

SINGING TO THE SUN

By Vivian French

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ONCE there was a lord who did not believe in love, and he married a lady who only believed in gold. At the end of a year a son was born, and the lord stooped down to the cradle to look.

“One day,” he said, “this child will be the most powerful lord in all the land. Every man, woman and child will tremble as he passes, and even the mightiest of my horses will bow his head as this boy walks by.”

“I will not bow,” said the small tabby cat who sat by the hearth, but nobody heard her except the court jester ... and no one ever took any account of what he saw or heard or thought.

“No, no!” said the haughty lady. “He will be the wealthiest lord in all the land. Why, even the rats that run in his kitchens will eat from dishes of purest gold.”

“Hmm,” said the tabby cat. “And what use is gold when you are hungry and thirsty and far away from the places of men?”

“Exactly so, little one,” said the jester, and he shook his head so that the bells on his hat jingled and rang. The baby smiled and held out his arms, but his mother frowned and carried him away.

The years rolled by. The mighty lord grew older and greyer, but he did not grow wiser. He sent armies this way and that to crush and defeat the kings who lived nearby, and sometimes he won, but more often he was defeated. His lands grew smaller and poorer, and this did not please his wife at all. She grew meaner and meaner, until she counted every bite of meat and every sip of water. She kept the one golden coin that was left in a silver chest, and she kept the silver chest in a leaden coffer. The leaden coffer she kept in a wooden box, and she wore all three keys on a chain round her neck.

In the upstairs nurseries the baby grew older and taller until he grew into a little boy, and then he moved to the rooms of state and grew taller still until he became a young man. He had been christened Thorfinn, but few people knew him by his name. His father always forgot, and his mother never remembered. Sometimes Thorfinn went downstairs to the kitchens to talk to the jester (who was now very thin) and the tabby cat (who was now very fat), but most of the time he was kept poring over ancient books. The books his father gave him spoke of the best way to win battles, and the books his mother gave him were full of charms and spells that showed the best way to turn pebbles into gold.

On Thorfinn's eighteenth birthday there were no presents, but his mother and father met together to talk about his future.

"It will soon be time for our son to marry," said the mighty lord. "He must marry the daughter of the most powerful king in all the world, and then he will be lord of all the kingdom. His lands will stretch North and South and East and West... further by far than an eagle can fly."

"No, no!" said the haughty lady. "He must marry the daughter of the wealthiest king in all the world, and then he will be lord of all the gold and the silver and the diamonds and the rubies in the kingdom. His buttons will be sapphires, his shoes will shine with emeralds, and even his shadow will be the finest black silk velvet"

The tabby cat was sitting on the windowsill.

"And what would Thorfinn like for himself?" she asked, but there was no one to listen to her. Thorfinn was sitting in the ancient library studying the royal rules of battling with dragons, and the jester was walking on the hills and listening to the winds.

It was the jester who brought the news. No one was ever quite sure where he had heard it, but then nobody ever asked the jester how he knew what he knew. He came to the mighty lord and the haughty lady as they sat over their breakfast.

"My lord," he said, "my lady. The King of the Golden Mountains has three daughters who wish to be married. The king is tired and old, and he has divided his kingdom between them. One daughter will be given all his lands, and power over every thing that grows and lives there. One daughter will be given all his wealth, together with

the gold mines, the silver mines, the diamond mines and the lakes of pearls. The third daughter—”

“STOP!” shouted the lord, and the lady sprang to her feet and clapped her hands.

“We have no need to hear any more! Quick—quick—saddle the horses! Call for our son! He must leave at once!”

Thorfinn was sent for, and he came slowly into the room, looking anxious. He was not used to speaking to anyone other than the jester and the tabby cat.

“Son,” said his father, “you are to ride at once to the Golden Mountains. You will go to the king, and you will tell him that you will marry the princess who brings land and power.”

“No, no, NO!” The lady shook her head so hard that her necklace broke and the beads scattered all over the floor.

“Son! Listen to me! You are to ride at once to the Golden Mountains. You will go to the king, and you will tell him that you will marry the princess who brings wealth—the gold mines, the silver mines, the diamond mines and the lakes of pearls.”

“No, NO, NO!” The lord banged his fist on the table so hard that the wood splintered beneath his hand. “You must marry land and power!”

“NO, NO, NO!” The lady stamped her foot so hard that the stone floor cracked in three places. “Wealth! You must marry wealth!”

Thorfinn said nothing as his father and mother shouted louder and louder and louder. He sat down on the window seat and stroked the tabby cat.

The tabby cat looked at the jester, who was patiently waiting by the door.

“I would like to know about the third princess,” she said, so softly that only the jester could hear her.

The jester smiled. “The third princess brings nothing and everything,” he said. “She brings happiness, and love.”

“Ah,” said the tabby cat. “That is everything.” The lord and the lady argued until the sun was high in the sky, and they were too worn out and angry to speak another word.

The jester stepped towards them and bowed low.

“My lord,” he said, “my lady. The King of the Golden Mountains will, without a doubt, welcome your son with open arms. But there are others who will be less welcome, and so he has set a task for all those who come hoping for power, or riches, or even merely happiness.”

The lord and the lady sat up.

“What task?” croaked the lord.

“What kind of task?” whispered the lady.

The jester bowed again. “When Lord Thorfinn comes to the palace he will be taken to the king’s great hall. There he will see the three princesses sitting on three thrones. All three are beautiful, but one is pearl pale, with hair as fair as a field of ripened corn at sunrise. One princess is rose pink, with hair as red as a chestnut just cracked open from the shell. One princess is ebony dark, with hair as black as the depths of a midnight river.”

“Enough! Enough!” shouted the lord. “Which is the princess with the lands and the power?”

“No, no, NO!” snapped the lady. “Which is the princess with the gold?”

The jester shook his head. “Nobody knows. No one, that is, except the King of the Golden Mountains. And that is the task. Lord Thorfinn—and the other princes and lords and young men and old men who come to try their luck—will have to guess. They are to have one chance, and one chance only, and if they guess wrong—” the jester shrugged— “why, there are hungry wolves on the Golden Mountains.”

The mighty lord and the haughty lady looked at each other. The jester looked at Thorfinn. Thorfinn stopped stroking the tabby cat, and the tabby cat meowed and rubbed her head against his hand as he stood up.

“I will go to the Golden Mountains,” Thorfinn said. “I have read and read until my mind is sore, and I would like to go out into the world.”

The lord and the lady heaved a huge sigh of relief. Even they with their hard and shrivelled hearts were unwilling to order their son to risk being torn apart by hungry wolves. If, however, Thorfinn himself chose to go out and seek his fortune—well, that was a very different matter. His father called for horses, and his mother called for a jerkin of silver and a cloak of golden velvet.

“And a sword encrusted with emeralds to buckle at our son’s side,” she said.

“And six of my finest soldiers to ride in front and behind,” said the lord. “Jester— see that it is done.

“The jester spread out his empty hands.

“My lord,” he said, “and my lady. There are no horses left in the stables, and the last of the soldiers marched away after last year’s war. There is no jerkin of silver, nor cloak of golden velvet, and there is no gold left to buy such things. Neither is there a sword encrusted with emeralds...but the young lord is welcome to ride my donkey, and I have a cloak of wool to keep him warm.”

“Will you come with me?” Thorfinn asked. “We can ride the donkey turn and turn about.” He bent down and picked up the tabby cat and tucked her under his arm. “And you can come too, my friend.”

And that was the way it was. The mighty lord and the haughty lady were not pleased when they saw their son ride off to seek his fortune on a donkey with only a jester and a tabby cat for company, but there was nothing that they could do or say to change the way things were. All they could do was to make Thorfinn promise over and over again that he would do his best to choose power or wealth...and even as his shadow faded from the pathway his mother was still calling, “Gold! Gold! Gold...”

The road to the Golden Mountains was long and hard, but Thorfinn was happy. He stared around him in wonder as the donkey clip-clopped along, and the jester told him stories of the towns and villages and farms that they passed.

“How much you know!” Thorfinn said. “I know nothing at all...except that wars cost more than peace, and it is very very hard to turn pebbles into gold.”

The jester laughed, but the tabby cat nodded.

“Both those things are good to know,” she said. “It is also good to know that one has much to learn.”

At last the road led up to the gates of the King of the Golden Mountains. Beyond the gates was a crowd of lords and princes, young men and old, all hoping to win the hand of one of the princesses. Thorfinn and the jester took their place in the line, and the tabby cat walked beside them.

Little by little Thorfinn and the jester moved nearer and nearer to the palace. From far away came the sounds of cries and moaning, but when Thorfinn asked the jester if he knew what the reason could be the jester shook his head.

“The wolves will be fat tonight,” said the tabby cat, but she spoke so quietly that Thorfinn could not hear her.

When Thorfinn and the jester were led into the king’s great hall Thorfinn’s eyes grew wide. The three princesses were sitting on three tall thrones, and all three were more beautiful than Thorfinn could ever have imagined. The pearl pale princess was dressed in tissue of silver, and her corn gold hair rippled down to the floor. The rose pink princess was dressed in silks the colour of an ocean wave, and her glowing chestnut hair shimmered in the light. The princess who was ebony dark wore ruby red velvet, and her midnight black hair curled and twirled and danced around her head. Not one of them smiled when Thorfinn stood in front of them; they stayed as still and as silent as statues.

“Ahem,” said the king. “It is time for you to make your choice, young man. You may look as long as you wish—but you may not speak a word to my daughters, and they will not speak a word to you. When you are ready, come to me—and tell me which daughter brings power, which wealth, and which love. If you choose correctly my daughters will curtsy to you, and then you must choose which one you will take as your bride.”

The King of the Golden Mountains swept away to his own throne at the other end of the hall, and musicians began to play soft music as Thorfinn stared and stared at the princesses.

“How can I choose?” he asked the jester. “I know nothing about princesses, and I have no way of telling which is which. How can I choose?”

The jester touched his arm. “Ask their father the king if you are permitted to take one hair from each of their heads.”

Thorfinn looked up in surprise. “A hair?” he said.

“Yes,” said the jester, and Thorfinn did as he was told...although his hand trembled as he took a hair from each princess in turn.

“That was well done,” the jester said. He walked across to the musicians, and bowed to a man playing the violin. The man stopped playing, and the jester bowed again.

“May I?” he asked, and as the man nodded the jester took his bow and threaded it with the silver blonde hair. “Now, play!” he said.

The musician took the bow and began to play, and as he played the other musicians fell silent. The tune was harsh and strong, and Thorfinn could hear the sound of bugles blowing and heavy armoured feet marching...marching...marching.

“Enough,” said the jester, and he took the bow and pulled away the silver blonde hair. “Now...and he threaded the bow with the chestnut hair, and it shone between his fingers. “Play!”

This time all Thorfinn could hear was the clink clink clink of coins tumbling and falling, and the murmur of dulled voices counting...counting...counting.

“That will do,” said the jester. He snapped off the chestnut hair, and gently, carefully threaded the bow with gleaming black. “Play,” he said. “Play.”

As the first few notes sang out Thorfinn put out a hand to steady himself against the wall. He could hear the sweetest birdsong, and children laughing. He could hear women singing lullabies to their babies, and old men humming as they sat and dozed in the sun. He could hear young men and women whispering secrets to each other, and in and out danced a little tune that was so happy Thorfinn thought his heart would break in two.

“Now,” said the jester, “tell the king what you know.”

Thorfinn went to the king. “The pearl pale princess brings power,” he said. “And the rose-pink princess brings gold. And the princess as dark as midnight brings happiness and love.”

“You are right,” said the king, and the three princesses stood up, and swept Thorfinn three deep curtsies.

“Choose,” said the king. “Choose from Power, Wealth and Love. Choose your bride, and my good wishes go with you.”

Thorfinn looked at the Princess of Power, and he thought of his father endlessly fighting wars so that he might seize a little land here, a little land there...or, more often, lose it. He looked at the Princess of Wealth, and he thought of his mother endlessly

scrimping and saving and valuing nothing if it was not made of gold. Then he looked at the third princess, and he thought of the endlessly long lonely years he had spent growing up in his old cold castle.

“I have lived with power and wealth,” he said, “and power and wealth are hard as stone. I have never lived with love, and I do not know what it is like...but I think I would like to be happy. I choose the princess who is as dark as midnight.”

The king bowed, and the Princess of Love swept another deep curtsy.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said, and she smiled a smile that made Thorfinn hold out his arms to her. “Thank you, but I do not choose you.” She turned to the jester. “You are the wise one, and you are the man I will marry.” And she took the jester by the hand, and the jester threw off his cap of bells and the two of them ran out of the king’s palace and off and away to live happily ever after.

“Oh,” said Thorfinn, and he bent down and picked up the jester’s cap.

“Will you not take power, or wealth?” asked the king.

Thorfinn shook his head. “No,” he said. “I shall travel the world until I am as wise as the jester...” and he walked slowly out of the palace and up the road. Behind him walked the tabby cat, and as she went she looked up at the sun and she sang.