



The Twelve Dancing Princesses

Christina Collins
Retold Fairy Tales

The Twelve Dancing Princesses

Forests hide secrets. Be not beguiled by the innocence of primroses and gold star flowers and cowslips. Trees harbour secrets. Beneath the trees of this land are the smothered mountains. Valleys tip their rocks down into shards and slivers of rivers and it is cold up here much of the year. Unscaleable summits glitter silver and diamond in the snowy sunlight that fails to penetrate the deepest valleys.

Mountains divide.

There is a softer valley among these forbidden frowning mountains where the emerald hills slope gently down and graze sheep. The river gathers its tributaries and bloats, glutted. Dwellings now emerge behind slopes. These knot together towards a grand stone fortress that shimmers in the hazy trapped heat that fattens the grapes on the receding ascending vines.

We have reached the centre, the naval of the world. The crux of these events.

After a night more than usually opioid in fragrance and the stupor of warmth, the king awoke in his castle in the valley. His dreams had been haunted with the memory of his lost queen, a smooth, lithe girl; too young some had said. But after the first glow of her beauty had lost its novelty as child after child was born with no son, he became angry. His frustration led to cruelty, then ferocity to his queen and daughters. He awoke on this morning with the condemning face of his eldest daughter piercing his dreams and that disgust at the memory of his young wife vanishing to the forest. Yet the King was accustomed to his power safely enveloped in the valley and did not like to be foiled. So on awakening on this morning, the King's first instinct was

perturbation. As tendrils of pine scent insinuated through the open window, the King sought for the lingering cause of his unease; and remembered.

His daughters.

Seized with apprehension, the King sprung from his sumptuous silken bed hung with flowers; dashed from the raised dais of his sleeping throne and billowed through the royal doorway, his brocaded bed robes rippling softly over the floor.

Unceremoniously, despite the best efforts of alert and powdered footmen, the king burst violently into the bedroom of the royal Princesses. Not a glance gave he their twelve velvet curtained beds but his gaze fell hungrily on the floor running against the wall. Here in a row were twelve pairs of hand sewn silken slippers. They lay in useless scraps of brilliantly coloured tatters, disgorged like ripped and silken entrails.

For twelve days now the King had found it necessary to replace his daughters' shoes. And for twelve days not one of his daughters would explain what had destroyed them. This insubordination sat ill with the King's disposition.

The screams of fury and fear echoed through the valley from the castle and ricocheted off the bare peaks for some time after a brooding silence had once more taken hold of the castle.

* * * *

The mountains divide. Kingdoms nestled in those valleys are riven viciously asunder by knife point crag after crag, cutting each off from the others at the throat. Negotiating the thinning paths fraught with scree, blocked by reproachful stones to reach each purified summit was legendary with danger. There had been many deaths of travellers reported by the herders, cut off by mists or storms, who either perished of cold on the mountain face or marched smartly off a precipice. The people of these kingdoms were safe from invasion. News rarely came.

Therefore when the King desired to advertise for assistance in the matter of his daughters' shoes, he feared limited success. After long state discussions with royal advisors bustling to and fro through the airy corridors of the castle, the King agreed the reward must be substantial. Whosoever of his own lands or others could discover what his reticent daughters did with their shoes each night would have the pick of them; a Duchy; the store of ancient amethysts and finally, in time, the throne itself. But if he should fail, the King decreed they may never marry elsewhere; blighting their own dynasty forever.

They came in droves.

The Kingdom was nearly doubled in population. Emergency stores of wheat were dragged open. The year's supply of wine was carried by the gallon to the Royal table in celebration of the valiant guests. Sheep were

scared off and lost by the tide of men pouring over the mountain ridges; orchards were plundered by exhausted travellers. The Kingdom was saved from being overrun only by the sword point of the mountains that pierced and murdered many more with cold. The bodies of golden princes; their russet mantles ragged and their beautiful faces disfigured with pain, were carried down when the weather cleared. The Princesses sighed over the waste of these flowers of their clans while competitors rejoiced.

It went on. The spring heightened and blossoms burst, then browned. Each prince or young nobleman was celebrated and feasted on arrival. Then, against custom and discretion, the young man was prepared a small cot in the bedchamber of the princesses. He resided without while they readied for bed, then was summoned by a gentlewoman. The twelve Princesses, each sweet face restful with their long hair coiled and cascading from the pillow, slept. The Prince was to keep watch during the balmy night and report to the King their movements. And each morning the Prince would start awake to find the Princesses staring disdainfully at him from their cushioned beds; he would raise in horror to behold the neat row of ruined slippers and be banished from the Castle by the furious King.

The Kingdom's supplies ran low. Young nobleman after another was ruined. The King despaired.

* * * *

Green leaves now shone gold and blood red in the evening sunlight. Harvest at last, replenishing the Kingdom's squandered stocks. The King's subjects rallied themselves after a summer of starvation and began bringing their herds in. The balmy air became crisper and the higher peaks enclosing the valley heaped up with snow.

One afternoon a young goat herder of that Kingdom descended from the hillside. He was fed on the milk and honey of that country and grew tall on its wine and meat. He was a handsome youth, strong with climbing after his flock, with blue eyes that sparkled with the distant mountains and his russet hair, recalling the red and brown leaves of the forest below fell in soft curls around his face.

Preoccupied he was as he left the bare hillside for the forest. Dissatisfied. It was the news of every village in the Kingdom that the King was still evaded by his daughters' secret. The youth was not surprised. He had seen many of these Princes flounder on the mountains, nay, carried them down too. As he helped lay out the beautiful corpses, their naïve faces untouched by care he felt almost resentment. They were weak. They were unworthy of his country. Why should the fertile land go to glut the Kingdom of another who would fortify their own lands with its wealth, then leave the hillsides to rot? All for these soft, pale youths. It was with these thoughts that the young goat herder reached the thickening trees of evergreen and ash and birch.

The first leaf fell outside the casement of the Princess' chamber.

Ambling between the trees, the youth paused. He had reached the deciduous door of the copse. This part of the forest stretched in all directions and the youth always stopped himself here, impressed with its closeness; its stillness. Wind never penetrated, and the only noise was of soft slow crows flapping lugubriously between trees close by. Forests hide secrets. The youth never felt it more so than now, with the melancholy red light stretching itself out between the silent trees and an unexpected mist that wreathed and laced itself in fine patterns around the trunks.

Breathlessly enthralled by the misty solitude, the youth was shocked from his reverie by a twig snap behind him. A crow like croak of a greeting and a wizened old woman stepped from behind a tree. She had the look of a fortune teller from her stiff, faded cloth garments and basket of ribbands and trinkets. He greeted her, yet she ignored pleasantries and spoke only:

“I know what your heart desires. I will help.”

Our hero was under her spell. At once enchanted he was drunk with thought – the overwhelming love of his mountain pointed country; the bitterness of it being ruined by the acquisition of strangers; the jealousy of these weak pale men and even yet, desire for the Princesses, glimpsed hosting festivities in the villages, and each fair limb softer than the gentlest green hillock of the valley's plains; each hair lock coiled more intoxicatingly than the red vineyards ascending up each hillside.

Our youth agreed.

“Take this cloak,” the leathered woman said. “You will find it useful. And drink nothing the Princesses give you.” The woman had a youthful twinkle in her leaf green eyes. The youth thanked her and turned to leave.

“One more thing,” the young-old woman checked him. “Those girls are more clever than their father thinks. Respect that.”

The goat herder nodded. He merely called at home to summarise his intentions to his father, then after washing himself in the cold pine scented stream, he marched straight for the palace.

* * * *

The kitchens were ablaze once more. Stuffed pheasants and quail eggs. Frozen shorts of grappa between portions of veal and wild boar bristling on the engraved silver. The Great Hall was glittering with a thousand candles against the encroaching darkness and the sharp autumn air that tumbled in from the mountains. Our young goat herder had never seen such cloth to adorn a table so woven with gold and coloured thread. Fragrant new wines washed down each rich mouthful.

The King sat disdainfully at the great table, six daughters at each side of him. Each was dressed in rich red material, the bodices delicately woven and lined with fur. Twelve pairs of eyes rested at times throughout the

meal on the young man. The eldest three conferred in proud whispers, sneering at his rustic manner. The younger sisters looked at him with more pity. He was handsome, and they had seen so many handsome men wasted. The sixth daughter found him more refreshing. She was rather taken with his healthful air. Her twin was the other side of the King so she could not whisper her thoughts light giggles but she occasionally leaned back and caught her eye behind her father's metal grey head. She leaned back in her chair and surveyed the curly headed red lipped youth at length. He had caused a bit of a stir, refusing all food offered but ate his own bread and cheese from the Royal plate. He looked about himself in general, or occupied himself with his plate. He caught the sixth daughter's eye in one of his visual perambulations of the hall. To his surprise, she smiled and winked at him. Taken aback, the goat herder stared. Then, gathering himself, he seized his goblet and raised it firmly to her with a broad white smile.

The King looked on, scowling.

* * * *

The moon shone. The ritual began again. The small cot was brought forth to the daughters' chamber, and the young man summoned within when the Princesses were appropriately apparelled in their white night robes. He blinked at the sumptuous tapestries and velvet bed curtains, the white woven lace and flowers garlanding posts and pillars.

In his daze, the eldest sister approached holding a copper goblet. Her fingers were long and slender with sharp nails. He looked at her cold proud face as she offered him the cup.

"Drink." She said.

He took the cup and drained it, returning it to the eldest Princess. The sixth Princess flinched but avoided questioning herself why. She was the first to lay her tumbling hair over her pillow. One by one the Princesses followed and drew their embroidered coverlets around them.

When the last candle had been extinguished, the goat herder leaned toward the wall by his low cot and spat out the red liquid onto his pile of clothes so the spatter would make no noise.

The moon shone and silence reigned like a deity through the castle. The goat herder stared at the silver light shimmering against the wall. It had illuminated a tapestry depicting dancing women in a forest with harts and boar in an eerie light. Gazing transfixed in the monochrome shadows, the goat herder fancied they moved. In the still air he thought of the old legend of music emitted from the turning night stars. On a night glittering as brightly as this he fancied it would be louder, like the sound of a finger around a fine glass as he saw once at fayre. A glassy silvery sound he fancied he could hear like a bell; a signal as the tapestry figures twitched and swayed in the violet night.

A bell. The sound of silver, the colour of ringing glass, melting together. The eldest sister sat up glassy eyed. Tight fast shut the goat herder his own eyes. Each Princess rose and dressed. Their garments were gold and silver, pearl and light refracting, the colour of moonlit nights. They brushed their hair, metallic in the lustrous light and slipped one by one behind the tapestry of the dancing women in the forest, capering and laughing with the harts and boar.

There was silence. The youth in panic ripped the sheets back and sprang up – cloak in hand. Running to the tapestry barefoot he slung the rough mantle around him over his under garments and followed through the newly revealed stone passage behind the tapestry.

* * * *

The youth followed the sounds of laughter. The passage was draughty, and he was glad of the cloak. He hurried after them until the moonlit clad Princesses were in sight. The sixth Princess had fallen behind, pondering why the goat herder so scrupulously refused all palace refreshment, then drank back her sister's potion with such relish. On instinct she glanced back down the stone passage towards the distant bed chamber. The goat herder froze in terror, then gasped. He comprehended the use of his cloak as the fair face turned back towards her sisters.

* * * *

Forests hide secrets. Dead and gone were the beguiling primroses in the blue winter night as the goat herder followed the twelve Princesses out of the stone passage and into the hillside forests. The youth recognised the still pines where they stopped, and once more felt their strangeness. Around him the moon threw sharp ink shadows; frost glimmered on the fallen pine cones and broken twigs. The air froze. The world was metal spikes and silver needles in the metal night; blue and silver, black and silver and the pearl light was so cold. The goat herder's feet were red and stiff under his cloak in that stillest, strangest part of the forest and his crystallised breath wreathed around his face as he reeled in the frozen night. Each Princess, moonlit clad, silver clad, pearl and diamond clad reeled in the knife edge night, dazed and entranced. As they stood, the stillness flickered. The trees flickered.

At once it felt less cold as a lace white mist crept into caress each frozen twig with its moist fingers. All thirteen watched the smoky mist, as it silently swarmed the forest.

It cleared. The air was soft and inviting. The goat herder looked up to see in horror that the forest had at last given up its secret and transformed; throwing outward leaves of silver. Gone were the green pines and beautifully bedecked in silver were trees that glimmered. Brighter than the moonlight, colder than the stars, the twinkling leaves nodded softly in the breeze.

Enchanted, the beguiled goat herder touched the leaf above him. Then he ripped off a small branch and smothered it behind his cloak. Several sisters looked round at the crack that echoed through the still night. Seeing nothing, they walked on.

Following the Princesses, the youth crept on in the new warm air. The forest glittered ethereally and the path was easy in the silver light that fell like liquid in droplets between the trees. The watery beams played on the curls of the Princesses' transformed hair.

They walked on. But this was only the first of the forest's secrets as swiftly once more, the trees transformed into further finery. Now the cold silver light brightened and warmed, honeyed and thickened and the forest burst forth gold. Gold were the shining leaves glistening on the silky curls, gold was the air heaped up in the midnight forest and gold was the light that dripped in caramel and amber on the faces of the laughing Princesses. The Midas night was uplifting and the Princesses broke into a run. The gold rippled ahead of their tripping steps.

The goat herder broke another branch to conceal beneath his cloak. Again the Princesses looked around at the crack, but seeing nothing, proceeded cautiously. The sixth Princess frowned and again slipped behind.

The next secret of the forest nearly betrayed the young goat herder entirely as an audible gasp escaped his lips. The forest was now jewelled in fantastic diamonds. Each branch drooped heavily with resplendent fragments and the rich hangings swung pendulously in the soft breeze. Some diamonds hung like clustered precious berries, others stretched languorously into four points, but all caught the moonlight to throw down innumerable rainbows on every trunk, twig and inch of ground. The forest was at once a glinting prism, blinding with the aurora of diamonds.

The eldest Princess, transfigured with joy now that her haughty countenance was left languishing back at the castle, took up the jubilant cry of 'nearly there!' and all twelve Princesses ran on laughing together. Now when the youth broke a third branch to ensconce in his cloak, not one heard.

The forest was ripe with its final secrets. The group of nocturnal adventurers stopped at the shore of a silver lake with willows trailing their fingers in its ripples that reflected shimmering mirrors back on the branches. Awaiting the twelve Princesses were twelve boats, each manned by a young fair man dressed richly. As the Princesses jostled amid giggles and shouts to their boats and partners, the youth slipped in with the sixth Princess. They took off at such speed on the windless night that the Princess's hair whipped maddeningly in our youth's face and he had to crush himself against the stern. All the same, the extra weight made the boat sink lower in the water and he winced as he heard the Princess comment at how they were lagging behind. The forest's final secret. On the far side of the lake yawned the mouth of a capacious cave, all a sparkle with

light. As the goat herder followed the Princesses in blinking, he saw columns bedecked with fragrant garlands and twisted with silver leaves; stalactites dripping thousands of candles and stalagmites serving as tables; draped with fine cloth and loaded with sparkling goblets and fruits. But the goat herder knew not to touch the food at a fairy ball, though the Princesses fell upon them, as his mother years ago before she died had warned him in her hearthside tales of the pining sickness that falls on mortals on tasting fairy fruit.

Now such a dance sprang up that the goat herder was breathless just watching; indeed from dodging the dancers as they were flung towards him. Each of the twelve Princesses danced with her Prince who glowed supernaturally, softly, warmly with the light of the forest's secrets. They danced in pairs amidst the throng of other elven creatures, they danced in great lines up and down the hall altogether; sister clasped sister by the waist to spin dizzily; there was leaping and cheering and quaffing of wine as beaming sister and dancer grasped goblets high above them as they span and gulped between steps. They danced and drank and ate for hours; they covered themselves in slops of wine, laughing till our youth was fair pining to join in. They danced on as the full moon's reflection traversed the length of the lake at the mouth of the shimmering cave and descended in the West.

Suddenly the music abruptly stopped. The twelve Princesses looked down with resignation and following their eyes the youth noticed that after hours of dancing on the rough cave floor, their shoes were worn through to tatters.

Then began the most heart rending of farewells as Princess clutched elf to breast and smothered them in tearful embraces. Finally each dancing Princess scooped up their ruined slippers and fled barefoot to the boats. Again the goat herder followed the sixth sister into her boat, having been smitten with her spirited dancing and jokes with her partners; again she frowned at the weight of her boat that lagged behind her sisters' while our youth cringed with guilt; again they fled first through the diamond forest glistening with prisms; again through the thick honeyed light of the gold forest and lastly through the ghostly glow of the silver forest, racing the dawn.

At last they reached that palace walls once more and slipped through the cold stone passage. Our youth realised with horror that he must overtake the fair dancers to be discovered asleep in their room, and he fumbled past. But as he passed the sixth sister, she trod on his cloak and it slipped clean off. And there he was, in his underwear before the twelve dancing Princesses all crowded against each other in the narrow passage.

* * * *

The forest wishes to keep its secrets. So when the sun rose pink and blue above the mountains, the three fairy forests were once more invisible. The sun rose higher and the pall of night slipped apace, racing back up the

mountain while the pine trees donned their morning dress of purple and gold light.

The sun had nearly bathed the palace while the twelve Princesses held council over what was to be done with their goat herder.

“Kill him,” said the second eldest.

“Nay sister, just take the branches and destroy them; no one will believe him,” said another.

“We should hear his defence,” decided the sixth sister.

Her twin sanctioned and the other ten were brought to agree. And the goat herder confessed his meeting with the wizened wise woman in the stillest part of the forest while the sisters exchanged glances; poured forth his humble soul on the seeming unworthiness of those foreign Princes and begged mercy of the sisters.

“Leave me,” he begged, “to return to my hillside and my old father. I will be ever content alone with the visions I have seen and enriched with the beauty of your secrets!”

The sisters conferred.

“We have a better idea,” spake the eldest.

* * * *

The King’s Court sat in State; the King on his throne with six daughters to his left, and six daughters to his right. The goat herder, now refreshed, was called upon to give his answer.

He told the forest’s secrets. He explained first the silver forest and brought forth the shimmering bough as proof. He described the golden forest, then the diamond, holding up each bright branch to show them all. He described the lake and the cave, and finally the beautiful ball with its hours of joyous dancing that left the Princesses’ shoes so spoilt.

The King congratulated him. He scowled at his daughters and growled under his breath that they would be punished for their disobedience. He granted the goat herder the Duchy, the amethysts and the pick of his daughters. The goat herder expressed how he found the sixth daughter most captivating, but what was that to a Princess; and moreover, he would only accept the King’s gifts at his daughters’ consent.

Now this threw the King into a great rage. He railed at his daughters for bewitching the young man; for their wilful passion and their sordid peasant diversions. He was calling the guards to have them confined when the eldest Princess stood up.

“Too long have you oppressed us with your austerity and harshness father. Too long have you thwarted our pleasures and abused our heritage. Our mother your Queen died not, but returned to her own Kingdom in the forest. We are her changeling daughters all and we have been dancing in the forest these months with our own kin, to feast with our mother. And now, we take our rights.”

The twelve Princesses surrounded the King and the eldest grasped a dagger from her belt sheath and slit his throat. In that moment the three branches flew from the goat herder's hand and blossomed into three beautiful tall trees as a glimmering bower protecting the Princesses and their goat herder at their feet.

A shout went up from the courtiers.

"The King is dead! Long live the Queen!"

* * * *

Beneath the trees of this land are the smothered mountains. Cowslips and lady's bedstraw bloom so gold in the summer that tales in the valley say they turn to pure gold at night. The river pours its falls down the mountain precipice and throws glittering diamond prisms on the trunks of trees. The forests open and green soft slopes grazing cattle emerge. The vines in this land bear the sweetest wines. Folk say this Kingdom is protected and blessed, and the joyful Queen who rules ordains many dances, pageants and festivals for the holidays of her prosperous people. Older folk say warmly how their children enjoy much more dancing now than they themselves ever did.

The Queen's eleven sisters form the council of this land, and the sixth is married to a local boy who still tends his goats between Royal duties, and all are very happy. On the Queen's Jubilee day there is now the tradition of huge gold, silver and diamond trees set up on the green and all folk dance under them and mysterious beautiful men and women come from the forest and dance with peasant and Princess alike. The young goat herder greets them warmly and shows his sons and daughters. He teaches them many things of this world and the other.

And the old woman who advised our goat herder in the stillest part of the forest? She attends these annual celebrations in her gold gown, her limbs lithe, shimmering and pure, and she kisses and blesses her daughters and her glowing grandchildren.

And she winks at the youth. She always liked a strong boy with spirit.

So long as he did as he was told.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com