



The Pirate Princess

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THE PIRATE PRINCESS

Once there was a king—

And once there was an emperor—

And neither of them could have children. While roaming the world in search of a solution to this problem, they happened to meet at a particular inn. They did not know each other, but sensed a certain royal demeanor about the other, and soon were introduced. They made an agreement then and there that, should they return home and their wives conceive, their children would be married, by and by. Sure enough this came about—the emperor had a daughter and the king had a son—but the pact they had made at the inn was forgotten.

When the children grew up, their parents sent them off to study, and they happened to have the same teacher. They fell madly in love, and made an agreement of their own: The prince took a ring and put it on her finger. And thus they bound themselves to each other.

Presently it came time for them to return home. The princess's people were busily arranging suitors for her, but she wasn't interested in any of them; likewise the prince was at home in his own country, pining away for the princess. The emperor tried to cheer the princess by leading her through his grand courtyards and palaces, but the princess was disconsolate and nothing made her any happier.

The prince, meanwhile, missed her so much that he became ill. The people asked him what ailed him, but he didn't want to tell them. So they asked his servant. "Perhaps *you* can figure out what's wrong with him," they said.

"I know what's wrong with him," the prince's servant answered. "For I was there with him the entire time, when all this came about."

And he told them about the agreement the prince had made with the princess.

At this the king remembered the pact *he* had made, and he wrote to the emperor telling him to prepare himself for the wedding. The

emperor didn't want his daughter to marry the prince anymore, but neither did he dare refuse. So he sent a reply that the king should send his son along—but the emperor was planning to test him to see if he could govern an empire. If he could, the emperor would allow the marriage to go forth as agreed.

The emperor sat the prince in a room and gave him papers outlining the affairs of the land. The prince was distracted—he longed to see the princess terribly—but he was forbidden even a single minute with her. When by chance he caught a glimpse of her reflection in a hall of mirrors, he fainted, and the princess padded over and revived him.

She said: "I do not wish to marry someone else! You and *I* are bound together!"

"But what do we do?" replied the prince sadly. "Your father doesn't want us to marry."

"It doesn't matter," said she. And they decided they would sneak down to port and sail away at once. And off they went.

After some time on the salt-sprayed ocean, they were ready for a change of pace. They longed to set foot on dry land again, and so sailed toward a tree-lined shore. They beached their ship and walked among the trees, and the princess took off her ring and gave it to the prince. Then she lay down to sleep and the prince lay beside her. The prince woke first and, seeing she was about to wake, set the ring beside her on the ground.

On their way back to the boat, the princess realized she had forgotten the ring, and sent the prince back to get it. He looked and looked, but could not find the spot they had lain down to rest, nor any sign of the ring, and the further he walked the more he became lost. He tried to find his way back to the princess, who by this time had begun looking for *him*, but she had gotten lost, too, so even if he had found his way to the shore—which he didn't—she wouldn't have been there. Instead he came upon a road, and followed it to a tilled and fertile country. Since the prince knew no useful skills and had no occupation, he found his way to a great house and became a lowly servant.

The princess, meanwhile, made her way back to the beach and decided she would remain there, reasoning that a passing ship would find her. She ate fruit from the trees by the shore, and at night she would climb into the trees and nestle among the branches, where she was safe from wild animals, prowling in the dark below.

* * *

Now, it happened that there was an exceptionally rich old merchant who conducted business dealings all around the world. One day, his only son, who was an aimless wastrel, said to him: "You are old and I am young. Nobody pays any attention to me. When you die, I'll be left with nothing, and have no idea what to do to make my living. Therefore, give me a ship full of merchandise, and I will sail the seas and become a businessman."

The merchant agreed, and gave his son a ship laden with fabulous goods. The son of the merchant sailed from port to port, buying and selling and trading until he became a successful businessman in his own right.

Their ship chanced to skirt the shore where the princess was stranded and, seeing the reflection in the water of what appeared to be a young woman in a tree, they laid anchor and sent off a little boat, rowed by a single sailor.

When the sailor drew near the tree, he saw it was indeed a young woman up there and reported back to the ship what he had seen. Now the merchant went out in the boat himself and called to the princess: "Come down! Come on out of that tree!"

"I will *not* come down," said the princess, "unless you promise not to touch me until you take me home to your country and marry me according to the law."

"I promise!" the young merchant answered, and she climbed down the tree and got in the boat. Soon she was entertaining the crew of the ship, including the young merchant, for she could play every type of

musical instrument and speak many languages. He was very happy to have found her.

Now they were nearing the young merchant's home port. The princess told him: "It would be best if you went on ahead and told your father, your relatives, and everyone you know that they should all come down to the docks to meet me, since you are marrying such an important woman! Then, when we are married, I will let you know who I truly am."

He agreed to this.

Then she said: "Since you are bringing home a woman like myself, it would only be right to give your sailors something to drink, so that they, too, know you are marrying such a high quality woman."

He agreed to this as well, and broke into the barrels of fine wine they had carried back with them from abroad in the holds of the ship. Then the young merchant went home and announced to his father and all his relatives that he was getting married.

Meanwhile, the sailors had become very merry and discombobulated from the wine. They staggered around the ship and down the gangway and went ashore, falling asleep on the ground in a drunken stupor.

And while the young merchant's whole family put on their finery and prepared to meet the princess at the docks, she hoisted the anchor and unfurled the sails and cast off. Decked out impressively, the young merchant's family arrived at the port where the ship had been docked, but it was gone. The old merchant father was furious.

The young merchant son wailed in disbelief. He said to his father: "Believe me, I brought home a ship full of goods! It was magnificent! It was full to bursting!"

But there was no ship to be seen.

The young merchant said to his father: "Ask the sailors what happened! They'll back up my story."

So his father asked them, but they were still drunk and had no idea what had happened. Whereupon the old merchant banished his son,

and said he never wanted to see him again. So the young merchant left his father and his father's house, and became a wanderer and a vagrant.

And all the while, the princess sailed the sea.

* * *

Now it happened that there was another king in an entirely separate land who built a palace on the sea, for no reason other than that he enjoyed feeling the gentle sea breeze on his cheek and watching the passing ships. One day the princess's ship sailed past this palace. He watched for a long time but didn't see any passengers or crew or anyone at the helm, so he thought he must be hallucinating, and he commanded his men to look. And they saw it as well!

For her part, the princess briefly considered laying anchor, but made up her mind that she had no need for a palace on the sea. But the king sent envoys to meet her and persuade her to stop. Until then, he hadn't had any success in finding a wife, for whomever he desired did not want him, and whoever desired him, he did not want.

The princess knew what was coming, so she told the king what she had said to the young merchant: "Promise me that you will not touch me until we are married according to the law."

And the king swore to this.

Then the princess said: "Swear too that you will neither open the holds of my ship nor even touch the ship itself. Let it rest on the sea 'til we are married. Only then will you see the fabulous treasures within, which I have brought with me from around the world. When your people see them, there will be no way anyone can say you have married some common woman from the marketplace."

And the king swore to this, as well. Then he wrote to the rulers of all nations, inviting them to his wedding.

Meanwhile, the princess demanded that eleven noblewomen be brought to her. Eleven noblewomen came, each the daughter of a great noble. The king built palaces for each of them, and the noble-

women would gather together at one or another of them and play games and musical instruments.

One day the princess announced that she had a desire to walk the decks of her ship, and suggested that instead of meeting at one palace or another, as they usually did, they should go down to the docks where her ship was moored, and play instruments and games on board. So the eleven noblewomen followed the princess to her docked ship, and the princess offered round the fine wine from her holds—the same wine that had befuddled the sailors. Very quickly they became incredibly drunk, and the princess hoisted the anchor, spread the sails, and cast off—fleeing the sea palace with both her ship and the noblewomen.

When the king discovered the ship had disappeared, he was alarmed. He did not suspect it had anything to do with the princess, so he said to his men: “Be careful not to let slip to the princess that anything has happened, for she will be very upset to learn that her ship, with all its precious cargo, has sailed away on its own. She may also think that I gave it to someone else as a favor. You with your brusque mannish soldiers’ ways will only manage to aggrieve her further if you try to tell her—I know it. Therefore, send one of her noblewomen to break the news gently.”

So the king’s men went door to door to the chambers of the noblewomen, one palace at a time, but didn’t find anyone in residence. In the evening, they enlisted an old matron to break the news to the princess. Of course, *she* didn’t find anyone either, and was very alarmed.

Some time passed and nobody did anything, and nobody let on. But the fathers of the noblewomen were used to receiving regular letters from their daughters, and it didn’t take long for them to notice they were no longer getting any. They came to visit, and when they found the palaces empty they became infuriated with the king. These nobles were ministers of the state, and they decided the king needed to be executed as punishment for his inattentiveness and careless-

ness—but then they reconsidered, and dethroned him and banished him instead.

* * *

Presently the princess woke the noblewomen up. They told her they wanted to return home. The princess said: “Let’s wait out here a bit longer.”

Soon a violent storm broke, and the noblewomen pleaded: “*Now*, let’s return home.”

But the princess said: “We are already very far from land.”

“Why have you done all this?!” the noblewomen wanted to know.

“I was afraid the ship would break apart in the storm,” the princess explained. “My only option was to untie the ship and spread the sails.”

This answer reconciled them to her at once, and they continued to sail the sea and play games and musical instruments.

One day they spotted a palace. The noblewomen, remembering their own palaces, far away on a distant shore, urged her to lay anchor. “Let’s get closer to that palace!” they said.

But the princess didn’t want to. She said: “I still regret going to that *last* palace!”

So they sailed on without stopping, until they spotted an island. This time they did draw near—a bad decision! There were twelve pirates on the island who were used to killing anyone and everyone they encountered on sight.

The princess forestalled them. “Who is your leader?” she demanded, before they had even drawn their swords.

The pirates identified their leader and the princess asked him: “What do you do?”

“We are pirates!” he said.

“We are *also* pirates!” the princess said. “You rob with strength, but we rob with cunning, for we are learned in languages and music. What benefit would there be in killing us? It would be better to marry us! Then you will have *our* wealth, too!”

She showed them the fabulous treasures in the holds of her ship. The pirates did not need further convincing. They showed the women where they hid *their* treasure, buried about the island, and agreed to get married, one to another, match for match. The pirates chose first according to rank.

After the twelve weddings, the princess offered the pirates some of the fine wine in barrels.

"I have never used this wine!" the princess told them. "I have been saving it for the day that the heavens smiled upon me and my marriage."

She passed out twelve goblets of wine and said: "Drink to your new wives!"

The pirates drank and quickly became drunk and fell into a stupor. The princess told her eleven noblewomen: "The time has come! Each of you slit your husband's throat!"

And each of them did it, gashing them swiftly, and the decks ran red. Now they went to the pirates' hiding places and dug up their loot. Each noblewoman was now fabulously rich—wealthier than any king in the world. In fact there was so much treasure they decided not to take any bronze or silver, only the gold and jewels. Even so the ship quickly filled up; in order to make room, they threw anything which wasn't as valuable off the ship.

They decided henceforth they would dress as men, and they sewed themselves disguises in the fashion of the day. Then they sailed on.

* * *

It so happened that there was another old king who had only one son, whom he was marrying off and to whom he was giving the throne. This son of this king was bald, and he said that before he became king he was going to take to the sea and travel with his wife, so that if—heaven forbid—they ever needed to flee the kingdom, she would be accustomed to sea travel.

So he went with his wife and the royal ministers of the court, and off they sailed. The people on the ship were wildly elated to be at sea. They played games, and decided that everyone should strip naked, whereupon they took off all their clothes, except their shirts, and tried to climb up the ship's mainmast.

The princess's ship, meanwhile, was coming in sight of this ship just as the king's son tried to scale the mast. At first the princess thought these were more pirates, and she wanted to change course, but when she saw them playing games she decided to approach.

The princess said to her noblewomen: "I bet you I can knock that bald one off the mast and into the sea!"

They said to her: "How can you possibly do that? We are so far away!"

And the princess said: "I have a piece of glass, and I can use it to knock him off. But I'll wait for him to climb to the very top, because if I knock him off while he's still climbing, he'll fall on the deck of the ship, whereas if I knock him off at the top of the mast, he'll fall into the sea."

So she waited until he was at the very top of the mast, and she took out the glass and held it to the sun, and directed the beam at the prince's bald head. His brain exploded immediately, blowing a hole in the side of his head, and he let go of the mast and fell with a splash into the sea.

When the people on the deck below saw that he had fallen, they raised a commotion. They wondered how they would ever return home—when he heard the news, the old king would die of grief!

Seeing the princess's ship the royal ministers sailed toward it, hoping they had, perhaps, a doctor on board who could give them some advice.

"Do not fear!" they cried out when they drew near enough to be heard. "We will not harm you! Is there a doctor on board who could give us some advice?"

And the ministers proceeded to tell the noblewomen how they had been taking turns to climb the mast, when the son of the king fell overboard.

The princess—who was still disguised as a man—told them to fish the prince out of the sea, and they cast their nets and dragged them through the waves and drew him out. The princess took his pulse with her hand and told them his brain had exploded through the hole in the side of his head. Immediately they opened up his skull and found that she was right, and they were astonished. They asked her to come back to their country with them and be the king’s personal physician, as she could be assured of a high status and great influence.

But the princess didn’t want to. “I’m not a physician,” she told them. “I just happen to have some specialized knowledge in the medical field.” But she agreed to keep company with them awhile, and so the two boats sailed together.

The royal ministers believed that their widowed queen should marry the doctor (who was really the princess) because he was so wise. And they wanted “him” to be their new king. Of course, they already had a king—the *old* king—but they decided they would kill him, without telling the queen, to spare her feelings. At the very same time, the widowed queen *also* believed she should marry the doctor, but she was afraid that the people of the land would not want him to be their king.

The royal ministers threw a party on the two boats as they sailed, hoping that when everyone was drunk enough they could broach the topic with the queen. Each day they celebrated somebody else: the queen one day, this or that minister the next. When it came to be the day of the party for the doctor, “he” gave everyone some of “his” wine and they all became joyous and loose-lipped.

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” the royal ministers said, “if the queen married the doctor?”

“That would be magnificent,” the doctor said. “I just wish we could talk about it when we are all sober.”

“It would be so lovely to marry the doctor,” the queen sighed. “But we must have consent from all the people of the land!”

“It would be wonderful,” the doctor agreed. “I simply wish we were talking about this when we weren’t drunk.”

Soon enough they had sobered up, and the royal ministers remembered what they had been saying and were embarrassed, even though the queen had said the same thing. And the queen, too, was embarrassed about what she had said, even though it was in total accord with what the ministers had said. They began making arrangements for a marriage, and decided definitively that the two should be wed. Everyone was in agreement on this point, and they sailed home to their land.

The people of the land were very happy when they saw the ships on the horizon. It had been a long time since they’d seen the son of the king, and they had no idea where he had got to. On top of this, the old king had died while they were away!

When the people of the land saw that the son of the king was no longer a part of the company, they wanted to know where he was. The royal ministers, for their part, explained how he had fallen from the mast when his brain blew out the side of his head, and that they had already elected a new king, who had come with them. The people were very happy about that and they rejoiced.

The king commanded his people: “Announce in each and every land, near and far, that absolutely everybody—whether he be foreigner or visitor, fugitive or exile—is to come to my wedding. Not a single person should be absent, and all will receive fabulous gifts.”

Furthermore, the king commanded: “Set up fountains all around the city, so that no one needs to travel far to drink good water. Rather, everyone should have a fountain nearby. Draw a portrait of me beside each fountain, and set up guards to watch them. If anyone stares at my portrait and makes an unpleasant face, seize that person!”

And this they did. The fountains were built, the portraits drawn, and the invitations sent near and far to every land, and all the people

came. The son of the first king, the true bridegroom of the princess, who had gotten lost looking for the ring and found the road and become a lowly servant—he was there. The merchant's son, who had lost his ship and earned his father's wrath on what should have been his wedding day—he was there. And the king who had built the palace on the sea, and given the princess eleven noblewomen for company, the king whom she had caused to be dethroned—he was there, as well. Each of these three drank at the fountains and recognized her portrait, and they stared at it and remembered her and made unpleasant faces.

They were seized.

At the wedding, the king (who was really the princess) ordered all the captives who had been taken at the fountains to be produced. She immediately recognized each of them, but they didn't recognize her because she was dressed as a man.

The "king" addressed them: "You, king, were dethroned because you lost eleven noblewomen, the daughters of your ministers of state. Behold! The noblewomen are here. Return to your land and be king once again. You, merchant—your father banished you because you lost the ship filled with merchandise. Behold! The ship is here, with all the merchandise inside. What's more, your wealth has increased tenfold! And you, prince—you lost your bride-to-be while searching for her ring. Behold! Here she is. Let us return home."

And she took off her disguise and revealed who she really was... And they returned home.