

CASTLES IN THE AIR

By Stephen Krensky

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A LONG TIME AGO, there lived a king newly come to the throne. He was not a young man, however, for his father had ruled for many years. As was the custom, he settled major disputes within the kingdom, hunted wild boars in the forest, and hosted sumptuous banquets on important holidays. His chief delight, though, was not his official duties, but his inventions. The king tinkered endlessly with every kind of mechanical device and building structure, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. His castle and the countryside were littered with abandoned projects.

As was also the custom, the king wooed princesses both near and far, each one more beautiful than the last. He was ill at ease making flowery speeches or giving costly gifts; the only things he readily exchanged were his ideas. The princesses, though, rather liked receiving flowery compliments and priceless baubles, and a daydreaming king was no substitute for that.

Beyond the village surrounding the royal castle, a spinster had settled in a small cottage. She was not rich or pretty, but decidedly clever, being especially skilled in magical lore. Hopeful heroes flocked daily to her door for help. They were handsome fellows, resplendent in their armor, who had sworn to fight a dragon, giant, or the like for the love of a fair maiden. The battles to come were all they spoke of. Though the spinster aided them in her fashion, she never envied the fair maidens. If heroes were nothing more than ruddy cheeks and strong sword arms, then she could do without them.

Most often her visitors came and went on the post road nearby. It was heavily traveled, but sadly neglected, and now stood pockmarked with holes. Stumbling horses threw down a great many riders all of whom beseeched her for assistance. This

troubled the spinster. Healing balms were expensive, and she could ill afford to spare the time from her work.

Yet not until a disabled carriage put into her care six flustered passengers at once did she finally lose her temper. And lost it remained. Since only the king had the resources to improve the road to her liking, to the king she would go.

The royal castle was larger up close than she had imagined it from afar. Taking a deep breath, she strode across the drawbridge into a bustling courtyard.

“Bring me to the king!” she snapped to a liveried page.

He was trained to follow orders and led her immediately to the throne room. The polished tables, thick tapestries and golden candelabras furnished an imposing setting, but the spinster hardly noticed. Her attention was drawn to the king, who was sitting on the floor next to a pile of blocks.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty,” she said, remembering her manners.

“Sssssh,” he replied, forgetting his entirely. Without glancing up, he went on stacking blocks on top of each other. They shortly began to sway and, despite king’s protests, soon toppled over. He muttered to himself and called for more blocks.

The spinster was tapped on the shoulder.

“I’m afraid the king is not giving audiences today,” said his trusted chief advisor. “He has been studying towers of late and is consumed by the notion of building one with three turrets.”

Towers and turrets were not her concern, but the spinster was intrigued by the king’s fervor. She left quietly, promising to come back on the morrow.

True to her word, the spinster returned the next day. This time there were no blocks in the throne room. Instead, the king was sitting amid a mound of papers that were covered with sketches and notes. A quill sat limply in his hand.

The spinster curtsied. “Your Majesty,” she said. “I ask a boon. The road near my cottage is marred by ruts and holes. It grows more dangerous with every rainfall. Could you please see to its repair?”

The king began to scribble while she spoke and continued to write after she had stopped. His nose was wrinkled and the creases ran deep in his forehead. It was not a heroic face, the spinster decided, but she warmed to it, nonetheless.

“Why are you blushing?” the king demanded, abruptly crushing a flawed design.

The spinster stammered something about the heat.

“Oh,” he said. “Now, what was it you wanted? Ah, yes, I remember. A dangerous road. Repairs and so forth.” He reflected briefly. “Not much flair in that.”

“Flair has its place, Sire, but I do need your help.”

Her reproachful tone surprised the king. He was about to respond when a sudden thought sent him burrowing through the papers. “That could do it!” he cried. “Might be the proper balance... compensates for the wind. Bring back the blocks, I say!”

The forgotten spinster was again escorted out by the chief advisor. “You understand, of course,” he said, “that His Majesty is a dedicated inventor.” He smiled graciously. “And after all, it is his right to build castles in the air.”

The spinster stared ahead angrily. “If that’s what he wants,” she murmured, “it can be arranged.”

Several days later, the king returned from a hunt to find his chief advisor anxiously awaiting him.

“Sire,” he said, “I bear strange tidings. The duke’s castle is floating hundreds of feet above the ground.”

The king was impressed, though not a little puzzled. “How did the duke contrive such a feat?” he wondered, shaking his head. “I can’t even manage that tower. Perhaps the duke doesn’t use blocks.”

“It was not his idea, Sire. The duke has dropped repeated messages to that effect from the walls. In fact, he seems to think it’s something you arranged.” The chief advisor paused. “As you recall, the duke is rather excitable.”

The king sighed. “I only wish I was responsible. Still, I must see the castle for myself. Ready a fresh horse at once.”

The king was gone all afternoon. When he did return, his face glowed with excitement. He wandered through the halls telling everyone what a remarkable sight he had witnessed. One of the pages found him in the kitchen describing the scene in great detail to the cooks and scullery maids.

The page announced a visitor.

“Very well,” said the king. “I’ll be up in a moment.”

It was the spinster who awaited him. Her manner was assured, her eyes sparkling with confidence. The king knew princesses whose eyes glittered on occasion, but sparkling was another thing entirely.

“This is a great day,” he announced. “Truly historic. We have a castle in the air, you know.”

“I know,” said the spinster. “I put it there.”

The king clapped his hands. “You accomplished this marvel?” he cried. “What imagination!” He beckoned her forward. “Come tell me how it’s done.”

The spinster was confused. The heroes she knew would feel threatened by a floating castle, not pleased by it. “I am not here to share secrets,” she declared. “I simply want the post road repaired.”

The king waved his hand impatiently. “Never mind that,” he ordered. “We have no time for roads. Now, about the castle. How did you ever manage it?”

The spinster folded her arms and said nothing.

The king was astounded. “Take this woman to the dungeon,” he fumed, his royal pride surfacing vengefully. “A night there will change her mind.”

That evening, a troupe of jugglers performed for the king. He usually watched their tricks in earnest, always sure a ball would fall or a plate would drop, though none ever did. The present entertainment, however, could not ease the strange discontent he felt. And the balls sparkling in the candlelight served only to remind him of sparkling eyes in the dungeon below.

The king retired early to his bedchamber. There the silence lay heavily about, unbroken save by his occasional mutterings. The king’s thoughts churned from one to

another like cream into butter, but none of them were any comfort to him. Weariness overcame him at last, and he slept fitfully till dawn.

Sunrise found the chief advisor rushing into the royal bedchamber without knocking. The king opened his eyes, noted the distraught face of his trusted minister, and burrowed under a quilt.

“The most dreadful thing has happened, Sire. I don’t know what to do. We’re ...we’re floating.”

The king uncovered his head. He tumbled to the floor as the castle swayed in the wind, sending his fourposter bed sliding back and forth. His dresser drawers fell out, spilling shirts and breeches onto the rug. Fortunately, the king was an accomplished sailor. Steadying his feet on the deck of his bedchamber, he walked to the window.

Far beneath him lay the castle moat, the village stretching out around it. Farmhouses sat like intricate toys on patchwork squares, tied together by brown ribbon roads. The sea and the mountains met in the distance, the beginning of one and the ending of the other indistinguishable in the haze. The king nodded to himself and sighed.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?” the chief advisor asked.

The king turned almost reluctantly from the window. He smiled nervously. “Bring the prisoner to the throne room,” he ordered. “And see that we’re not disturbed.”

The spinster had been anticipating the royal summons, and she entered the throne room prepared for a burst of the king’s temper. She was determined to have her own way, but she was a little sorry the three-turreted tower couldn’t be part of the conversation. She had several suggestions to make.

Instead of the angry shout she expected, however, the king simply stared at her. There was nothing absent-minded about his expression; indeed, rarely had he looked so composed.

The spinster found his glance unsettling. “Have you reconsidered my request?” she asked.

The king was silent.

“I should add that until you see reason the castle will not descend. You will be able to give the matter your full attention.”

“That could be inconvenient,” said the king, approaching her. “But bearable, I think, if you would be by my side.” He gently took her hand.

Whatever the spinster’s initial reaction, the king proved quite persuasive in the end. Their marriage took place a fortnight after the two castles returned to the ground. In future years, the roads throughout the kingdom were inspected and repaired, while much else that needed mending was attended to as well. And on the site of the queen’s former cottage, a splendid three-turreted tower was built, to the lasting admiration of everyone who passed it.