

The Princess Cured by Music

There once lived a Queen who after many years without children gave birth with great pain to a baby daughter. After the birth, the mother was very weak and the child was not expected to survive. The King summoned all the finest doctors in the land, but they had to admit that they did not believe that they could save her, and they recommended that he consult the Chief Magician. Magic, with its dangerous side-effects, was always a last resort, but the King was desperate, and so the Magician came to the King. When he had seen the baby and consulted with the doctors, he told the King and Queen:

"I believe that the child's life can be saved, but I must call upon one of the Kindly Powers to help me, and the one I select will have great influence upon the princess, since she is so young. I have three choices: listen well and think before you decide. If I cure her with the power of flowers, she will grow up to be beautiful and gentle, but also thoughtless and silly. If I cure her with the power of the stars, she will still be beautiful and also clever, but her heart will be cold and unfeeling. If I cure her with the power of music, she will be intelligent, kind, and gracious; but if anyone she loves is unkind to her and does not care for her, she will fade away and disappear."

The King and Queen immediately agreed that they could not bear that the princess be either silly or unfeeling, and that they were certain that nobody could fail to care for their daughter. So they asked the magician to call upon the power of music. He went away to a hidden room and performed the secrets rites magicians always perform, and then everyone in the palace heard an extremely faint, but beautiful melody that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The King and Queen, all their courtiers and friends and servants, stopped what they were doing and held their breath, because they knew magic was at work. After only a few minutes the music stopped, and the royal couple ran to the princess's room, where they found the healthiest-looking baby anyone could hope for.

So the princess grew up, and she was every bit as kind and as clever as the magician had promised. Though certainly pretty, she was no perfect beauty, but nobody ever cared about that when they heard her speak, or laugh, or sing. She was always happy, except when someone around her was hurt or grieved, and everyone loved her. Not only was she witty (which it is not so easy to be if one is also unfailingly kind, as she was), but she was a gifted mathematician and engineer.

When she was of an age to be married, as princesses must be, it seemed obvious that she should marry her second cousin, who was King of the country across the mountains. This King was famous for his devotion to his people. Ever since he was a young prince, he had studied diligently all the arts a good king should know. He had learned history, economics, agriculture, and a variety of practical crafts, and every day he had practiced the skills he would need if he had to lead his armies, such as horsemanship, fencing, and archery. Now that he was King, he spent all day, except when he took exercise, discussing affairs of state with his councilors or hearing petitions from his people, and every night he had huge piles of state papers beside his bed. Some kings spent their time hunting, and allowed their kingdoms to fall into poverty, but he always put his people first. Since it is the responsibility of a king to marry and produce an heir, if he can, so that disputes over the kingdom can be avoided, he decided to marry. His cousin across the mountains was not only the heir of a rich kingdom, but he had also heard that she was popular and likely to be helpful to him. He sent a formal proposal to the princess and her parents, and she replied that since, from all she had heard, he was worthy of admiration and respect, she would be honored to be his wife. Her parents sent a letter back to the King, saying that they would agree to the marriage, but that he must promise that he would never, under any circumstances, be unkind to their daughter or not care for her, for if he did she would fade away and disappear. He had never been unkind to anyone, and so he promised without worrying about it. So they were married.

They disagreed the very evening they met, the day before the wedding, when the princess who would soon be Queen suggested that he declare the wedding day a holiday throughout the land, as it would be in her homeland. He thought that would be proud, and did not seem to understand her when she said that the people would enjoy taking the day to share their joy. Still, he agreed to please her, and when he saw the happiness of the people, he realized that she had been right. The early days of the marriage seemed to go very well. Because the kingdom had a dry climate, and was even prone to drought, she studied hydraulics, and supervised the building of cisterns, aqueducts, pump-houses, and fountains throughout the land. Every evening at dinner they talked about the work of the day, and he congratulated himself on having won so excellent a Queen.

After dinner she would go to the music-room to play the piano and sing, while he did more work. She tried to persuade him to come and sing with her, but he explained that he did not like to sing. She asked him once if the court musicians could play for them to dance, sometimes, and he explained that he did not like to dance. He had, of course, learned, because all capable kings must dance at diplomatic receptions, but he did not like to. So she enjoyed her music alone; it was not the kind of royal court at which courtiers were in constant attendance. As the months went by, he did not notice that his wife seemed, somehow, less *there* than she had been at first.

On the anniversary of their wedding, he woke up early and looked out the front windows of the palace at the formal gardens. Before the palace were three great fountains, but they had been broken and silent for many years. Although he had loved playing in and around them as a small boy, he had always had more important concerns than repairing them. Now, though, the fountains were playing, with bright water rushing from their elaborate bronze spouts and rising high into the air before falling into the basins in a fine spray. He turned, and the Queen was sitting up in bed, smiling at him. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said, and he answered, somewhat absent-mindedly, that it was very nice, but wasn't it wasteful? She

explained carefully that she had worked very hard to repair the pump works, and that they were very efficient, and that she thought all the people (for the palace stood along the main street of the city, and the gardens were open to view) would enjoy the sight. He agreed that it was very clever of her, an excellent idea, and began to prepare for the day. The Queen seemed, somehow, less lively than she had been before this conversation.

Then, a few weeks later, the Queen burst into the King's study, as he was reading through some petitions, and told him that she was going to have a baby. He had not lifted his head, and simply answered that she should come back later to tell him her news, because he was very busy right now. He went on reading, and did not hear her go. That evening, the Queen was not at supper. He sent servants to her room, but she was not there. He searched himself all over the palace and the gardens, but she was gone. None of her clothes or jewels was out of place, and her books and papers were in order. She had vanished without a trace. Only after night fell, when the King stood at his window looking out over the garden, did he remember that she had spoken to him in the afternoon. All at once he heard her words again, and realized what she had said, and that he had ignored her. And then he began to weep. It had never occurred to him for a moment that he could be unkind simply by not paying attention. Never before in his life had he been cruel to anyone, but now he had made his Queen disappear, the Queen who was the kindest and most gracious lady in the world.

So he made his way to the rooms of his Chief Magician, who alone might be able to help him, and told the magician what he had done. The magician thought for a while, and at last said:

"No magic I can perform has any chance of restoring your Queen. Only you yourself can summon a power to bring her back, and you must find the power yourself. If you truly love her, the power will call you so that you can call upon it. No plan will bring success in this quest. You must wander in disguise for a full year through your kingdom, following your heart. If the year ends and

you have not found the power to restore your Queen, she will be forever lost."

The King was devastated, but the magician's words still gave him hope, so he quickly and carefully made arrangements for his Council to watch over the kingdom, and very early the next morning he slipped out of the palace, wearing very ordinary clothes, and began to walk down the road. For three days he traveled through the kingdom, and on the afternoon of the fourth day, as he was walking on a bad, rutted road through a lonely wood, he came upon a group of two men and a woman in odd, bright-colored clothes standing helplessly beside a broken-down wagon and trying, quite ineffectively, to calm a furiously rearing horse. The King guessed that it had fallen into a rut and one of the axles had broken, and then the horse had gone into a panic and broken out of its traces. With all his practice in horsemanship, it did not take him long to shoo away the others, who were merely frightening the animal further, and to quiet him down. Then, with hardly a word, he directed the mending of the axle, and before long the wagon was ready to move again. He could easily tell that none of the three was experienced in such matters, though they were handy enough. Soon they confirmed that he was right. They were two brothers and a sister, traveling musicians; the oldest brother played the oboe, the sister played the fiddle, and the youngest brother played the drum. Their driver had gone to the nearest village for help after the accident, or so he had said. That had been many hours ago, and he had not come back. They were not very surprised that he had abandoned them, since he had always been irresponsible and too fond of drink.

And so the King soon found himself the driver and general factotum for the troupe of musicians, who went mostly from wedding to wedding throughout the land. They were cheerful people, who made an adequate living if not a luxurious one, and since they loved to play and sing, and to see the people dance as they played and sang, and to wander here and there around the countryside, they had a pleasant life. They never asked where the King came from and where he had been going, and he did not offer to tell. He cared for the horse, bargained with the patrons, and

cooked the meals. He also, after a few weeks, found that his companions were teaching him to play the flute, without quite knowing how he had agreed to learn. With his long habits of discipline and concentration, he learned quickly, and soon he was a member of the band. As they traveled around the countryside, he thought continually of his quest and of the power that would find his Queen again, but he seemed no closer to finding her. Every day he missed her more and more. His love and grief filled the notes that came from his flute, yet, oddly enough, they did not make the tunes seem sad to the dancers, who spun and whirled all the more joyously the adder he became.

At last it was the last day of the long year, and the troupe happened to be in a suburb of the capital. The King told his friends that he would have to leave them, and they did not question his going any more than they had questioned his coming. But they insisted that he take the flute with him, to remember them by. The King walked very slowly back to his palace, his quest unfulfilled, as sad as any man can be. He could not imagine how he would live through his reign and perform his responsibilities without her, but it seemed he did not love her enough to have found the way to bring her back. With heavy footsteps, he went through the gate into the palace garden, but he could not bear to go inside. Once he went inside he would have admitted to himself, finally, that his journey had failed. He sat down on the side of the dry central fountain, and without thinking, he put the flute to his lips and began to play, a slow waltz with which the band often brought the evening to an end. After he had played for a few moments, he felt with surprise that his hands were damp, and he realized that spray was blowing in the air: the fountain had begun to play. The sunlight glittered on the rising water and broke into tiny rainbows. All at once, the King felt a tiny stirring of hope, though he could not have said why, and at the same time he felt that his heart would break at any moment. He modulated into a livelier melody, and played louder, then he began to dance to his own music. He did not dare look around him, but simply played with all his heart, on and on. Finally he began to hear a whole orchestra playing around him and with him. He heard

it perfectly. Now he was playing a solo, a piece much more complex than any he had played before, but somehow he knew what notes he had to play. He he did not know how long he played, but he continued until a final triumphant chord had sounded. Then he lowered his hands, and looked. The Queen was standing in front of him, and she held a baby in her arms. She was smiling and crying at the same time, and she reached her arm to the King, and they went into the palace together.

That night, after they had put the young prince to sleep, the Queen asked the King to dance with her. The King seemed to have forgotten that he did not like to dance, and they danced for a long time that night, and many happy nights thereafter.