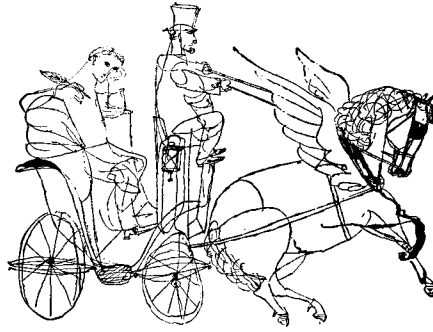


VIEWS & REVIEWS



The Fairy Princess

A Parable

DEAN ACHESON

THE Grand Chamberlain and the Court attendants brought the Guest into the Queen's reception room, like a duck guiding a cygnet which had been caught up among the ducklings. After much fluttering, muttering, and busying about, the servants were left, grouped together at the far end of the audience chamber; and the Guest and the Royal Interpreter were led to the raised gold-upholstered sofa, the contribution of a Gallic decorator to the conception of Asian splendor, where the Queen sat, solid, genial, and gray, fanning herself. It was very warm. The Guest bowed, palms pressed together before his chest as in prayer. The Queen inclined her head. Greetings and gifts were exchanged. The Grand Chamberlain, fussing, withdrew out of hearing. The Queen, the Guest, and the Royal Interpreter were alone.

"How did you come?" asked the Queen. "By the new planes?"

"No," said the Guest, "by the old road—but it's no longer that. By the great new road the Americans have made where the old road was, changing everything."

"Not as much as you think," said the Queen. "Did you see the villagers coming to town now that the dry season is here and the river is low?"

"An endless procession," answered the Guest. "Village after village along the shoulder of the highway; miniature oxcarts, miniature oxen, miniature people, miniature dogs—the original essence of dog, father of all breeds of dog—plodding along, cart after cart, trucks and busses roaring past in both directions. The people seem the same; but can they be?"

"Why not? Did you expect them to be taking vitamins made by a Belgian syndicate with their rice? For a thousand years—who knows how many thousand years—the Great River has drawn back and opened its riches to us, tons and tons of fish scooped out of it to give protein and vitamin. Can a highway change that?"

"As you yourself said, Majesty, 'Why not?'" the Guest replied. "Highways, planes, radio, newspapers! Ideas come by them. People look the same. Perhaps act the same. But are they the same? How do you know? You see them from the top; how do they look from the bottom?"

"How does a flower look from the bottom?" asked the Queen. "A tangle of roots and earthworms. I prefer the view from above; but I can see that it is a matter of taste and one's nature."

She stopped, as though reaching

beyond the edge of memory, and then went on. "Long ago, when I was a young Princess, I was being driven along this same way in my carriage. Of course it was the old road, before the Americans came. But it was the same time of year, the dry season, and the villagers were coming to the city for fish oil, as you saw them today. Oxcart after oxcart, mile after mile of them; the road was crowded, dusty, and pulsing with life.

"It was late afternoon, and already families were drawing off the road for the night, unyoking the oxen, getting the evening meal, putting the smaller children to bed in the cart. Then we came to a block. Something ahead had stopped traffic. No use to turn, even if we could; for we were soon blocked behind too. So we pushed along, the servants shouting to make way for the Princess. Pretty soon we heard wailing ahead, and soon after came on the reason.

"An ox lay dead beside the road, one of a peasant's span. The entire village had stopped to lament. The tragedy was real enough. To buy another ox would have taken all that had been saved in the year for fish oil. Yet without another ox the family could neither go on nor go back. For the moment the narcotic of lament deadened the dilemma.

"Find out for me," I asked a servant, "the price of an ox."

"About a hundred piastres, Highness, give or take a bit depending on the ox," he reported.

"Looking in my purse, I found just one hundred piastres, no more, no less. Giving them to the servant, I bade him be off to buy an ox. Soon he came back with one, and I sent him with it, as a gift from the King, to the bereaved peasant."

The Queen paused, leaning forward in the intensity of her telling. "In the briefest moment," she went on, "in the twinkling of an eye, all was changed. The wailing stopped. A rising murmur rustled through the people like a freshening breeze through trees. Then cheering, shouts, laughter, and a rush toward my carriage. People kissed my ring, the carriage, the horses. They danced about us. They sang. Where there had been sorrow, now

was only joy, gaiety, and laughter."

The Queen stopped, but the Guest knew that she had not finished. "Friend," she began again, "you said that I see people only from above and ask how I know what changes them. I might make an answer, but I should like to know yours. Was it, in my story, only the matter of the ox? A dead ox made them sad; a live ox made them gay? Was it as simple as that?"

"No, Majesty," said the Guest. "It was not that; but it was as simple as that."

"No riddles," cried the Queen. "Out with it."

"It was you yourself," replied the Guest. "For you were a fairy princess, and we all know a fairy princess can change things into their opposites. With one wave of her all-powerful wand, the ugly toad is changed into the most beautiful prince, or the fisherman's hut into a marble palace, or the other way around. It was you that day on the old road who changed people, and—if I may speak with the frankness of an old friend—I wouldn't put it past you now."

THE QUEEN burst into laughter; she choked and cried with laughter, until the Grand Chamberlain and the servants began to murmur at the other end of the room. When finally she could speak again and met the Guest's perplexed eye, she said, "Look at me. Just look at me! Do I look like a fairy princess?"

It could not be denied that the Queen had made a point, but the Guest was in no position to admit it. With dignity, he adopted a stern tone.

"Majesty," he said, "the test of a fairy princess is not looks but works. You found sorrow; you changed it into joy. That, if I may put it this way, is the spoor of a fairy princess. Furthermore, with respect and deference, this is not a matter for levity. The books are full of reports of most unfortunate exercises of this power by jesting princesses unaware of what in the Pentagon, a sorcerer's castle, is called their capabilities. Believe me, Most Gracious Queen, and do not take it lightly, a Queen may be as likely as not a more mature fairy princess."

The Queen, smiling a gentle and

detached smile, was silent for a long moment. Then bestirring herself, she rose and bowed with her hands pressed together.

"Good night, my friend," she said, now quite regal. "You must leave us while we think about our talk." The Guest withdrew.

In the morning the Prince was abstracted and inattentive during the audience he gave the Guest. When the Guest stopped his narrative for want of a listener, the Prince asked him bluntly, "What is all this that you have said to my mother about her being a fairy princess?"

"Highness," said the Guest, "it was only a manner of speaking."

"Manner of speaking indeed," said the Prince. "You have put ideas into her head. God knows what will come of that."

"Your Highness knows better," the Guest protested. "Not put them into her head. They were all there. Only stirred them up and set them circulating."

"Put it any way you like," said the Prince wearily. "She's off again on her passion for changing people. I think she gets it from the Americans. At any rate, it makes me nervous when she talks that way."

"What way, Highness?"

"Well, to begin with, she says

that if I do not mind the diet she has prescribed for me, she will turn me from a Prince into an elephant, and ride on me."

"Please, Highness, have no doubt of it. She will. But that, you say, is to begin with. After that, what?"

"Then she wants to change the Americans."

"Into what? Into what?" breathed the Guest.

HE THOUGHT of the hundreds of Americans he had seen that day—three hundred, four hundred, five hundred—devoted, uncomplicated prophets of progress, planting new crops, building new roads, showing new weapons, upsetting the ancient harmony between the death rate and the birth rate, breaking the repose of untouched minds with Roman letters and Arabic figures, happy in their propagation of the faith. Suddenly he was all but paralyzed by panic, seeing these people as the inhabitants of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, just before the dam burst. How could they be warned? Would they believe a warning?

"Into what?" he asked again. "Into what?"

"That's just it." The Prince embodied exasperation. "I can't get it out of her. She just won't say another word."

O Apple Tree

An apple tree, a man, a rib,
A serpent's mildly vicious fib
Sewed Eve a tucker and a bib.

And breasts that once were frank and free
To Adam's hands roving *ad lib*
Became a secret and a trap.

He learned the art of being glib,
She learned how not to do but be.
She stitched a target on a lap.

And soon it wasn't two but three,
Then after him a shepherd chap
Who took a knifeful from his sib.

Cain wiped his blade and bought a crib.
O apple tree, O man, O rib.

—CHAD WALSH