

Imagine

TRAVELLER'S TALES NO. I



Tattercoats

IN the days of the saints and martyrs, there was once a princess called *Pobffwraphlu* (pob-fur-a-flu) in a castle in Wales, on a windy cliff that looked over the bright sea and caught the whispers in the wind from the island beyond the straits. Though beloved by her parents, the Queen, her mother had died shortly after she was born, leaving her father the king to mourn his wife exceedingly for a year and a day. He swore to all that he could never marry another, for none was as beautiful as his dead love, except perhaps, for his daughter.

And so the princess and the king lived with all their servants and soldiers, while the ministers and courtiers gossiped and grumbled about the king taking a new wife,

for surely the poor girl needed a mother? *Pobffwraphlu* grew from child to maid and still the king remained unwed.

The King Remarries

Finally, after some years, the chief minister and the chamberlain both came to the king and told him of a beautiful widow—woman with two grown daughters, living in a grand mansion beyond the mountains in the fat, green country over the border. They persuaded the king to see her and she was invited to the feast at the Twelve Days of Christmas; shortly after New Year, these two were married. However, the new queen proved a bitter, jealous woman, envious of *Pobffwraphlu*, now a beautiful young woman. She saw her two daughters as the heirs to the castle and the kingdom and these pampered, self-indulgent and spiteful girls gave the poor princess *Pobffwraphlu* nothing but grief. The gentle princess, ebony-haired, red-lipped and eyes the colour of a summer sky, bore the brunt of their pinches and slaps without a whimper or word to her father. Despite this, the constant

carping of her step-mother was always to be heard about the castle, saying *Pobffwraphlu* was lazy, greedy and sly. She and her lazy daughters found ways to constantly keep the princess hungry and her chambers cold, but *Pobffwraphlu*'s temper was always sweet and her words kind. The king seemed blind to his queen's mistreatment of his youngest daughter, for he had become besotted with the woman and could not see her faults, seeing only the good in her and her hoyden girls.

The Princess' Friends

The princess found her friends amongst the jugglers and tumblers at the castle and the story-tellers, fortune-tellers and Gypsies who came to play and dance at festivals and the St Martin's Day, Midwinter, Christmas, Easter and Mayday feasts. Their stories and songs made



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golden, happy memories that Pobffwraphlu would treasure, when her step-mother and step-sisters seemed particularly cruel; the princess would take these memories out and hold them close, basking in their warmth in the cold of her chambers.

Pobffwraphlu would walk also amongst the trees of the forest close by, much against the will of her step-mother who was fearful of the forest and thought it a dangerous, forbidding place. There Pobffwraphlu would wander, talking to the woodland creatures, the birds and the deer; she fancied she could hear them reply, 'Do not worry Pobffwraphlu, we shall keep you warm and bring you berries and fruits'. As she grew older, these creatures kept her company and her secrets, for the princess had dreams of escaping her sad life and becoming loved and cherished by a family who would protect and care for her. As for food and warmth, the foxes and squirrels brought grapes, berries and nuts, to keep her hunger away, whilst the birds, badgers and hedgehogs brought leaves, twigs and sticks that she could use to kindle a small, warm fire where she might sleep safe and cosy in her rooms, dreaming of her escape to a new life in distant lands. In her dreams she was never hungry, cold or unhappy and the world was a colourful, joyful place.

The new Queen dies

In the cold, damp winter, the new queen took to her bed, as she often did, complaining to her doctor of her aches and pains, grumbling at her daughters, chiding the servants constantly and carping at poor Pobffwraphlu, until everyone was

wearied by her misery, including the queen herself. As days passed, she grew weaker and more querulous until one bitter winter's night she died, though it wasn't the coughing that carried her off, but the coffin they carried her off in.

Pobffwraphlu's step-sisters were worn out with weeping, their faces puffy and eyes red (though they still managed to eat their own dinners and most of Pobffwraphlu's) and the sound of their wailing throughout the castle was worse than a banshee!

Her father was once again without a wife and the three young women had no mother; soon the court

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began to whisper, 'It wasn't proper for the king to be alone with three young maids, he must marry again! Still in his prime,' they said to each other, 'still handsome enough for a duchess or countess to find attractive!'

Soon the whispers became talk and the talk became grumbling and the grumbling became argument and the argument became shouting, heard by the king, the princesses and the servants, through the council chamber doors. The king resolved to hold an audience with his ministers and council.

'You must marry again, my king', said the chief minister. The

chamberlain and council members nodded. The king looked grim, he did not wish to wed again, twice was enough he said, but marry he must, insisted the councillors, 'Your people grow restless with the absence of a queen.'

So eventually the king agreed and the royal council passed a law, signed by the king's own hand, that whosoever should fit the royal ring, would become the new bride of the king. The ring had been handed down from queen to queen since ancient times and made from bright Roman silver with the eagle of the legions etched into the crown and Latin letters engraved into the band, though none could read them now, being so faint.

The trying of the ring

Each day following, a hundred princesses from across the land and over the borders into England, Scotland and Ireland, passed through the castle gates in their finery, with pages, guards and grooms behind. They lightly stepped into the Council Chamber and tried the ring before the lords and ladies of the court, whilst the king sat glowering in his tall, oak throne on the dais. The chamberlain and chief minister looked glum. After a week, the daughters of duchesses and dukes came to try, then the following week the daughters of countesses and counts, until only the daughters of town burghers and merchants were trooping through the hall to try the ring; but as the days went by, none could fit the royal ring, being either too big or too small in the finger. Many a widow woman thought about the chance to try the ring too, but none wanted to take on three

step—daughters, one good and two bad, if the rumours from the castle servants were true!

Early one morning, the two step—sisters were squabbling in the Council Chamber, having sneaked in before the hopeful maidens came to try the ring, arguing over which one of them could become queen and rule as their mother had once done. ‘Why should someone else have all our mother’s dresses and jewels, her place at court?’ they complained, ‘These things are ours by right!’

They couldn’t agree though, as to who should try first and began to quarrel. As they pulled each other’s hair, slapped, scratched and snatched at the ring, their step—sister, Pobffwraphlu came in to see what the fuss was. She gently took the ring from the hands of her step—sisters and pleaded with them not to quarrel so. They could not marry the king, she said, for they were his step—daughters. The two spoiled sisters sulked and flounced at her, demanding that she give the ring back to them.

‘I cannot give you the ring, for you will only squabble and quarrel’, Pobffwraphlu replied. As she said this, she slipped the ring over her finger to keep it safe from her squabbling step—sisters and put her hands behind her back. Just then, the chief minister and the chamberlain came into the chamber, with all the courtiers, to begin the day. They looked at the purple, velvet cushion on which the ring usually sat, but could not see it.

‘Where is the ring?’ the chamberlain asked. He glanced at all three young women, suspicion in their eyes.

Before you can say all-fur-and-feathers, up jumped the wicked girls. ‘She took it!’ both the spoiled step—sisters cried, ‘And will not give it back!’ The chamberlain, who knew the tricks and jealousy of the step—sisters, looked kindly at the ebony-haired princess. ‘My lady’, he said gently, ‘Please return the ring to the royal cushion and let us begin with the trying—on for the day.’

The Princess and the ring

The princess took her hands from behind her back, ready to take off the ring and replace it on the velvet cushion, but the chamberlain’s face turned pale and sickly as he saw the ring on her ring-finger. A cry went

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up from behind him. The chief minister had looked too, his eyes wide with surprise and alarm.

‘The ring fits the princess!’ they gasped in shock. Soon the council members and the rest of the court pushed forward to see for themselves; there, shining brightly upon the princess’ slender ring-finger was the royal ring of the queen, shining brightly in a shaft of morning sunlight.

‘The ring fits! She must marry the king!’, said the chief minister, ‘But she cannot marry her father!’, cried the chamberlain, horrified. ‘But the

law is the law!’ cried the courtiers, ‘you cannot ignore the ring!’

‘But she cannot marry her father!’, cried the jealous step—sisters, furious at the minsters, courtiers and most of all, their sister, for they could see their grasp on gowns, jewels, banquets and balls disappearing as quick as boiled asparagus.

The trembling princess looked about her, tears in her eyes, pleading with the chamberlain, chief minister, the dukes and counts. ‘You cannot ignore the law!’ they said sternly, ‘and you cannot shame your father.’

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The king, hearing the shouting and being much afraid of what it meant, stepped into the Council Chamber with all his pages and knights at his side. ‘What is the meaning of this hubbub? Quiet!’ he bellowed, appalled at the noise and confusion that swirled out of the Council Chamber doors and around the corridors and stairways of the castle. All shouting suddenly ceased, for who does not obey the king?

Slowly, slyly the spiteful step—sisters stepped up to the king and, glancing at the trembling girl in the midst of the circle of ministers, standing like a doe surrounded by belling hounds, they told the king that their step—sister had tried on the ring, as she wished to be queen in their mother’s place, and oh me, oh my, the ring fit! They dragged poor Pobffwraphlu’s hand out from behind her back and pointed at the ring on her ring—finger. ‘It fits?!’ gasped the king, his face pale as

ashes. 'Why did you try on the ring, my daughter?' asked the king, distraught.

'Father, I did not,' Pobffwraphlu replied, 'I took it from my sisters who were squabbling over it, to place it back on the velvet cushion for safe-keeping. It slipped onto my finger accidentally. Please father!', she begged, 'you cannot marry your daughter.' But the chamberlain, the chief minister (who had changed his mind when he saw the opportunity to bully and browbeat a gentle princess) and all the courtiers looked at the king, their faces filled with stern authority, saying, 'The law *is* the law, my liege. You cannot ignore the ring.' Truth-be-told, a king could be browbeaten too and that, thought the chamberlain and chief minister, could be of use in the future.

'I cannot marry my daughter!' cried the king, 'I cannot shame myself and her!' But the minsters and court were adamant; 'You cannot ignore the law, or else *all* will do so and then where would we be?' So the king, with leaden heart and wooden limbs, gazed upon his beautiful daughter and was persuaded by his courtiers and ministers that he *must* obey the law, the very law he had made; for even kings and queens cannot be above the law!

The Princess' Wedding

'When will the wedding take place, my liege?', asked the chief minister, all bright, brisk business. The king looked at his daughter, who stood shaking in the midst of all the courtiers, with tears falling from her cerulean eyes at the centre of the chamber. 'When will the wedding be, my daughter?' he asked softly.

'When I have three gowns for the wedding', whispered the desperate young woman, 'a gown for the betrothal feast, a deep, blue gown the colour of twilight, sewn with sapphires from Egypt; a golden gown the colour of the sunrise, with sequins from Venice, made of silk from Cathay, for the church ceremony; and a gown for the wedding ball, a silver gown the colour of the moon, sewn with diamonds from Tartary, that sparkles like the stars.'

The Treasurer looked aghast, 'The expense!' he cried, but the king was adamant, his daughter must have these three gowns before the wedding and they must be made by the best sempsters and seamstresses in the kingdom.

So orders went out across the land for the dresses, to the cordwainers for slippers of the softest, finest Spanish leather, and over the German Sea to Amsterdam for the diamonds and sapphires. Yards of silk threads, velvets and cloth-of-gold all came into the palace workshops, as a royal wedding meant new gowns and suits for the whole court. The palace kitchens began ordering the ingredients for the feasts and festivities; great carts with hocks of ham, lamb and beef; waggons with barrels of wine and malmsey, fine French cognac and sparkling champagne; apples, pears and cherries for tarts and pastries; twenty-four blackbirds for a great pie; the quantities would have filled the larders and cellars of the townsfolk for years, but would all be eaten in three days of wedding celebrations!

That terrible, long, lonely evening the creatures of the forest and birds of the air crept into the princess'

chamber at twilight, when all the bustle of the day had ended, comforting the princess as she sat through the long hours thinking of the day of her wedding. They brought Pobffwraphlu gifts from the fields and hedgerows, tasty morsels and the juice of berries, as these were all the poor girl could eat, her stomach tied in knots and twisted like old rope. 'I cannot marry my father,' she whispered to the fox, hedgehog and squirrel sitting around her, 'But I cannot shame the king; and the ring, is the ring, is the king's law!' The doves cooed in sympathy, but what could be done?

As the day of the betrothal feast and wedding ceremony crept closer and closer, Pobffwraphlu became more and more fraught with worry – how could she resolve this impossible situation! The feast was all prepared, the church was decorated in readiness, the castle was scrubbed from tower to drawbridge and the gardens pruned and primped; everything shone even the guards' armour and halberds! The courtiers and ministers had all had their coats and shoes made, their gowns and slippers tailored, their cloaks and hats brushed and buffed. As for the step-sisters, they had maids and seamstresses running to and fro all the day long, fetching ribbons and taffeta, silks and satins, sequins and bombazine whilst they squawked and squabbled over necklaces and bracelets, tiaras and earrings until the whole castle was in an uproar. Only the king looked sombre and sad, his eyes filled with unshed tears whilst deep sighs escaped his chest as he sat, wringing his hands. He cursed the day he signed the law about the ring and marriage of the king, rueing his faith in his ministers and councillors.

Hours passed and all the while, the princess stayed within her chambers, seemingly in quiet contemplation of her coming nuptials and turning away all who came to her door to ask if she would like oyster or lobster soup for the betrothal feast; would she prefer daisies or hawthorn blossoms for the church; had she any particular musical favourites for the wedding march and would she prefer satin or silk for her dancing slippers? But none received an answer, for she would not open the door.

The Princess' plan

Yet all the while only the jugglers, tumblers, fortune-tellers and story-smiths were allowed to see the princess, darting in and out of her chamber quick as-you-like. The courtiers whisper to each other, 'What can the princess be talking to them about? Why does she see them and not us, her courtiers and ladies-in-waiting?' But they do not know that Pobffwraphlu has a plan.

The chamberlain and the chief minister are deeply suspicious of these carnival folk, eying them surreptitiously as they slipped in and out of the chamber's door. 'Who can say what these vagabonds and mountebanks are up to!' they growl to each other; but the king will not hear of them being hindered in their access to the princess Pobffwraphlu, 'She is planning some marvellous entertainment, no doubt, to celebrate the wedding and we shall see it at the feast. Let them pass!' he tells the guardsmen and maids, standing at the chamber door.

Finally, the early morning of the day of the betrothal feast arrives and the

chief minister, the chamberlain, the treasurer and all the councillors stand at the princess' door, behind the king. Behind them are the tailors and dresses, just as she'd asked.

'The dresses are ready, your highness,' the chamberlain says, 'the council awaits, the people grow impatient.' The door opens a crack, just enough to reveal Pobffwraphlu, in the dim light, pale as the moon, tear-stained cheeks and eyes swollen. She looks at the dresses and then at her father's mournful face, a tear running down his cheek. 'We must marry on the morrow', she says sadly, 'after the betrothal feast tonight.'

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'A feast tonight, my lady?' the chamberlain asks, his face surprised and not a little displeased. He'd forgotten the betrothal feast and the gown the colour of twilight, sewn with sapphires. 'I shall wear the Egyptian gown, deep blue with sapphires, for my betrothal.'

The princess looks at her father, who nods and repeats what she has said. 'A betrothal tonight she wishes, and a feast she shall have!' the king announces, 'Go and inform the cooks and get the hall ready, with candles a plenty and lanterns. Wake up the musicians and tell the courtiers to make ready. Bring out the pewter platters and silver drinking mugs and the second-best

wine shall be served.'

And so the feast is made ready, the long tables and benches scrubbed and sanded, the rushes on the floors changed and the lanterns filled with olive oil from far-away Byzantium, while the candelabras are lit with thick, beeswax candles.

The betrothal feast

All the courtiers are chattering, at their seats, waiting for the arrival of the princess in her gown of twilight, all done up in their own finery. And there she is, all of a sudden, slowly walking through the archway of the great doors to the hall, under a veil of the sheerest silk, with silver in her hair and sapphires sparkling on her dress. The dukes and duchesses, the counts and countesses, stand to see the princess as she enters the hall, pale but steady in her steps to the dais and the thrones where the king sits alone.

The step-sisters are livid, furious that their half-sister looks so beautiful in her gown, so pale and sad, so regal and stately; she already looks like a queen, the courtiers say to each other. 'How can she be so calm,' the spoilt girls say, 'when tomorrow she must wed her father?'

The princess does indeed seem calm, though sorrowful, as she walks the length of the hall, stately as a Spanish galleon, slender as a willow and pale as a lily. She finally reaches the dais and drops into a deep curtsy before the king, who bids her rise after a moment of gazing sadly back at her. She steps up, one, two and turns to seat herself on the second throne, the queen's throne, beside her father.

Quickly the food is brought in and all seat themselves at the tables, trying to lift the sombre atmosphere of the king and his daughter as they look in opposite directions, avoiding each other's glance. Pobffwraphlu looks about her from her raised seat, seeking a welcoming, friendly face in the crowd of courtiers, ministers and councillors, but none return her gaze, quickly looking away, furtively watching her from under their eyelashes. There is a sense of shame in all their glances, an uncomfortable embarrassment in their demeanours. For are not all complicit in the scheme to marry her to her father? The chamberlain and chief minister are loudest in their merry-making, but red-faced and not from wine, for they know it is a wicked thing they do, to make the girl of tender years marry her own father.

The Princess' escape

Then a merry tune begins to be played and into the great, shining hall a troupe of dancers step, lively and lightly, tawny-skinned and raven-haired, their particoloured coats and dresses spinning out with each circle they make in the dance. The fiddler and piper are there close-by, the tabouret and naker players beating their small drums in time to the lively tune. One of the dancers spins out into the crowd at the tables, reaching a hand to a gentleman and lifting him to his feet to join the dance. Somewhat unwillingly he goes, awkward at first, but the Gypsy girl leads him in the steps and soon he is smiling in the dance. Others are led into the centre of the hall, clapping and smiling, boys and girls until all is

colour and movement, swirling music and jaunty steps.

The king watches, smiling sadly and his daughter watches him, a look in her eyes that could be goodbye, before she too is gently pulled into the dancing by a Gypsy girl who drapes Pobffwraphlu in a tatterdemalion coat of many colours, over her gown of twilight, strips of colours so bright the eye seems to spin just looking at them, as she twirls and swirls to the tune. The coat spins out, higher and higher until Pobffwraphlu is a circle of light, turning so fast the eye cannot catch her in the centre of the dancers.

'Her gown of twilight, strips of colours so bright the eye seems to spin...

Suddenly, the dance comes to an end as hawthorn blossoms are falling from the ceiling of the hall, covering the dancers in fragrant blooms and littering the floor with crushed petals. They are falling so fast that it's like a sudden snow-storm, covering all in the centre of the hall in soft hail of blossoms. When the petals are finally still, the crowd gasps, for where are the musicians and Gypsy dancers? And where, oh where, is the princess Pobffwraphlu? All that is left is the tatter-coats of many colours, lying like rainbow skins in the centre of the trodden blossoms and petals. As to Gypsies or princesses, there are none...

Some say, Pobffwraphlu went off with the Travellers, marrying a man

called Romani Brown and wandering the world in her bright, particoloured tatter-coats; others tell tales of seeing a princess in the woods, surrounded by creatures of the forest like a woodland queen in her fine gown of twilight, before her court of beasts and birds. Springs and trees all over Wales came to be named for her and pilgrims would travel from far-and-wide to visit these and seek her protection, her charity and her grace, especially amongst the Gypsies and Travellers, for whom she held a special place in their hearts; for had she not sought shelter and safety amongst them?

The tale's end

She never returned to the castle of the cliff over the sea and her father never sought her out, preferring to remain alone. Sometimes he would sigh on his throne in the great hall, a faraway look in his eyes, then he would shake himself and smile at his gaggle of step-grandchildren (for the spoiled-sisters grew wise and kind, without their jealousy of Pobffwraphlu to gnaw and bite them and married gentle men). The sound of children's laughter in the castle gave the old king comfort and the court were satisfied that one of the growing sons or daughters would be king or queen after the old king had gone.

The chamberlain and chief minister were quickly dismissed by the king, after the feast, packed off to a monastery in the mountains where they contemplated their sins on thin gruel and dry bread. The rest of the court soon forgot their part in the events and came to forget the princess in time, though her father the king never did...