



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Palace on the Floor

Evelyn Sharp

Prince Picotee had just built a fairy palace on the nursery floor, and he sat back on his heels and looked at it with pride. Surely, no one had ever built so fine a palace before in the space of thirteen minutes and a half! Not only were there two lofty towers that soared proudly upwards until they were actually as tall as the Prince himself, but there was a great arched doorway as well, with a flight of steps leading down from it away under the nursery table; and there was even a drawbridge, made of a single big brick and suspended by a piece of string. All this, however, might be found in anybody's palace; what made the Prince's palace different from every one else's was just the way the windows were built. They were not built in rows, like ordinary windows, so that any one could guess how dull and square the rooms were inside; but they appeared here and there as if by accident, sometimes at a corner, sometimes on the top of another window, sometimes under the battlements, wherever, in fact, the little builder-Prince had felt inclined to put a window; and the most wonderful thing of all was that, however much he tried to peep through them, he could not possibly see what the rooms were like beyond. So the palace he had built himself was full of beautiful halls and rooms and passages that no one would ever be able to see.

"No doubt," exclaimed Prince Picotee, "this is the most wonderful palace that ever was built!"

Just then Dimples, the Prime Minister's little daughter, ran into the room. "How absurd!" she cried. "Why, it isn't a real palace at all!"

"It is real enough for me," said Prince Picotee. "When I am grown up and a king, I shall have a palace exactly like this to live in."

Dimples came and sat on the floor by the Prince. "I shouldn't like to live in a palace that would tumble down directly you pulled out the bottom brick," she observed, placing her fat little finger on the brick as she spoke.

The Prince seized her hand hastily. "There will be no girls in my palace," he said with dignity; "it is only girls who want to pull down other people's palaces."

Dimples put her head on one side and examined the palace afresh. "How untidy your steps are!" she remarked. "The top one is shorter than the others, and there is a join in the middle of the second one."

The Prince felt a little hurt. "It is not my fault if the bricks are not all the same length," he said. "Besides, those things do not matter. Only look at my beautiful windows!"

Dimples looked, and burst out laughing. "What funny windows!" she exclaimed. "Why, you can't see into the rooms! What is the use of having a palace when you don't know what it is like inside?"

"You don't understand," answered Prince Picotee. "Anybody can see inside an ordinary palace; this is a particular palace, you see."

Dimples did not see at all; so she changed the conversation. "What are all those soldiers doing on the table?" she asked.

"They are not on the table," explained the Prince. "They have been marching since yesterday morning, and they are on the road to my fairy palace." He then began to station his soldiers on the battlements of the two lofty towers.

"I suppose you think your wooden soldiers are real, too!" laughed the Prime Minister's daughter.

"Hush!" whispered the Prince. "If you speak so loud, they will hear you, and it would never do for them to know that you called them wooden. Anything might happen to you if you made them really angry!"

"You are only talking nonsense," said Dimples, which was what she always said when she did not understand what the Prince meant. At the same time she could not help being struck by the look on the face of the soldier that Prince Picotee had just picked up. It was the captain of the little regiment; and as the Prince placed him at the post of danger on the bottom brick of all, she felt sure that she saw a flush of anger on his painted wooden cheeks and a gleam of mischief in his round black eyes. "He is only a toy soldier," said Dimples, tossing her head; but she did not say it aloud, and it is certain that she felt a little uncomfortable, all the rest of that day, about the look on the captain's face.

Now, Dimples had come to stay with the Prince for a few days, and it happened that the room in which she slept was next to the royal nursery; and right in the middle of the night—which, as every one knows, is the time for wylms and fairies to be about—she awoke suddenly with a most unpleasant start. There, by the side of her bed, stood one of the Prince's wooden soldiers, shouldering his wooden gun as though he had never done anything else for the whole of his life,—which was certainly the truth,—and holding himself just for all the world as though he were glued together. He was certainly a most military-looking soldier, and if Dimples had not been a particularly brave little girl, she might have been decidedly frightened.

"What do you want?" she asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"Follow me. Prince's palace. Captain's orders," said the little soldier, in three jerks; and he turned round and marched stiffly towards the door. His tone was hard; but then, of course, his voice, like everything else about him, was made of wood. Dimples made no fuss about obeying him, for she was always ready for an adventure; so out of bed she jumped without any more ado, and followed him into the next room. It took them several minutes to get there, because the soldier walked so very slowly; but this, again, was not surprising, for people with wooden legs cannot be expected to walk as fast as ordinary folk.

When they reached the nursery, Dimples gave a cry of surprise. It was evident that the Prince's palace had sprung upwards since the afternoon, for the two towers were now far above her head, while as for the drawbridge, by the time she had crossed it and mounted the magnificent flight of steps, she found herself quite out of breath. "Perhaps it is a real palace, after all," she said doubtfully.

"Don't mutter. Bad manners. Captain's prisoner," said the soldier in three jerks, as before.

Dimples did not answer, for at that moment she stepped inside the Prince's palace and was too breathless with excitement to utter a word. It was indeed no ordinary hall in which she found herself; it was built entirely of oak beams of different lengths, so that in one place the ceiling was low and in another place it was high, in one corner there were several doors, and in another there were several windows; here an arch tottered perilously over an opening, and there a solitary pillar blocked up the whole of a doorway. It was truly a wonderful palace, as the Prince had said, but it was a little surprising at first sight. Dimples, however, had no time to think about it, for at that moment a stern voice was heard coming from below the floor of the hall.

"Bring the prisoner here!" said the voice. Dimples looked through a hole in the floor,—which was not difficult, as the floor was full of holes,—and there, on the bottom brick of all, stood the toy captain.

"Come along. Bottom brick. Captain waiting," said her guide; and with some little difficulty—for it is not easy to jump from beam to beam when one is accustomed to solid floors—she scrambled after him and arrived in front of the terrible captain.

"Oho!" said the captain, grasping his sword as tightly as he could,—which was very tight, as it happened, because his fingers were glued to it,—"who is the real person now, you or I?"

The question was a puzzling one, but Dimples did her best to answer it truthfully. "Well," she said, "I suppose you are real, though I didn't think so before; and I suppose I am real, too; but it is rather confusing, isn't it?"

"Not at all confusing," said the captain, a little rudely it must be owned. "It is quite clear that I am real, of course; but as for you—why, you are not even painted!"

"No," said Dimples, as politely as she could, "I am not painted, and I don't think I want to be painted, thank you. Why, I should never feel safe for a moment if I had a face that anybody could wash off with a sponge!"

At this the toy captain was so furious that he shook with anger from head to foot.

"Do you know," he said, "that I have only to pull out the brick on which I am standing, and the whole palace will tumble down on your head?"

"Of course I know," laughed Dimples, who was growing less frightened every minute; "but if you do, it will tumble down on your head as well as mine."

"That is true," said the toy captain, "but I am a real person and I am made of wood, so it will make no difference to me."

Dimples was obliged to own that there was something in what the captain said; and as she disliked nothing so much as being beaten in an argument, she at once pretended not to be listening.

"Oh, dear, how hungry I am!" she said, yawning.

"If you were real and not made up," said the toy captain, "you would never get hungry at all." However, he called out to a soldier, who was mounting guard on the top of a pillar just over his head, and ordered him to bring the prisoner some food. In a few minutes, Dimples found herself in front of a curious meal, served on round cardboard dishes and consisting of one red jelly, two raw mutton chops, a bunch of grapes, and a slice of salmon.

"But they won't come off the dishes, will they?" asked Dimples, who had fed her dolls for years on the very things that were now placed before her.

"Of course not," said the toy captain. "They would have been lost long ago if they had not been stuck on. What more can you want? If you were a real person, as you pretend to be, your appetite would be taken away by the mere sight of dishes like those!"

This, in fact, was what had already happened to Dimples, for there was nothing very enticing about a jelly from which she remembered sucking the paint only a week ago; while as for the other things, even her youngest and favourite doll was beginning to grow tired of their monotony. So she made no objection when the captain ordered the dishes to be removed.

"Now you have satisfied your hunger," continued the captain, "I will order you to be taken upstairs to the dungeon."

"Upstairs!" exclaimed Dimples. "What a funny place for a dungeon!"

"Funny? Not in the least!" said the captain, severely. "In a palace of this kind you must take the rooms as you find them. You will find the dungeon squeezed between the drawing-room and the kitchen, at the very top of the left-hand tower. There you will have to stop until the King comes."

"Who is the King?" asked Dimples, curiously.

Before the toy captain had time to answer, the band of the regiment struck up an inspiring march. To be sure, there were only two wooden drummer boys and two wooden trumpeters, of whom one had lost his trumpet and was therefore obliged to blow continually through his stiffened fingers; but for all that they made quite a cheerful noise, and in the middle of it the King mounted the steps and entered the palace.

"Hurrah! The King! It is the King!" shouted the whole regiment in twenty wooden voices.

"The King!" repeated Dimples. "Why, it is the Prince!"

"Don't talk nonsense," said the captain, gruffly. "Do you suppose we would allow ourselves to be commanded by a mere Prince? This is a real King, I can tell you, though he isn't made of wood, more's the pity!"

And when Dimples saw the dignified way in which the little King walked into the palace, she could not help agreeing that he was a very real King. Indeed, she found it difficult to believe that he was nothing but her playfellow, the Prince Picotee, for never before had she seen him look so happy and so triumphant. There was no doubt that the little King had found his kingdom; and Dimples, remembering that she was really his prisoner, began to wish that she had not teased him so much about his toy palace and his toy soldiers. But the King did not even see her; he walked straight into the great hall and then stood still and drew a long breath of satisfaction.

"It is the most wonderful palace that ever was built," he murmured to himself; "it is much, much more wonderful than I thought."

Then his eyes fell upon Dimples, who was trying to hide behind the stiff figure of the toy captain, on the bottom brick of all.

"What is that girl doing in my palace?" asked the King, frowning.

"Please your Majesty, it is your Majesty's prisoner," answered the captain,— "she is waiting for your Majesty to decide on her punishment."

"What has the prisoner done?" asked the King in as dignified a manner as he could assume, considering that he stood on a tottering brick at the edge of the

abyss in which the captain and his prisoner awaited him.

"Please your Majesty, she was heard to say that your Majesty's army was not a real army, and that I, your Majesty,—I was nothing but a toy soldier!" said the captain; and he again shook with anger from head to foot, which, after all, was the only way he could shake, because he was made all in one piece.

"Send the prisoner here," commanded the King. "It is not safe to keep a prisoner on the bottom brick—especially when she is a girl."

So Dimples, wishing from the bottom of her heart that the little playfellow she had teased had not been suddenly changed into a king, clambered up again into the hall.

"Prince Picotee," she said in an anxious undertone, as soon as she was near him, "I do think it is a real palace now, I do really!"

"Why, it's only Dimples!" exclaimed the King, and he nearly tumbled off the edge of the floor in his surprise. Then he remembered that he was a king, and tried to become dignified again, which, of course, was exceedingly difficult now that the Prime Minister's daughter was there to see. As for Dimples, she had not played with the Prince all her life for nothing, and she quite ceased to be frightened of him as soon as she came face to face with him.

"If you let that nasty captain punish me, I'll tell them all you are only a little boy and not a king at all," she whispered; and her round little face twinkled with merriment.

The King wavered. "I always said I would have no girls in my palace," he murmured sorrowfully.

"Will you promise?" persisted Dimples.

The King avoided her eyes. It was very hard not to give in and smile too, when Dimples looked like that. After all, he reflected, if Dimples was a girl and did not understand things properly, she made an excellent playfellow; and the most wonderful palace in the world might grow a little dull if there were only wooden soldiers to share it with. So the King made up his mind, and took the prisoner by one hand and waved his other in a royal manner to the captain.

"I will talk it over with the prisoner," he announced, "so do not let us be disturbed. And you need not take any more prisoners without consulting me," he added hastily, for he really feared that his nurse might be the next prisoner, and then, where would be the fun of being a king at all?

"Now, let us go and explore your palace," said Dimples, impatiently; and the captain was left on the bottom brick to get over his disappointment.

It would be impossible to describe how the two children wandered over the fairy palace that the Prince had built; how they climbed from one floor to another; how they dropped from arch to pillar; how they wound their way in and out of delightful passages, finding fresh secret rooms as they went; how from one window they looked down on the vast nursery tableland and from another caught a glimpse of the towering rocking-horse; how they quite forgot they were King and prisoner, and stood at last, hand in hand, on the battlements of the highest tower and told each other what fun it was to play in a real fairy palace.

The toy captain, however, had not forgotten anything; and when he saw them talking in this familiar manner on the battlements—which he could easily do from his position on the bottom brick, so cleverly was this wonderful palace built—he felt it was high time to interfere.

"Has your Majesty decided how to punish the prisoner?" asked the toy captain, holding himself in his very stiffest manner and raising his voice sufficiently to be heard on the battlements.

The King looked at the prisoner, and the prisoner laughed at the King.

"Well," said Dimples, demurely, "has your Majesty made up his mind?"

"Oh, don't!" whispered his Majesty, crossly. "You know I can't behave like a king if you laugh at me!" Then he folded his arms and looked down at the captain. "I have decided not to punish the prisoner at all," he said solemnly.

"What!" cried the captain, furiously. "You are not going to punish the prisoner at all?"

"No," said his Majesty, growing bolder; "and what is more, I am going to have you beheaded for interfering in the King's private affairs!"

Even Dimples felt a little nervous when she saw the look that crept over the captain's face.

"Oh, dear," she whispered to the Prince, "that is how he looked yesterday when I said he wasn't real. Would it not be wiser to make friends with him?"

But her little playfellow was looking as he had looked when he first entered his palace. "A king," he said grandly, "makes neither friends nor enemies. The captain is only my toy, and I can do as I will with him."

The captain's fury knew no bounds when he overheard this. "That is what comes of having a king who is not made of wood," he said. "But you have forgotten one thing, your Majesty!"

"And what is that?" asked the King, smiling.

"The bottom brick," said the toy captain, as he stooped and pulled it out.

Truly, there had never been such a shatter and a clatter and a tumble as when the toy captain pulled out the bottom brick of the Prince's palace! And in the midst of it all the children felt themselves falling and falling and falling. And louder than it all sounded the mocking laughter of the toy captain.

"Some people would say it was only a dream," observed Prince Picotee, the next morning, as they stood over the ruins on the nursery floor.

"It can't have been a dream," answered Dimples, who was always practical, "because here is the head of the toy captain."

"And here," added the Prince, bending down, "is his body. So he was beheaded after all!"

"I wish," sighed Dimples, "that it could all come over again."

"It will some day," the Prince assured her, "when I am King and have built another palace like this one."

"But I shall not be there," pouted Dimples, "because you won't have any girls in your palace."

Prince Picotee kicked the headless captain about the floor thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not quite sure," he said, growing a little red. "Perhaps I'll have one girl."

"Will you?" laughed Dimples. "But what if she pulls down your wonderful palace?"

"Ah," said Prince Picotee, gravely, "I shall not tell her about the bottom brick!"

Stories help us explore cultures, learn moral lessons, connect with nature — or simply have fun. That's why ririro.com offers 3,000+ free stories — fairy tales, fables, bedtime stories, myths and more — for every age, in 13 languages, with free printable PDFs and often audio. Reading should be a right, not a privilege. Share ririro.com and spread the joy of reading.

Instagram: @ririro_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririrocom