an execution.’

‘We’ve been through all that. Just tell me what I have to do.’

Softening his tone the executioner enquired, ‘What are you going to wear?’

Cinderella hadn’t really thought about it. ‘I don’t know. This I suppose.’

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Oh, dearie me, no. Neckline’s much too high. You want something low at the back and low at the front. Otherwise it gets really messy.’

Cinderella unbuttoned her collar. ‘This bit does come off.’

‘So it does. Most ingenious. These tailors think of everything.’
Cinderella was a little shocked. ‘Not executions, surely?’

The executioner continued with his patter regardless. ‘Now what about your hair?’

‘Up in a bun. Like this I think,’ suggested Cinderella, as she tied her hair into a bun behind her head.

The executioner rubbed his chin in a way that Cinderella thought she recognised.

‘That’s the spirit. Hmm, a slender neck, but sinewy. Could cause a bit of a problem.’

‘Well, if it’s going to be too much trouble, let’s cancel the whole thing.’

The executioner shook his head. ‘Sorry. The queen was most particular. Now, an important part of any severance, as we like to call it, is the angle of the neck to the block. So, if you wouldn’t mind just kneeling down.’
Cinderella looked at the rough wooden stump reluctantly. ‘Do I have to?’

‘It will make our jobs just that little bit easier.’

Falling slowly to her knees she bent languidly over the block. ‘Like this?’

‘That’s right. Now arch the neck just a little bit higher. Perfect! Then you give the signal, the axe blade comes down and it’s all over in a jiffy.’

Cinderella shuddered. ‘Does it have to be an axe? They’re so heavy and blunt.’

The executioner puffed up his chest. ‘I’ll have you know that my axe is ’oned to perfection. But it’s true. They can be a bit unwieldy. It’s

Cinderella and Buttons

traditional that's all. The French prefer to use a sword. It takes more skill, but gives a cleaner cut. In the court of the Sultan of Tangiers, the executioner applies a sucking action to the nape of the neck. It causes a slight tingling sensation but otherwise it's quite painless. I'm not very good at it myself, but this should give you the idea.'

The executioner bent down over Cinderella and started to kiss her neck.

Cinderella squirmed violently, partly in response to the tickling. 'Let me go! I'm a married woman.'

The executioner held her tight. 'I heard your husband left you. Found you in bed with the man you love.'

Cinderella struggled harder to escape and landed a successful blow on the executioner's nose.

'We weren't in bed—and I don't love him. Now let me go! If Buttons was here he'd kill you.'

The executioner dismissed her threats in a contemptuous voice. 'Come off it. If he loved you that much, he wouldn't have run away.' He started to kiss her neck again.

Cinderella squirmed, but more playfully, this time. 'Stop it. It tickles. Go on stop it, Buttons. I'm getting dizzy.'

Buttons stood up and took off his executioner's mask. 'Damn. How long have you known it was me?'

Cinderella sat up and started to fluff out her hair. 'Well you do talk a lot for an executioner. Usually they just grunt a bit and then chop people's heads off. Anyway there isn't a Sultan of Tangiers, and even if there was, he wouldn't kiss people to death.'

Buttons took out a shirt from his bag on the floor and started to put it on. 'Stopped you being bored though.'

Cinderella ran over and kissed him. 'It is good to see you, but we should hurry. The guard will be back any minute.'

Cinderella and Buttons

‘I shouldn’t worry about that.’

‘Why not? They *are* trying to kill me.’

Buttons drew closer to his wife and whispered, ‘Trust me,’ and they kissed again.

No sooner had they done so than there was the unmistakable jangle of the guard’s keys being pushed into the lock. Then, like a galley ship ramming through a barricade, Queen Alexandra burst open the door and thrust herself into the room.

Walking up to Buttons she declared ‘Ah ha. Just as I thought. The fool couldn’t keep away. Guard, seize him!’

As he was pulled away from her, Buttons mouthed to Cinderella ‘I’m sorry. You were right.’

His hands were then tied behind his back.

Queen Alexandra sat down grinning from ear to ear. ‘Now that I have you both, no one will dare to rebel.’

Cinderella stood in front of Buttons, pushing the guard away. ‘What will you do to him?’

Prince Rudolf entered the room convinced now that it was safe. ‘Something slow and horrible, if I have anything to do with it.’

Buttons popped his head over his wife’s shoulder. ‘And what about Cinderella?’

Queen Alexandra smoothed the folds of her dress as she recovered from her recent exertions.

‘Well, given that a rebellion is out of the question, a trial seems hardly necessary; Guard, run her through with your sword!’

The guard stood to attention. ‘I’m afraid I can’t do that, Your Majesty. No executions without a trial. That’s the law.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Prince Rudolf yelled at the guard. 'I am the law now!'

'With respect, Your Highness, the king is still breathing. He is the law, and he says no death without a trial.'

Queen Alexandra walked over to the guard and took his sword out of its scabbard. 'I trust you have no objections if my son does it.'

'It's murder if he does, and it's treason if I try to stop him.'

Prince Rudolf took the sword from his mother. 'I told you we shouldn't educate these people mother. Teach them to read and they stop doing what you tell them.'

Queen Alexandra looked at her pocket watch. 'Just hurry up. I haven't got all day.'

The prince, however, was inclined to relish the moment. Looking at the edge of the blade he inquired of Cinderella, 'Do you have any last requests?'

Looking at the prince with tender eyes, she whispered, 'Since my life is nearly at an end, I would like to kiss the only man I ever really loved.'

Prince Rudolf was impressed with her magnanimity, but was hardly surprised that she meant himself. 'Good of you to be so sporting about it.'

'Come here Rudolf.' He moved closer to her inviting lips. 'Oh Rudolf...'

As the prince puckered up his mouth for a farewell kiss, his face was suddenly contorted with pain as Cinderella struck a firm blow to his manhood with her knee.

'Now I can die a happy woman!'

Queen Alexandra was furious. 'Guard! Arrest her!'

'On what charge?'

Cinderella and Buttons

‘Assaulting a royal personage.’

‘In my opinion, Your Majesty, he was rather asking for it.’

Prince Rudolf, emboldened by the sword, was outraged at his defiance. ‘I’ll have you flogged for this, you insolent rogue.’ Prince Rudolf was just approaching the door to call for another guard when in walked King Henry with Griselda not far behind. The king’s eyes blazed with anger.

‘What is going on here?’

‘Father, you’re alive! I thought...’

‘You thought your mother’s poison would finish me off. In fact, I did have a little indigestion from Griselda’s cooking, but nothing fatal I assure you. Guard, arrest Prince Rudolf and Queen Alexandra on a charge of high treason!’

The guard snatched back his sword from the startled prince. ‘A pleasure Your Majesty.’

Queen Alexandra was not going to concede defeat quite so easily. ‘On what evidence?’

Griselda stepped forward and held up the vial of poison. ‘On my evidence. You gave me this potion to put in the king’s wine. You promised me that I could marry the prince if I went along with it.’

Cinderella looked at Griselda in surprise. ‘So why didn’t you?’

‘I may be a bad sister, Cinderella, but I’m a loyal and I might even say devoted subject. Also, a woman who would poison her husband is somewhat apt to forget her promises.’

Prince Rudolf still didn’t understand how all his mother’s plans had been unravelled. ‘But what about the doctor?’

Queen Alexandra hissed at him savagely. ‘Shut up you fool!’

Cinderella and Buttons

King Henry cleared his throat and then spoke again. ‘Ah yes. When I explained to our good physician that my death would be immediately followed by his own, he suddenly became much more optimistic about my condition.’

Cinderella was still a little puzzled. ‘So, why did you leave it this long before coming in?’

King Henry explained. ‘It’s not often that a king gets a chance to see how his son will behave after his death.’

Prince Rudolf walked over to stand in front of the king and opened his arms to him. ‘So what did you think, papa?’

The king turned purple with rage. ‘You are the most spoilt child I have ever known. You are lazy, arrogant and heartless, and you spend money as if there’s no tomorrow. You have precious little regard for the law, and you seem to have an insatiable appetite for cruelty and revenge!’

Prince Rudolf looked a little hurt. ‘It’s only my first day.’

‘Enough! When you were born, I did your mother the kindness of overlooking the fact that I was away at the war when you were conceived.’

‘I don’t understand,’ declared the prince, but then stared in alarm at Queen Alexandra.

‘Cedric was his name I think. Very handsome I understand, but he found cleaning out the stables a bit too much of an intellectual challenge.’

Prince Rudolf’s mouth gaped open in horror. ‘You don’t mean... Mother how could you? With a stable boy!’

The once buxom queen raised herself up like a wave about to break. ‘I hardly think that *you* should lecture *me* about sleeping with the servants!’

King Henry renewed his tirade at the prince. ‘I tried to be a good father to you. I thought that the right education might make any man fit to be a king. Your conduct today has finally shown me the error of my ways. I now disown you as my successor and I appoint Prince Albert Buttons Trevelyan as legal heir to both halves of the kingdom. At least he will take the job seriously.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Queen Alexandra was sanguine in defeat, having fought a fearless game but lost. ‘And what fate do you have in store for me?’

King Henry looked at his wife of thirty years. ‘You will stand trial for attempted murder and for defying an order of banishment. If you are found guilty, I will let Cinderella decide whether to commute your sentence to life imprisonment. As for our marriage, as Head of the Church, I now declare it null and void. Consider it a divorce. Guard, take them away!’

The guard prodded Prince Rudolf with his sword. ‘Come on you!’

The prince looked at the dethroned queen. ‘Mother, tell him not to talk to me like that. It isn’t right.’

Queen Alexandra slapped her son on the side of the head. ‘Stop whimpering!’ and they were both led away.

Cinderella turned to Buttons ‘Did you know this was going on?’

‘I did have some idea.’

‘So why didn’t you tell me?’

Buttons shrugged. ‘There wasn’t time. Anyway, don’t you have a few apologies to make?’

Cinderella nodded. To King Henry she said, ‘Your Majesty, I am sorry that I lied to you about being Princess Anne-Marie. I was angry with Rudolf at the time, but it wasn’t right of me to take it out on you.’

Turning to her stepsister she added, ‘And I’m sorry that I misjudged you, Griselda. I know that you could never harm anyone, especially a member of the royal family.’

Griselda was all nudges and reconciliation. ‘Oh, that’s all right. The king and I seem to be getting along frightfully well at the moment. There may even be wedding bells in the air.’

King Henry started to leave. ‘Come along Griselda!’

Cinderella and Buttons

Griselda looked delighted. ‘Such a commanding voice! Anyway, I must dash.’ And she rushed out after the king.

Buttons was left alone in the dungeon cell with Cinderella. A lot had happened in the last ten minutes, but not everything was quite as it should be. ‘It’s great being heir to the throne and everything, but I wish someone would untie me.’

Cinderella walked slowly around her husband, looking at him carefully. ‘I rather like you the way you are.’

‘Come on Cinders, don’t be a tyrant.’

Cinderella was not about to give up her advantage so easily. ‘I think a little practice execution is in order.’

‘No, anything but that.’

Cinderella went through the executioner’s bag and found her husband’s favourite pen. ‘I hear that in the court of the Emperor of China, they use a poisoned feather dragged slowly across the skin. Apparently, the victim can last for days.’

Buttons played at trying to escape. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘Why not?’

He had to think quickly. ‘Because then I couldn’t tell you the story about the mermaid who fell in love with a dragon.’

‘Hmm, well in that case, I postpone the execution.’ She untied his hands and gave Buttons a big kiss. ‘You are free to go. But the story had better be good.’

‘Oh it is. Once upon a time, there was a bright purple dragon who lived in a cave by the ocean...’

Cinderella shook her head. ‘No, not here.’

Cinderella and Buttons

Taking Buttons by the hand she led him up a winding stairway of damp stone towards the sound of distant music as it trumpeted the king's recovery. Stopping at an open doorway, Cinderella looked out and saw the executioner's block in the middle of the courtyard. Thinking of how badly it all might have ended, Cinderella turned and put her arms round her husband's neck. Brushing her hair against his cheek, she paused for a moment and then whispered softly in his ear, 'You can tell it to me in bed.'



Gregorin
and the
Green
Knight

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘Go on, jump!’ said Gregorin to his reluctant, ashen-coloured son.

Theodore looked over the edge of the platform which was set high up in his father’s tower.

‘But Daddy,’ he said, as he rubbed his head against Gregorin’s side, ‘it’s a very, very long way down. Why can’t I just ride on your back like I usually do?’

‘A young dragon must learn to fly sometime, Theodore. It’s no use having a terrifying creature, such as yourself, growling and belching smoke one minute, and then having to admit the next that while most dragons can fly, you never got round to learning because you were too frightened of heights.’

‘But why can’t I just walk everywhere instead? I’m really very good at that. I can run and crawl and swim. I can even get along with just two legs and a tail...’

‘That’s all very well, but how are you going to wander down a cliff-face or meander across a ravine?’

‘I’ll go round the other way.’

‘But what if there isn’t another way?’

‘Then I’ll just make up my mind that I want to go somewhere else instead.’

Gregorin started to frown.

‘Look, this is getting silly. If dragons were not meant to fly, why have they got wings?’

‘Decoration, Daddy, that’s obvious.’

Gregorin and the Green Knight

Gregorin's frown deepened. 'I don't want to hear any more about decoration! Either you jump off this tower like any self-respecting animal or you get pushed. Understood?'

'What about a compromise?'

'Compromise! You either spread your wings and fly, or you don't spread your wings and you drop like a stone.'

'I know, Daddy, but if you took off with me on your back, then I could try opening my wings. If I fly, I fly, and if I don't then there's no harm done.'

'Very well, let's give it a try.'

Gregorin knew to his cost how difficult it was to change Theodore's mind once it was set. Despite his tender years, his son's skill with subtle arguments almost matched those of his father. Indeed, Gregorin was worried that he had indulged his young offspring too much in his verbal education and had neglected his physical training in consequence. But Theodore was always so interested in everything his father did that it seemed only natural to explain things to him. He accompanied Gregorin to the mine and helped him to dig and rummage for the finest ores. He helped to stoke the furnaces when his father was busy, and he even spoke to the men, sometimes, when they came to trade with the dragons. Sadly, though, this had happened all too rarely of late.

In the many years following Gregorin's act of heroism at the battle of the Gladed Gorge, the people in the valley had gradually renewed their mistrust of the inhabitants of the tower. If a harvest failed or someone went missing in the forest, then it was always the dragons who fell under suspicion. Children were told to keep away from the dark tower lest some terrible harm befall them. Indeed parents made up wicked and terrifying tales to frighten their children.

'If you misbehave once more, then the dragons will eat you up,' they would say. 'If you are naughty, Gregorin will take you in his claws and carry you high up in the tower to feed you to his ravenous monster of a son.'

Gregorin and the Green Knight

The threats and stories started in fun, but through constant repetition, even the adults came to believe in them. A mood of gloom and unease settled over the valley and for the first time there were petitions made against letting the dragons live so close to the village. Matters might have been put to rights with a few understanding words had not some travellers arrived from over the mountains, lured on by the promise of dragon gold. They called themselves ‘knights’ and spent much of their time declaring the importance of honour and chivalry.

This usually meant that two or more of them fought each other in order to win the hearts of the pretty girls in the village. The older people observed that it would be a sorry state of affairs if only the roughest and most ferocious men were to marry—and the maidens said that the knights were so busy bashing each other with swords that they hardly noticed who they were fighting over.

Despite all this, many of the young men of the village did join up with the two bands of warriors. Those captained by the Red Knight would stage battles with those led by the Black Knight. Usually, after much drinking at the tavern, one knight would say to another that he could split the bench they sat on with a single blow of his axe. The second fellow would counter that he could not only split the bench with his sword but that he could destroy the table as well. The first would then demonstrate that tables were nothing compared to oak beams, and so the contest would escalate until the building itself was in danger of collapsing.

The Red Knight and the Black Knight stayed above all this, however. They would often be seen together in a quiet corner of the tavern forming some cunning and secret plan. One day they announced that, after consultation with a profoundly wise wizard, it had been decided that all the evil in the entire valley sprang from the infernal monsters in the tower on the hill. It was the duty of any knight worthy of the name to drive off those wicked creatures or to demand financial compensation for past wrongs. The knights, of course, would have a proportion of the treasure for ensuring justice, perhaps just over half, but the villagers would at least have peace of mind, and money in pocket.

Now the innkeeper, who was a very wise man, noted that the most damage he had seen done to the village had resulted from the behaviour of the knights, and not from the dragons at all. Also, he said, an angry

Gregorin and the Green Knight

dragon was likely to do much more harm than a contented one. Unfortunately, his views were swept aside by the villagers who, driven on by superstition and avarice, sought the end which they were told was best for them.

There was one young man who, while attracted to the ideas of honour and chivalry, stood apart from all the brawling and brutishness of his contemporaries. Indeed, so pure of heart was he, that neither the Red Knight nor the Black Knight would have him in their bands of men. The Green Knight was only accepted at all because he was, without doubt, the finest swordsman in the region. When a proper tournament was held, and this was all too rarely, he would win each contest with astounding ease. On one occasion, he entered the competition with one hand tied behind his back, and on another memorable day he had gone without his sword, to much popular derision. The crowd jeered and booed until, with a flick of his foot, the Green Knight disarmed his opponent and sent him toppling to the ground.

But it was the Green Knight's natural calm and even-handedness that most upset the other men. He would always be able to understand both sides of an argument, which was deplorable in a man of honour, and he would often suggest some middle way which removed the need for a fight altogether.

One day, the mayor of the village, who was very old, died in his sleep. Such was the influence of the knights that rather than choosing a new mayor by asking the people whom they preferred, a contest was announced to decide the successor. The Red Knight and the Black Knight both agreed that the only true measure of a man's merit was to be found in doing some difficult task, such as demanding gold of ferocious, man-eating dragons. And so it was that one afternoon two men, in gleaming, clanking armour walked out to the tower on the hill and banged noisily on their shields with their swords. 'Come out and pay us homage, dragon!' they cried.

On hearing this, Gregorin opened two drowsy eyes and decided that the men must be drunk or on a dare, so he closed his eyes again and tried to continue with his afternoon sleep. But as the din became more insistent, Cassandra reluctantly suggested that perhaps they should both go and take a look.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘We demand, in the name of justice, that you pay us due compensation for the damage done to the forest by you and your family. After careful consideration, we have decided that the sum of five thousand gold pieces will be sufficient to begin with.’

Gregorin thought deeply before answering.

‘I see. This is some sort of anniversary celebration of the time I paid back all my treasure. But I don’t quite understand the point of it if there is no one here to watch.’

The men, members of the Red Knight’s band, were not noted for their sense of humour or their intelligence.

‘If you do not obey our instructions, then we shall be forced to take punitive measures against you.’

Gregorin breathed a huge blast of flame into the air, and then asked, in a leisurely manner, ‘Like what?’

‘We shall be forced to dismantle your tower, and evict you from this land.’

Gregorin laughed.

‘And just how do you propose to do that?’ asked Cassandra.

The knights took two explosive bolts and fired them at the tower. One missed completely, but the other crashed into a gargoyle, smashing it into a thousand pieces.

‘I don’t think that was very friendly,’ remarked Gregorin in a controlled tone. ‘You are also trampling all over the garden, so I think you had better leave. NOW!’

The knights prepared to fire off again, but before they could reload, they were swept up in two powerful claws. Gregorin held them gently but firmly as he flew swiftly through the air and, a few minutes later, he dumped them unceremoniously into a duck pond on the outskirts of the village.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

The Red Knight and the Black Knight declared that this was a flagrant act of war on the part of the dragons and that vengeance should be immediate and total. The Green Knight was unconvinced by their arguments and so he refused to join the expedition that was soon mounted. The two bands of men set out for the tower of the dragons. Some carried crossbows with explosive bolts, whilst others brandished chains and wire nets. The motley crew crept as quietly as they could up the hill and, on being given the order, they unleashed their projectiles with full force.

The tower rocked and shuddered with the impact, and Gregorin and Cassandra leapt into the air through a high opening.

‘How dare you disrupt a beautiful summer afternoon with this racket? You come and try to destroy our home, attacking us without warning...’ Cassandra was furious, and her scales bristled, ready for combat.

‘Get the green one!’ came the cry and a number of explosive bolts were loosed in her direction. Unperturbed, she deftly batted them back with her tail, and several of the knights were injured. Gregorin, meanwhile, was breathing fire onto some sticks of mysterious-looking wood. They smouldered rather than burned, and gave off an alarming, if not to say offensive smell. He threw them with an accurate claw amongst the clusters of men, and they were soon beating a hasty retreat, coughing and with tears in their eyes. After they had gone, Cassandra turned to Gregorin and sighed, ‘What are we supposed to have done?’

‘It is my fault. In my youth...’

‘Nonsense, Gregorin. You cannot spend a lifetime being blackmailed for a few thoughtless acts that you committed years ago, and for which you have already made amends.’

‘The villagers don’t see it like that.’

‘Well they should. If they don’t love you as I do, then that is their fault. I only hope that we have seen the last of them.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ he replied.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

Gregorin and Cassandra went wearily back inside their home, to have a rest and to prepare some materials for the repairs to the stonework.

Late one evening, several weeks later, Theodore crept all alone up onto the platform of the tower.

‘I know I can do it, so long as nobody is watching me. Come on Theodore, this time you are going to fly.’ He stepped back five measured paces from the edge and sprang forward.

‘No!’ he cried to himself in annoyance as he ground to a halt with only inches to spare.

As he tried to stoke up his courage, by talking to himself, his voice took on some of the deeper tones of his father. ‘I’m getting angry now, Theodore. If you don’t do it this minute, then no more charcoal snacks!’ With an iron will he braced himself for the final attempt. His back legs became steel springs catapulting him over the edge. Suddenly the tower had gone and he was falling through space.

‘I’ve done it at last,’ he thought to himself, as he plummeted headlong from the parapet. Remembering just in time, he opened his wings and the whistling in his ears softened into a gentle rushing. He tried steering, a little to the left, a little to the right and then ‘Ouch!’ He crashed straight into a pine tree and fell tumbling to the ground. He tried to sit up in his dazed state, but sank back down, bruised and exhausted. Suddenly, eight unshaven burly men leapt upon the young dragon and covered him with a suffocating steel net. Try as he might he could not break free.

‘Mummy!’ he cried, but it was no good. He was trapped. The knights took their struggling bundle between them and carried it back to the village, delighted that their hours of waiting had been rewarded.

When Gregorin and Cassandra found that Theodore was missing, they flew up and down the valley crying his name and peering into the darkest shadows and deepest ravines. They felt sure that he had walked off somewhere looking for a new stream to dam or a new creature to befriend.

‘He must be here somewhere, Gregorin. He can’t have just disappeared.’

Gregorin and the Green Knight

It never occurred to either of the dragons that any harm could have befallen their son from the people of the village. Perhaps, given recent events, they should have known better, but it came as a great surprise when, returning anxious and tired to the tower, they were confronted with the sight of the Red Knight, the Black Knight and a horde of other warriors. To their horror they saw that, some distance away, Theodore was trapped in a cage of thick iron bars, which was resting precariously on a barrel of gunpowder. He looked startled, bewildered and extremely hungry. The knights, being ignorant men, had given him sulphur to eat, which burned his throat and barely assuaged his hunger for a second.

The Black Knight was the first to speak. ‘Now dragon, either you give us your gold, or that ‘child’ of yours, whom you hold so dear, will be blown to dust.’

Gregorin and Cassandra came in to land.

‘No closer or my man here will be forced to drop a burning torch onto the fuse.’

‘What is it that you want, villain?’ shouted Gregorin.

‘Just the five thousand gold pieces as payment, in part, for damages.’

‘Damages! You speak of damages! You and your loathsome minions attack my home, try to kill my wife and me, kidnap my child and you speak of damages!’ Sparks flew in Gregorin’s breath.

‘Keep calm, darling. We mustn’t get angry.’

‘Angry, I’m furious! If you lot have touched one scale on Theodore’s body I shall tear you limb from limb. How dare you threaten to harm my son? Do you really think you can hold a dragon to ransom and live?’

Gregorin tore the ground with his claws, smashing large rocks into fragments in his agitation. Cassandra had never seen her husband like this before and she was rather proud of him. The Red Knight started to feel a little unsettled. The plan was not going as smoothly as the Black Knight had promised him that it would. True, Gregorin could not attack them for fear of harm to his son, but equally, none of the knights

Gregorin and the Green Knight

believed that they would live for more than a few moments after Theodore's destruction. Thus there was a stalemate. Neither side could back down and neither side could win. Gregorin clawed the ground noisily and the torches burned inches away from the fuse.

Luckily the Green Knight, hearing the disturbance, but unaware of what was going on, set out for the tower as fast as his legs would carry him. When he arrived, Gregorin and Cassandra had just about made up their minds to risk everything on one mad dash for the powder keg. The Green Knight could see from their coiled crouching that they were about to leap.

'Wait!' he cried, and everyone looked round.

'This is none of your business, green cloth!' hissed the Black Knight.

'If it is an affair of honour, then it is every knight's business, and if it is an affair of infamy, then it is even more so. What 'gentleman' worthy of the name would hold a child prisoner, even a dragon child, for the sake of treasure-making and personal gain?'

'It is payment for damages done by this monster against the forest and its people. We stand here in the name of justice,' declared the Red Knight, backing up his friend.

'If it is a matter of justice,' responded the Green Knight, 'then it should be settled in accordance with the age-old traditions of knights of the sword. The only proper way to resolve this disagreement is to have a fight to the death, one to one.'

'What, one of you against me?' asked Gregorin with derision in his voice.

'Yes, one knight, one dragon. That is our motto, or at least it should be.'

The Green Knight looked around at all the warriors cowering behind their weapons and sneered at their timidity. The Red Knight crossed over to the Black Knight's side. He whispered the following in his ear.

'This may solve both our problems at once. Either the dragon dies or he does.'

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘Excellent,’ announced the Black Knight. ‘To resolve this dispute honestly, there will be a battle to the death between a champion of our choosing and Gregorin the Dragon.’

‘Some sense at last,’ said the Green Knight, greatly relieved.

‘So you agree to our proposal,’ asked the Red Knight, slyly.

‘Agree to it? I suggested it. For men of honour there is no other path.’

‘Good,’ declared the Black Knight, ‘The Red Knight and I appoint you, Green Knight, to be our swordsman.’

‘But I have no quarrel with the dragon. This matter is between you two, your men and him. I have no malice against Gregorin or his family. It would be foolish to appoint me in your cause.’

‘Then you are too afraid to fight. Does the Green Knight finally show his true colours?’

‘I am no coward, villain, and anyone who says so shall die on my sword within the hour. I shall fight for you, since I have given my word, but on one condition. I will not have you and your thugs watching the death of myself or this splendid creature for the sake of your own amusement. If there is to be a fight, then it should take place tomorrow afternoon out of sight and out of earshot of the village. The victor, if he lives, will show the carcass of the other to the villagers. This way justice may be done without the bloodthirsty gawping of those vile men.’

‘So be it,’ snapped the Black Knight. Theodore was freed and the knights retreated in good order. The young dragon ran over to nestle between his parents.

‘Were you frightened, Theodore?’ asked Cassandra.

‘Only when I was falling, Mummy. Once a dragon has learned to fly he isn’t afraid of anything.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Gregorin. ‘In a few months we’ll have you doing barrel rolls and somersaults like the best of them...’ Theodore and his

Gregorin and the Green Knight

father took off and flew to one of the lower openings in the tower. Cassandra stayed behind and pondered for some time.

‘Such a pleasant young man,’ she thought. ‘It is awful that he is to die tomorrow. And after he has gone there will be others, less graceful and more poisonous than he. There always are.’ She looked up at the tower and out across the valley, and sighed.

The Green Knight spent the early hours of the morning staring up at the stars and shining moon. ‘The last time I shall see you all,’ he whispered. ‘So many of you and there’s so little time left in which to count you. I dreamt once of having a kingdom where truth, honour and chivalry would guide the citizens. Great deeds and fair dealing would have inspired the villagers to become the builders of a great city. But all that is lost now, for tomorrow I die. And afterwards there will descend an age of darkness in which the Red Knight will battle with the Black Knight, tearing the forest and its people to pieces. Eventually one knight will stand triumphant, with the other at his feet. Then no one will be safe from his bullying or his lies. I must fight tomorrow, I have given my word, but if I fight I shall die.’

The next day, the Green Knight had a light breakfast and armed himself for battle. He put on a breastplate and a sturdy helmet, and polished his shield. At his side he placed his sword, and in his right hand he held a lance. This was a new invention for the time, thought to aid a warrior in keeping out of range of a dragon’s fiery breath. The Green Knight’s strong right arm took the weight easily and he set off into the forest.

When he reached the appointed place he peered around warily, looking deep into the forest and up into the sky to spot his foe. Gregorin, however, was nowhere to be seen, so he banged on his shield and awaited developments. Now in all he had been taught, the Green Knight had learned that dragons attack from the air. Being able to fly is their main advantage, enabling them to dive upon and crush an enemy before he is aware of what is happening. Thus the Green Knight was extremely surprised when some minutes later Gregorin walked into the clearing puffing merrily away.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘I’m glad to see that you are a man of your word, Green Knight. My wife holds you in high esteem and she would have been most disappointed if you had run away.’

‘Don’t bandy words with me, dragon. This fight is not mine by choice, but it is my duty. If I must die then let it be an honourable death.’

The Green Knight leapt forward, lance and shield to the fore, and Gregorin only narrowly missed losing an eye. He could see that this was going to be difficult. They circled each other, the Green Knight with every muscle poised for action, and Gregorin, his scales raised, planning on how to disarm his opponent.

The Green Knight lunged forward with his lance, but slightly misjudged the distance. Gregorin caught the shaft in his mouth and smashed it like a desiccated twig between his teeth. The Green Knight drew his sword. The dragon, his blood up, blasted the young man’s shield with flame and he fell backwards. Gregorin leapt on top of the knight and pinned him to the ground.

‘A good effort,’ he said, ‘but you really need a bit more practice with that lance. The balance can be quite tricky and it takes years of experience before a knight is ready for serious combat.’

Whilst he was speaking, the Green Knight managed to edge his sword into a crack between two of Gregorin’s scales. The gleaming blade rested for a moment and then, with all his strength, the knight plunged it home. The dragon twitched and violently pulled away. The young man plunged again. Gregorin writhed, impaled and trapped by the unforgiving metal. The Green Knight used all his power to drive in the razor sharp blade for a third and final time. Gregorin breathed a great bellow of flame into the air.

‘Don’t, it tickles,’ he said, and with a flick of his claw, the knight’s sword and shield went clattering into the forest.

‘Now, can we talk?’ Gregorin asked. The Green Knight sank back down onto a boulder to hear his fate.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘Well, as I was saying, my wife has rather taken a fancy to you. She says that without your help yesterday, there would have been a lot of bloodshed on both sides. She feels that it is a shame that a young man such as you should die whilst those at the centre of the trouble split the spoils between them. I was a little out of sorts, at the time, as you may have noticed, and so was not very susceptible to your finer qualities. But after your magnificent first attempt at fighting a dragon today, I am inclined to agree with her.’

The Green Knight remained silent.

‘So I have an alternative to propose to you. Cassandra and I realise that our days in the valley are rapidly coming to an end. Eventually those two ruffians, or their successors, will once again try to kill us, or to harm our children. A life of constant vigilance is liveable, but not much fun, as I know only too well. Therefore I suggest that we give you a bag of dragon scales, as evidence of your victory, and you say that our bodies crumbled to ashes as our life’s fire was extinguished. Everyone will have to believe you since, by then, Cassandra, Theodore and I will be long gone. You will return to be mayor, and we will find a new home over the mountains.’

‘How did you know about the contest to be mayor?’

‘A young captive dragon still has ears, you know. Anyway, what do you say?’

The Green Knight started to pace up and down.

‘I think that your plan is completely dishonourable. How could I hold my head up in public knowing that I was living a lie.’

‘The other choice, my brave young knight, is that I blast you to ashes, the Red Knight and Black Knight rule the forest, and Cassandra and I leave anyway.’

‘But to live a lie to save my life is despicable.’

‘Then don’t lie. Return with the scales and say nothing. Silence is not a lie. The villagers will draw their own conclusions. Who knows, the

Gregorin and the Green Knight

stories they invent may make you even more famous than the truth would have done. So what do you say? Do you want silence, hope and life, or agony, tyranny and death? The choice is yours.’

Unnoticed by the young man, Cassandra had landed during the fight and she had watched its progress with much trepidation. Greatly relieved at the way it had been resolved, she walked over out of the shadows, and presented the Green Knight with a bag of scales. He hesitated, and then reached out and reluctantly took it from her.

‘I shan’t say anything, except perhaps, thank you.’

‘Our pleasure,’ replied Cassandra, ‘and remember, don’t return until after dark to the village. We will slip away at sunset. Take care Green Knight.’

‘I shall,’ he replied.

Gregorin and Cassandra waited until the knight was lost to view, then they turned away to have a final leisurely stroll through the forest that they both loved and knew they would never see again.

Later that afternoon Cassandra lay next to Gregorin on the platform high up in the tower. It was approaching dusk now, and all the preparations had been made.

‘Won’t you miss all this, Gregorin? You have spent years of your life building up this great fortress. And since I have lived here, it has become a home for both of us. When you were away I would steal up to this place and gaze at the sun as it sank behind the mountains. Oh Gregorin, won’t you feel miserable having to leave?’

Gregorin looked at Cassandra and smiled.

‘I will miss it, because it is my home and because it is beautiful. This is where I came to think of you, Cassandra, when I too was alone. Now I shall leave it far behind and, if it weren’t for having you and Theodore, I would feel wretched. But since you are both with me I shall shed a final tear and set off to make a new beginning in another land.’

Cassandra poked Gregorin with her pointed, agile tail.

Gregorin and the Green Knight

‘You are a flatterer sometimes, you know.’

‘I know, but sometimes you deserve it.’

Cassandra went to wake Theodore.

As the shadows stretched over the jagged mountain peaks, Gregorin, Cassandra and their son took to the air. With powerful beats of their wings they flew higher and higher. As they climbed, the air became colder and clearer until finally the stars glowed with a steady brilliance, and the hills below looked no larger than pebbles in the bottom of a mountain stream.

