

THE FOOL, THE STICK, AND THE PRINCESS

Rachel Pollack

Rachel Pollack is an international expert on the Tarot, with more than a dozen books to her credit. She has also written for numerous comic books, including Doom Patrol and Tomahawk. More to the point (perhaps), she is also the author of five novels, including Unquenchable Fire, Temporary Agency, and Godmother Night, which won the World Fantasy Award last year. She writes short fiction much too infrequently, so it's always a real treat when we see a new story from her, as in the case of this delightful fairy tale.

There were once three brothers who lived in a poor country far away. The two older brothers were very clever and everyone said they would do well in the world, even in a land with so few opportunities. But the youngest was nothing but a fool. He had never learned to read, and even the simplest tasks eluded him. Told to fetch wood, he would set out determined to get it right, but before he got to the back of the house and the woodpile he might see a rabbit and try to imitate its hop until he fell over laughing, the woodpile long forgotten. Or worse, he might see a rainbow and fling the wood in the air as he lifted his arms in happiness. The Fool, as everyone called him, simply loved rainbows. Whenever he saw one he would throw his arms high above his head, no matter what else was happening. People would shake their heads and worry what would become of him.

As time went on, the family became poorer and poorer, despite all the efforts of the mother and father and the elder brothers. Finally, the oldest brother announced that there were just no opportunities for an ambitious young man in a country where people told legendary stories about eating more than one meal a day. He must leave home and seek his fortune. He kissed his parents, told his second brother to take care of the Fool, and set out on a sunny morning across the cracked clay of their poor farm.

He had gone no more than a day's journey when he spotted something along the side of the road, half hidden under a burnt-out bush. At first glance it looked like a plain stick, about waist high, but the sharp-eyed brother noticed a glow of light all around it. "A magic staff!" he cried excitedly and seized it. Power surged through him and he shook the stick at the sky. "Now nothing can stop me!" he cried. "I will make my fortune and return home to rescue my family."

Just as he was striding off, he heard a terrible roar. He turned and saw an ogre about to rush at him. The ogre stood ten feet tall, with shoulders like rocks, and thick scales for skin, and teeth like sharpened iron stakes. Though he shook with fear, the eldest brother told himself he had no reason to worry. He pointed the magic stick at the ogre and shouted "Stop this monster from devouring me!" A blast of light streaked from the stick—but instead of striking the ogre it ran all through the eldest brother. In an instant his entire body had turned to stone. Furious, the hungry ogre lumbered away.

A year went by. When Spring came once more, the second brother looked one day at the scraps of bread on the table and shook his head. "It's no use," he told his parents. "Something terrible must have happened to my brother or he would have returned by now. We have become more wretched than ever. I must go seek my fortune." His parents begged him not to go. If he didn't come back, they said, and they died, who would take care of the Fool? But he only kissed them and shook his head sadly at his younger brother. Then he left.

Three days from home he came upon his petrified brother. The magic stick still lay at his stone feet. "Oh my poor poor brother," he cried. "He must have found this magic stick and tried to use it and it turned against him." He picked up the stick. The power in it made him tremble all over. "Well," he said.

"Luckily I am much cleverer than my brother. Besides, he always wanted glory. I just want to feed my family. As long as I don't make any mistakes I can use this stick to make my fortune."

He had gone no more than a day's journey when he heard a roar. An ogre was rushing at him. Its mouth drooled with thick black slime. The brother raised his stick. He could see fire run along its length in its eagerness to unleash itself. "Prevent this creature from devouring me!" he ordered the stick. Just as the ogre reached him he turned all to stone.

Another year passed. One day the Fool said "Didn't my brothers leave some time ago? I remember something about that." His parents nodded. "They haven't come back, have they?" His parents shook their heads. "Oh," said the Fool, "I guess that means I'll have to go seek my fortune."

"No!" his parents cried. They knew he could hardly find his way out the door. But nothing they said could dissuade him. Maybe he'd forget. They tried to distract him, with stories, and games, and a bunch of flowers that his mother begged from a neighbor who had managed to grow a small garden. The next morning, however, the Fool tied a change of clothes in a large cloth and set out.

No sooner had he left the house than he saw a rainbow. "Oh look!" he cried, and raised his arms, flinging his bundle away from him. His poor father had to run after it or the Fool would have forgotten it entirely. As the Fool wandered up the road, his parents held each other and wept loudly.

The Fool had traveled several days, with detours to follow various small animals, when he came upon his petrified eldest brother. "How wonderful," he said. "Here we all thought something terrible must have happened, but instead someone's made a statue of him. He must be famous. How nice. He always wanted to be famous."

Several more days later, he discovered his second brother. "Now our family has really done well," he said. "Statues of both my brothers. Won't my parents be happy. Maybe someone will make a statue of me someday." As soon as he said it, the idea struck him as so ludicrous he bent over laughing. With his face close to the ground like that, he discovered the stick at his brother's feet. "Oh look," he said. "Just what I need to carry my bundle." He tied his cloth to the end of the stick and lifted it to his shoulder. A tickle ran all through his body. "What a nice breeze," he said to himself.

That night he used his stick to dig up some roots for his dinner. To his surprise they tasted like a marvelous feast, with flavors from roast quail to wild strawberries creme de menthe. "What amazing roots," he thought. "I'll have to tell my brothers about this." With the stick he drew an outline of a bed on the dirt. When he lay down on it he found it as soft as baby goose feathers. He smiled and fell asleep.

He had hardly set out the next morning when the ground shook with a great roar. "Thunder," he said to himself. "I hope the rain falls on something else and not me." Behind him, a sudden burst of rain like knives fell on the ogre who had just opened his mouth wide to bite off the Fool's head. As the rain hit him the ogre screamed, for ogres cannot stand water. He thrashed about but it was no use. The scales cracked, the skin underneath sizzled and burned. Finally the creature fell down dead.

"I wonder what all that noise was," the Fool said. He walked away without turning around.

For several weeks he wandered. Each day his stick dug up banquets in the form of roots, and every night he slept peacefully in his outline of a bed, untouched by animals or storms or even damp.

One day he came to a river. Beyond it he could see houses and fields, even a city, and somewhere near the city what looked like a tower of light. He wondered how he could get across. It was too far to swim and he could not see a bridge. "If only I was clever like my brothers and not such a fool," he thought, "I would know what to do." In a rare burst of annoyance he struck his stick against a tree. "I wish I had a boat!" he said. He heard a crackle, and when he turned around the tree had gone and in its place lay a fine rowboat. "How nice," the Fool said, as he got in and began rowing. "Someone just left this for strangers. What a generous land. Maybe here I can find my fortune."

When he reached the other side he found signs posted up and down the riverbank. Since he could not read he paid them no attention, and began walking toward the tower of light which shimmered and

flickered in the bright sun. In fact, the signs were all about the tower.

The king and queen of this land had a daughter who was so beautiful that princes from lands as exotic as Cathay, Persia, and England all sent delegations asking for her hand in marriage. Some even came in person and bowed down with great flourishes (and expensive presents) to press their case. Her parents considered the princess a gift from heaven itself, for they could pick a husband who would bring even more wealth and power to their kingdom. Empire, they told each other. Through their daughter's marriage they would change from mere king and queen to emperor and empress.

Unfortunately, when they had calculated the best possible match for the princess, they discovered that the gods had played an awful trick on them. Their daughter refused to marry! At first, they thought they might have gone a little too far in their choice. The prospective husband was not exactly young, and the warts on his bent nose and saggy chin ruled out any suggestion of handsome. So they found a prince whose good looks caused young women to faint any time he walked down an open street {newspaper editorials suggested he wear a veil, or simply stay home, but the prince only laughed}. Again the princess refused.

"What do you want?" her parents shouted at her. "Just tell us."

"I want to study," she said.

They stared at her. Study? They knew she spent a great deal of time with her books, rather odd books, in fact, but study? They'd always assumed she'd read all those books because she was bored and waiting to get married. Study rather than a husband?

They arranged one match after another. The princess refused to see them. Now they became truly angry. They told her they would choose a husband for her and she would marry the man, even if the palace slaves had to drag her from her precious library.

For the first time the princess became frightened. Until now she'd thwarted them by her will and by the good sense of prospective husbands who knew how miserable an unwilling wife could make them. But suppose her parents chose some brute who would relish forcing his wife to obey him? Suppose he took away her books?

Usually the princess did not study anything very practical. She preferred instead to ponder the mysteries of creation and the secret discoveries of ancient philosophers. Nevertheless, some of her books did contain a few magic formulas, if only to show the writer's disdain for such ordinary concerns. For days she searched through her books (she'd never gotten around to putting them in any order) until at last she came upon something truly useful.

While the palace slept the princess secretly borrowed a wheelbarrow from the gardener and carted all her books out to an open field. Standing in the middle of them, she cast a spell. A glass tower rose up beneath her, so steep and smooth that no one could possibly climb it. On top of it sat the delighted princess and all her books. Safe! She clapped her hands in joy. A moment later, she had opened one of her favorite works, a treatise on creation told from the viewpoint of trees instead of people.

Several hours later a noise disturbed her. She peered down the edge of the tower to see her parents there, waving their arms and stamping their feet. They screamed, they cursed, they threatened to tear down the glass mountain chip by chip. She paid no attention. Finally, her mother pointed out that she had taken no food with her. If she didn't come down and obey them she would starve.

Not so, the princess knew. As part of her years of study, she had learned the language of the birds. In a pure voice she sang out to them and they brought her whatever she needed. When her parents heard her song and saw the birds deliver her fruits and fish eggs and delicacies stolen from wealthy tables they finally knew she had beaten them.

Still they would not give up entirely. They sent out messages to all the princes and kings they could reach that whoever could climb the glass tower and bring down the princess could marry her on the spot. They even put up signs all about the land to announce this challenge. Secretly they hoped some lout

would be the one to get her. It would serve her right, they told themselves.

The Fool knew none of this, for signs meant nothing to him. Music, however— Just as the Fool started toward the glass tower the princess began her song. The Fool stopped and closed his eyes. Tears spilled out from beneath the lids to slide down into his wide smile. Never, never, had he heard such a wondrous sound. When it ended, and he opened his eyes, he saw birds of all colors and sizes, condors, parrots, humming birds, all of them in a great swirl around the top of the tower. Quickly he walked toward the light and the birds.

As he approached it he saw men, more and more of them as he got closer, most of them injured in some way, and all of them miserable. They hobbled about on crutches, they held bandaged heads in their hands, a few lay on the ground in the middle of broken contraptions. One man had strapped giant wood and cloth wings to his back, then jumped off a tree, hoping to flap his way up the tower. He'd only fallen on his head. Another had made shoes with wire springs so that he might bounce high enough to reach the princess. He'd only crashed into the side of the glass..

The Fool looked around at all these sad figures. "What happened to all of you?" he asked.

One of the men stopped groaning long enough to look up at the Fool's cheerful face. "What are you?" he said, "Some kind of fool?"

The Fool nodded happily. "That's right," he said. He thought he might have found a friend but the man only groaned more loudly and turned away.

"Well," the Fool said to himself, "if I want to climb to the top I better get started." He set the stick down on the base of the tower in order to brace himself. A step formed in the glass. He placed the stick a little ways up and then another step formed. "This is easy," he said. "I don't know why all those men made such a fuss. I'm just a Fool, but even I can find my way up a bunch of steps."

When he reached the top the princess stood there. She was furious! She pulled at her hair, she twisted her face in anger, she hopped up and down. Even so, the Fool thought her the most wonderful being he had ever seen.

"What are you doing here?" she shouted. "Why can't anyone ever leave me alone? How did you get up the tower?"

Her fury so startled the Fool he could hardly speak. "I ... I just climbed up the steps. It wasn't very hard. Really it wasn't."

Now the princess stared at the glass steps. Then she looked at the Fool, and then at his stick, which shone with a soft pink glow. She nodded to herself. Again she looked at the Fool. She could see a light in him purer than the magic of his stick.

Still she refused to let go of her anger. "So," she said. "Now you expect me to marry you?"

"Marry you?" the Fool said. "Marry you? I could never think to marry someone as wise and wonderful as you. I'm just a Fool. I only came here because of the singing. I just wanted to hear you sing with the birds." He began to cry.

The princess felt her heart dissolve and flow out of her body. No, she told herself, she would not allow any tricks. "Right," she said sarcastically. "And I suppose you didn't see all the signs my father has planted everywhere."

The Fool said "I saw them, but I don't know what they said. I can't read."

The princess's mouth fell open. She stared and stared at him. How sweet he looked, how kind, how honest. "Will you marry me?" she blurted.

"What?" the Fool said. He looked around at the piles and piles of books, some as high as a house, some arranged like a table or a bed. "Marry you? I ... How could I marry you? I just told you, I can't read."

"That's so wonderful," the princess cried. "I read more than enough for any two people. We will be perfect together." She began to sing the song a partridge hen sings when she has found the perfect mate. The Fool closed his eyes and became so swept up in joy he would have fallen right off the tower if the princess had not held on tightly to him. She stopped singing finally and kissed him. "We will be so happy," she said.

"Oh yes," he told her. "Yes!"

Before they went down from the tower, the princess looked at her beloved Fool and his ragged clothes. "Hmm," she said. To her he was perfect in every way, but she knew what her father would think of such a husband, and even though the king had said he would marry her to whoever climbed the tower she feared he would try to stop them. "Do you have any other clothes?" she asked him.

He looked at the bundle on the end of the stick. "Well," he said. "I did bring an extra shirt and trousers, just in case I had to give these to somebody who needed them more than me. But I'm afraid my other clothes have just as many holes as the ones I am wearing." He reached down and untied the bundle for the first time since he'd placed it on his stick. Then he gasped in surprise. His ragged clothes had vanished and in their place lay the softest and most elegant tunic and leggings anyone had ever seen, softer than silk, stronger than wool, with a river of colors woven into the fabric. The Fool scratched his head. "Now where did this come from?" he said.

Once the Fool had dressed, the princess called the larger birds, the condors and rocs and vultures, and asked them if they would carry her books down to the ground. Then she took her sweet Fool's hand and together they walked down the steps of the tower.

The king and queen were delighted to see their daughter married at last, and to such a fine prince—or so they thought, for when they asked him his kingdom he just waved his stick and said "Oh, over there," and each of them saw a vision of fields of diamonds growing like berries, and castles as large as mountains. They offered to have the Fool and their daughter live with them, but their new son-in-law said "No, thank you. I promised my mother and father I'd come right home as soon as I made my fortune." He wondered why the king and queen laughed, but he thought it rude to ask too many questions (he so rarely understood the things other people said anyway), so he said nothing. They set out with seven horses, one for the Fool, one for the princess, one for the treasures the king and queen were sending to the Fool's parents, and four for the princess's books.

Just as they approached the river, the ground shook and they heard a roar like the earth itself breaking in two. The princess turned around and saw a whole army of ogres racing toward them! Word had gotten to the creatures of their brothers destruction and now they wanted revenge. *They'll tear us to shreds*, the princess thought. *We have to do something*. But what could they do? There stood the river, too wide for them to swim across, and besides, what would happen to her books in the water? She looked up at the sky but there were no birds near enough to come to their rescue. Knowing that the ogres would reach them in just a few minutes, she began frantically to search through her books for the ones on magic. *If only*, she thought, as she raced from horse to horse, *she had paid more attention to practical issues*.

The Fool meanwhile paid no attention at all to any of these events. He did hear the noise and felt the ground shake but thought it might be a herd of animals running back and forth to enjoy the day. And he did wonder why his bride kept dashing from one horse to another, but trusted her totally, for after all, she was so much wiser than he. He might have wondered how they would cross the river, for someone had taken away the rowboat, except that right then, on the other side of the river, he saw his favorite sight in all the world (after his wife, of course). A rainbow!

The Fool did what he always did when he saw a rainbow, he raised his arms above his head to greet it. This time, however, he held the stick in his hand. The moment he lifted his arms, the entire river separated before him. The water rose up on either side, huge walls of water high enough to block the sky. You see, the Fool's stick was a very old magic stick, and it knew some very special tricks.

"Hurry," the princess urged as she spurred her horse, and the pack horses, across the passageway between the walls of water. The Fool laughed, thinking his wife wanted to exercise the horses, and so he galloped alongside her.

The princess looked over her shoulder. There came the ogres, filling the path, coming closer and closer. By the time she and the Fool and their horses reached the other side the entire army of ogres raced between the watery walls. *What can we do?* she thought. *They'll swallow us.*

The Fool glanced back, curious to see what his wife was looking at with such distress. All he could make out was a cloud of dust. "Now that's not right," he said to himself. "People depend on this river. What will happen if the water just stays piled up like that? I sure wish the river would come back down again." The moment he said it, the walls of water crashed down in a furious whirl of Waves. The entire army of ogres washed away and was never heard from again.

Now they set out happily for home. Anytime the Fool got lost (at least four or five times a day) the princess called a hawk or a raven to look ahead and return them to the path. They were two days from home when they came upon the Fool's second brother, still fixed in stone in the act of trying to cast a spell. "Look," the Fool said to his wife. "Not everyone in my family is a fool. My second brother has become so famous someone has made a statue of him." With his stick he tapped twice on the shoulder.

Instantly his brother came to life, falling to the ground where he looked up confused. "What ..." he said. "Where am I?"

"Brother!" cried the Fool and gave him a big hug. "What a nice surprise. Look, this is my wife, she's a princess, imagine that. Your foolish brother married to a genuine princess. And look, here's our treasure, a whole lot of it, or so my wife tells me, and here are all her books." He helped his confused brother onto his own horse and walked alongside, caught up in a happy chatter. Just as the path turned around the side of a hill, the Fool glanced back. To himself he said, "I wonder what happened to that statue?"

A day later they came to the first brother. Once again the Fool tapped the shoulder with the stick, and once again his brother came to life. Now they all traveled together, and when the Fool's parents saw them they wept with joy. With one of the jewels from the treasure chest they bought food and laid out a feast. Just as they all sat down to eat, the oldest brother suddenly remembered what had started them all on their adventures. "The staff," he said, "what happened to the magic staff?"

"Do you mean my walking stick?" the Fool said. "When we came close to home I realized I didn't need it anymore, so I threw it away."

"You threw it away?" both brothers repeated. "Where?"

The Fool shrugged. He saw his wife look at him with laughter and love and smiled back at her. "I don't remember," he said. "I just tossed it in some bushes."

And there it remains to this very day.

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