

# *The Princess With Twenty Petticoats*

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Dutch

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*Intermediate*  
*12 min read*

Long, long ago, before ever a blue flax-flower bloomed in Holland, and when Dutch mothers wore wolf-skin clothes, there was a little princess, very much beloved by her father, who was a great king, or war chief. She was very pretty and fond of seeing herself. There were no metal mirrors in those days, nor any looking glass. So she went into the woods and before the pools and the deep, quiet watercourses, made reflection of her own lovely face. Of this pleasure she never seemed weary.

Yet sometimes this little princess was very naughty. Then her temper was not nearly so sweet as her face. She would play in the sand and roll around in the woods among the leaves and bushes until her curls were all tangled up. When her nurse combed out her hair with a stone comb—for no other kinds were then known—she would fret and scold and often stamp her foot. When very angry, she called her nurse or governess an “aurochs,”—a big beast like a buffalo. At this, the maid put up her hands to her face. “Me—an aurochs! Horrible!” Then she would feel her forehead to see if horns were growing there.

The nurse—they called her “governess,” as the years went on—grew tired of the behavior of the bad young princess. Sometimes she went and told her mother how naughty her daughter was, even to calling her an aurochs. Then the little girl only showed her bad temper worse. She rolled among the leaves all the more and mussed up her ringlets, so that the governess could hardly comb them out smooth again.

It seemed useless to punish the perverse little maid by boxing her ears, pinching her arm, or giving her a good spanking. They even tried to improve her temper by taking away her dinner, but it did no good.

Then the governess and mother went together to her father. When they complained of his daughter to the king, he was much worried. He could fight strong men with his club and spear, and even giants with his sword and battle-axe; but how to correct his little daughter, whom he loved as his own eyes, was too much for him. He had no son and the princess was his only child, and the hopes of the family all rested on her. The king wondered how she would govern his people, after he should die, and she became the queen. Yet he was glad for one thing: that, with all her naughtiness, she was, like her father, always kind to animals. Her pet was a little aurochs calf. Some hunters had killed the mother of the poor little thing in winter time. So the princess kept the creature warm and it fed out of her hand daily.

It was in gloom and with a sad face that the king walked in the woods, thinking how to make a sweet-tempered lady out of his petulant daughter, who was fast growing up to be a tall, fine-looking woman.

Now when the king had been himself a little boy, he was very kind to all living creatures, wild and tame, dumb and with voice—yes, even to the trees in the forest. When a prince, the boy would never let the axe men cut down an oak until they first begged pardon of the fairy that lived in the tree.

There was one big oak, especially, which was near the mansion of his father, the king. It was said that the doctors found little babies in its leafy branches, and brought them to their mothers. The prince-boy took great care of this tree. He was taught by a wise man to cut off the dead limbs, keep off the worms, and warn away all people seeking to break off branches—even for Yule-tide, which came at our Christmas time.

Once when some hunters had chased a young she-aurochs, with her two calves, into the king's park, the prince, though he was then only a boy, ran out and drove the rough fellows away. Then he sheltered and fed the aurochs family of three, until they were fresh and fat. After this he sent a skilled hunter to imitate the sound of an aurochs mother, to call the aurochs father to the edge of the woods. He then let them all go free, and was happy to see the dumb brutes frisking together.

Now that the boy-prince was grown to be a man and had long been king, and had forgotten all about the incident of his earlier years, he was one day walking in the forest.

Suddenly a gentle breeze arose and the leaves of the old oak tree began first to rustle and then to whisper. Soon the words were clear, and the spirit in the oak said:

“I have seen a thousand years pass by, since I was an acorn planted here. In a few moments I shall die and fall down. Cut my body into staves. Of these make a wooden petticoat, like a barrel, for your daughter. When her temper is bad, let her put it on and wear it until she promises to be good.”

The king was sad at the thought of losing the grand old tree, under which he had played as a boy and his fathers before him. His countenance fell.

“Cheer up, my friend,” said the oak, “for something better shall follow. When I pass away, you will find on this spot a blue flower growing. Where the forest was shall be fields, on which the sun shines. Then, if your daughter be good, young women shall spin something prettier than wooden petticoats. Watch for the blue flower. Moreover,” added the voice of the tree, “that I may not be forgotten, do you take, henceforth, as your family name Ten Eyck” (which, in Dutch, means “at the oak”).

At this moment, a huge aurochs rushed into the wood. Its long hair and shaggy mane were gray with age. The king, thinking the beast would lower his horns and charge at him, drew his sword to fight the mighty brute that seemed to weigh well-nigh a ton.

But the aurochs stopped within ten feet of the king and bellowed; but, in a minute or two, the bellowing changed to a voice and the king heard these good words:

“I die with the oak, for we are brothers, kept under an enchantment for a thousand years, which is to end in a few moments. Neither a tree nor an aurochs can forget your kindness to us, when you were a prince. As soon as our spirits are released, and we both go back to our home in the moon, saw off my right horn and make of it a comb for use on your daughter’s curls. It will be smoother than stone.”

In a moment a tempest arose, which drove the king for shelter behind some rocks hard by. After a few minutes, the wind ceased and the sky was clear. The king looked and there lay the oak, fallen at full length, and

the aurochs lay lifeless beside it.

Just then, the king's woodmen, who were out—thinking their master might be hurt—drew near. He ordered them to take out the right horn of the aurochs and to split up part of the oak for slaves. The next day, they made a wooden petticoat and a horn comb. They were such novelties that nearly every woman in the kingdom came to see them.

After this, the king called himself the Lord of the Land of Ten Eyck, and ever after this was his family name, which all his descendants bore. Whenever the princess showed bad temper, she was forced to wear the wooden petticoat. To have the boys and girls point at her and make fun of her was severe punishment.

But a curious thing took place. It was found that every time the maid combed the hair of the princess she became gentler and more sweet tempered. She often thanked her governess and said she liked to have her curls smoothed with the new comb. She even begged her father to let her own one and have the comb all to herself. It was not long before she surprised her governess and her parents by combing and curling her own hair. In truth, such a wonderful change came over the princess that she did not often have to wear the wooden petticoat, and after a year or two, not at all. So the gossips nearly forgot all about it.

One summer's day, as the princess was walking in the open, sunny space, where the old oak had stood, she saw a blue flower. It seemed as beautiful as it was strange. She plucked it and put it in her hair. When she reached home, her old aunt, who had been in southern lands, declared it to be the flower of the flax.

During that spring, millions of tiny green blades sprang up where the forest had been, and when summer came, the plants were half a yard high. The women learned how to put the stalks in water and rot the coarse, outer fibre of the flax. Then they took the silk-like strands from the inside and spun them on their spinning-wheels. Then they wove them into pretty cloth.

This, when laid out on the grass, under the sunshine, was bleached white. The flax thread was made first into linen, and then into lace.

“Let us name the place Groen-e'-veld” (Green Field), the happy people cried, when they saw how green the earth was where had been the dark forest. So the place was ever after called the Green Field.

Now when the princess saw what pretty clothes the snow white linen made, she invented a new style of dress. The upper garment, or “rok,” that is, the one above the waist, she called the “boven rok” and the lower one, beneath the waist, her “beneden rok.” In Dutch “boven” means above and “beneden” means beneath. By and by, when, at the looms, more of the beautiful white linen was woven, she had a new petticoat made and put it on. She was so delighted with this one that she wanted more. One after the other, she belted them around her waist, until she had on twenty petticoats at a time. Proud she was of her skirts, even though they made her look like a barrel. When her mother, and maids, and all the women of Groen-é-veld, young and old, saw the princess set the fashion, they all followed. It was not always easy for poor girls, who were to be married, to buy as many as twenty petticoats. But, as it was the fashion, every bride had to obey the rule. It grew to be the custom to have at least twenty; for only this number was thought proper.

So, a new rule, even among the men, grew up. A betrothed young man, or his female relatives assisting him, was accustomed to make a present of one or more petticoats to his sweetheart to increase her wardrobe.

Thus the fashion prevailed and still holds among the women of the coast. Fat or thin, tall or short, they pile on the petticoats and swing their skirts proudly as they walk or go to market, sell their fish, cry “fresh herring” in the streets, or do their knitting at home, or in front of their houses. In some parts of the country, nothing makes a girl so happy as to present her with a new petticoat. It is the fashion to have a figure like a barrel and wear one’s clothes so as to look like a small hogshead.

By and by, the men built a dam to get plenty of water in winter for the rotting of the flax stalks. The linen industry made the people rich. In time, a city sprang up, which they called Rotterdam, or the dam where they rotted the flax.

And, because where had been a forest of oaks, with the pool and rivulet, there was now a silvery stream flowing gently between verdant meadows, they made the arms and seal of the city green and white, two of the former and one of the latter; that is, verdure and silver. To this day, on the arms and flags of the great city, and on the high smoke-stacks of the mighty steamers that cross the ocean, from land to land, one sees the wide, white band between the two broad stripes of green.

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