



The Seven Pigeons

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Portuguese

Intermediate

18 min read

In a deserted part of the rock-bound Cantabrian coast, a poor fisherman, named Pedro, discovered a lovely maiden, magnificently dressed, combing her long jet-black hair with a golden comb studded with diamonds.

It was still early morning, and the sun had not attained its greatest power; and as the tide was at its lowest, an innumerable number of ponds were formed by the rocks which, for a distance of half a mile, were left bare by the receding sea.

Seated near to one of these ponds, and cooling her feet in the water, sat this lovely maiden; and she was so intent on performing her toilet that she did not perceive Pedro, who, thinking she was a mermaid, and might therefore cast a spell over him, hid behind a ledge of rocks, and was able to see and hear her without being seen.

Pedro heard her singing the following words—

“I am daughter of a king
Who rules in Aragon,
My messengers they bring
Me food to live upon.
My father thinks me dead;
My death he did ordain,
For that I would not wed

A wicked knight of Spain.
But those whom he did send
To kill me in this place,
My youth they did befriend,
But cruel is my case.”

“Is it even so,” said Pedro to himself, “that this lovely maiden is the daughter of a king? If I render her assistance I may incur great danger, and if I leave her to die it will be a crying shame; what, then, am I to do?”

As he was thus pondering in his mind, he heard a flapping of wings, and, looking in the direction whence the noise came, he saw a pair of perfectly white pigeons bearing a small basket between them, strung on a thin golden bar, which they held at each end between their beaks.

Descending, they deposited the basket by the side of the princess, who caressed them most tenderly, and then took from the basket some articles of food which she greedily ate (for she had not eaten since the previous morning), and after having finished the contents she again sang—

“I am daughter of a king,
Who thinks that I am dead;
Here on this beach I sing,
By pigeons I am fed.
Thank you, my pretty birds,
Who are so kind to me.
But what avail my words?
Oh, I a bird would be!”

This wish was no sooner uttered than Pedro, much to his astonishment, saw that the lovely princess had been turned into a white swan, with a small gold crown on the top of its head.

Expanding her wings, she gradually rose high above him, attended by the pigeons, and all three flew out to sea; when suddenly Pedro observed a magnificent ship not far from the coast, whose deck was of burnished gold, and her sides of ivory fastened with golden nails. The ropes were of thread of silver, and the sails of white silk, while the masts and yards were made of the finest sandal-wood.

To the ship the three birds flew, and no sooner did they alight on the deck than Pedro observed that they were

three beautiful maidens.

The princess sat on a richly ornamented chair, and the other two maidens on velvet cushions embroidered in gold at her feet.

Over them was spread a superb awning to shelter them from the rays of the sun, and the vessel glided about over the vast expanse of water, now in one direction, now in another, as if the breeze blew to suit the sails.

Pedro was so astonished at what he saw that at last he got frightened, and, being young and nimble, he soon lost sight of the ship; but at every pace he seemed to hear a voice saying, "Run not away, future king of Aragon!"

Pedro continued running till he left the beach far behind, and was now in the pine-forest; nor did he stop till he was in the densest part, when, for very fatigue, he threw himself on the ground, and then he distinctly heard a voice say, "Pedro, you are destined to be King of Aragon; but tell no one."

Not till then had he discovered that he was no longer dressed in fisherman's attire, but that his clothes were of the finest cloth fringed with gold lace.

Pedro, on seeing this, said, "I am enchanted. That princess is indeed a mermaid, and has cast a spell over me. I am undone, my eyes deceive me, and what I take for so much grandeur is but a deception." Saying which, he started to his feet, and hurried towards his village as fast as his legs would carry him.

Arrived at the fishing hamlet, all his old companions paid him such deference that he tried to get out of their way, thinking they did but laugh at him, and, arriving at the door of his widowed mother's cottage, he ran into the kitchen. His mother happened to be frying some fish, and when she saw a grand gentleman enter the apartment she took the pan off the fire, and, bowing low, said, "My noble sir, this house is too humble for such as you; allow me to conduct you to his reverence's house, for there you will find accommodation more suited to your high estate."

Pedro would have replied to his mother, and sought to kiss her hand and ask her blessing, after the custom of the country; but, on attempting to speak, his tongue hung out of his mouth, and he made so strange a noise and so gesticulated that his mother was glad to get out of the house, followed, however, by her son and a large crowd of villagers who had congregated to see the grand stranger.

As soon as it was known throughout the village of the arrival of the grand stranger the church bells pealed, and

the parish priest mingled with the crowd desirous of seeing the new arrival; but as soon as Pedro commenced gesticulating as before, the priest and all the rest of the people were much frightened, for they thought that he was dangerously mad.

Pedro, noticing this, sorrowfully turned away from his native village and took the high-road to the next town.

As he was going along, thinking of his present trouble, he observed a wide gate made of gold, opening into a beautiful garden, into which he hesitated not to enter; for he recollected what the wise woman of the village had once told him—that “grand clothes beget respect.”

“Open wide those gates, O worker midst the flowers,” exclaimed Pedro to an old gardener (for he had now recovered his speech). “I come in cloth of gold to speak unto my love.”

“Sir,” replied the old man, “you may always enter here, for you are D. Pedro of Aragon, I well can see.”

“What very high balconies, a hundred feet in height!” exclaimed Pedro. “Tell me, good old man, does the princess ever come there?”

“To those balconies so high, to feel the cooling breeze,” replied the gardener, “the princess comes there every evening alone.”

“Should she ask you,” continued Pedro, “who I am, tell her that I am your son come from a distant land, and I will help you to water the pinks.”

At her usual time the princess came to her favourite balcony, and seeing Pedro watering the flowers, she beckoned to him, saying—

“O waterer of the pinks, come a little nearer and speak to me.”

“Is it true that you desire to speak to me?” inquired Pedro of the princess.

“No mirror bright ever reflected the truth more correctly than the words I uttered conveyed my desire,” answered the princess.

“Here, then, you have me,” said Pedro. “Order me as your slave; but give me, for I am thirsty, a small ewer of water.”

The princess poured some water into a silver goblet, and having handed it to Pedro, he exclaimed—

“And in this mirror bright of crystal water pure, which does reflect thy form, I quench my heart’s deep thirst.”

“You see yonder palace at the end of the garden,” said the princess to Pedro. “Well, in that palace you will be lodged for the night; but should you ever tell any one what you see there, you will put yourself in danger and cause me great trouble.”

Pedro promised to keep secret whatever he might see that night, and bidding “good night” to the princess, he hastened to the palace which the princess had pointed out to him, and, having entered it, he walked through the marble passage, which seemed to be interminable. On each side of him were rows of majestic columns, surmounted by gold capitals, and now and again he thought he saw the forms of lovely young maidens flitting among the columns.

Just as he was approaching a richly carved fountain surrounded by sacred palms, a maiden of surprising beauty seemed to be addressing a Moor in most impassioned tones, as if claiming his indulgence; but when Pedro got up to them he discovered that both were the work of the statuary.

At every step the surroundings became more magnificent, and the carved ceiling was of such exquisite workmanship that it seemed rather the work of the loom, being so like the finest lace, than of the sculptor.

At last he arrived at the end of this avenue of columns, and noticing a door in front of him, he opened it, and found himself standing on a marble quay, against which the sea waves were washing.

Scanning the vast expanse of water before him, he observed approaching him the same beautiful ship he had seen in the morning.

When the ship came alongside the quay, a sailor sprung on shore, and made her fast by a golden cable; then, addressing Pedro, he said—

“I am glad you have not kept us waiting, for our royal mistress is very wishful to consult you, as one of her favourite doves has broken its right wing, and if you cannot cure it, the princess will die of starvation.”

Pedro made no reply, but stepped on board the ship, which soon got under way, and within a short time they were approaching the coast he knew so well.

Having landed, Pedro saw the princess seated on the sand, nursing one of her white pigeons.

“Pedro of Aragon,” the princess exclaimed, “a stranger dared to enter my royal father’s garden, and in assisting to water the pinks he trod on the wing of my favourite pigeon, and he has broken it.”

“Señora,” replied Pedro, “the intruder did probably seek you, and had no idea of hurting the lovely bird.”

“That matters not,” continued the princess, “for my principal supporter is wounded, and you must cure her. Cut out my heart, and steep this bird in my warm blood, and when I am dead throw my body into the sea.”

“How can I kill one so lovely?” asked Pedro. “I would rather die myself than hurt you!”

“Then you do not care for me, or else you would do as I bid you,” answered the princess.

“Princess, I cannot and will not kill you; but I will do anything else you bid me,” said Pedro.

“Well, then, since you will not kill me, I order you to take this pigeon back with you; for I know it was you who walked in my father’s garden to-day,” continued the princess. “And to-morrow evening, when you see that princess whom you saw to-day, you must kill her, and let her blood fall over this pretty bird.”

Pedro was now in great trouble, for he had promised the princess to do anything she told him to do, except killing her, and he could not break his word; so taking hold of the pigeon very gently, and bidding good-bye to the princess, he again stepped on board the ship, and so depressed was he that he had arrived at the marble quay without being aware of it.

On landing, he retraced his steps through the avenue of pillars, and found himself once more in the garden, where the old gardener was again watering the pinks.

“What very high balconies!” exclaimed Pedro. “Tell me, old gardener of the ancient times, if the princess comes here to-day.”

“The princess loves the fresh sea-breeze,” answered the old man, “and to-night she will come to the balcony, for her noble lover will be waiting for her.”

“And who is the princess’s lover?” inquired Pedro.

“If you will help me to water the pinks, I will tell you,” said the old man.

Pedro readily acquiesced, and putting down the pigeon where he thought no harm would happen to it, he commenced assisting the gardener to water the pinks.

After a silence of a few minutes the gardener said—

“There were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we, and with other seven pigeons we might all be mated; but, as it is, we must remain seven pigeons.’”

“Yes,” put in Pedro; “but I want to know who the princess’s lover is.”

The old man took no heed of the interruption, and continued—

“There were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we——’”

“Stop!” cried Pedro; “I will have no such idle talk. Tell me who this noble lover is, or I will do you an injury.”

“Sir,” cried the gardener, with a very serious countenance, “there were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we, and——’”

“Take your watering-can,” shouted Pedro in disgust; “I will not listen to your nonsense!”

“And yet there were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we;’ and now the last of them is gone, for the noble lover has been false to his trust,” exclaimed the old man, looking very cunningly at Pedro.

At these words Pedro looked towards the place where he had placed the pigeon, and it was no longer there.

Seized with a fit of fury, he was about to lay hands on the gardener, when, to his astonishment, he found that he was also gone.

“I am undone,” cried the unhappy Pedro; “and now I shall not see the princess again.” Saying which he fainted away, and might probably have remained there some time, but that he heard a voice saying, in a jocular

manner—

“There were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we, and——’”

Pedro started to his feet, and close to him was standing the princess whom he had previously seen in the balcony.

“Why do you thus tease me, princess?” said Pedro. “I want to hear no more about the seven horrid pigeons.”

“Don Pedro de Aragon,” answered the princess, “I must tell you that the old gardener to whom you spoke is a magician, and he has possessed himself of the last means I had of regaining my liberty, for I am under his power. Is it not true that you came here with the purpose of killing me?”

“I was under a vow to do so,” replied Pedro; “but I cannot kill you, although I would rather slay you, fair princess, than do you a more grievous injury.”

“Go back, then, to the unhappy lady whom you left on the sea-shore, and tell her that you have been false to your promises,” said the princess.

“How sorry I am,” exclaimed Pedro, “that I was ever destined to be King of Aragon! When I was a poor fisherman, I was far happier than I am now!”

“Pedro of Aragon, the moon will be at the full to-night, and you may then rescue me,” said the princess, “if you have the courage to meet the wicked magician in this garden at midnight, for then is his power weakest.”

“I am prepared for the worst,” replied Pedro, “and I fear not your gaoler.”

“Well, then,” continued the princess, “when the magician sees you he will again tell you about the seven pigeons; but when he has finished, you must tell him that there were once seven wives who had only one husband, and that they are waiting outside to see him. Do as I tell you, and if you are not afraid of his anger, you may be able to free me.”

Pedro promised to do as he was told, and the princess having retired into the palace, Pedro amused himself by walking under the lofty balconies, watching the fire-flies grow brighter as night came on.

Just about midnight the magician was seen watering the pinks, and as soon as he perceived Pedro he said—

“There were once seven pigeons who said, ‘Seven pigeons are we, and with other seven pigeons we might all be mated; but, as it is, we must remain seven pigeons.’”

“Quite so,” put in Pedro. “And once upon a time there were seven wives who had only one husband, and they are waiting outside to see him.”

The magician, at these words, lost all control over his temper; but Pedro heeded him not, rather did he endeavour to increase his rage by repeating all about the seven wives.

“I am undone!” cried the magician; “but if you will induce the spirits of my seven wives to again seek the grave, I will give you what you want, and that is the princess.”

“Give me the princess first,” answered Pedro, “and then I will free you of your wives.”

“Take her, then,” said the magician; “here she is. And forget not what you have promised me, for I may tell you in confidence that a man with seven wives cannot play the magician.”

Pedro hurried away with the princess; and after they had been married and crowned, the princess, who was now queen, one day said to him—

“Pedro, the magician who held me captive from you was Rank, and therefore were the balconies so high. When you saw me on the beach fed by pigeons, it was that you should know my power; on the shore I was attended by winged messengers, and on the sea I sailed about at pleasure.”

“But what about the wounded pigeon?” asked Pedro.

“Recollect, Pedro, what you said to me in the garden,” answered the princess—“that you would rather slay me than do me a more grievous injury. That poor pigeon with its broken wing could no more hope to soar aloft than an injured woman to mix with her former associates.”

“And what about the seven wives who were waiting outside, and who so frightened the old magician, Rank?” continued Pedro.

“They are the seven deadly sins, who would each have a tongue for itself, and yet without tongues are enough to frighten Rank,” answered the princess.

“And who am I, then,” asked Pedro, “to be so exalted now?”

“You are the wise man who strove to do his best, yet tried not to exalt himself above his position,” sweetly answered the princess.

“So that the magician Rank has unwillingly raised the poor fisherman to be king,” whispered Pedro.

“Not Rank alone, but much more so thy own worth.”

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