

Jimmy Hollis & Dickson

*Ella
Of The
Pinders*

Watercolours by Sarah Lewtas

Dedicated to Maeve

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Chapter 1

In the town next to the Winter Palace lived a young girl with Her mother and father. I never met the mother and, although someone once told Me Her name, I'm afraid I've forgotten it. The father's name was either Harold or Albert, I can't be quite sure which. But I know for sure that the girl's name was Ella.

Now, when Ella was thirteen years old, Her mother died. When this happened, Harold (or Albert) fell into a deep depression, and lost all His joy in life. He took to drinking too much wine, and in the evenings He'd sit slumped over the table and moan, with His head lying between His useless arms. Or He'd sink into an armchair and stare - at nothing.

"How He must have loved Her!" said the neighbours. Well, They might have been right, but I don't think He'd loved Her. He'd *depended* on Her, yes - and grown weak in His dependence. And when She died, He was weak and thought He needed Her... but She was gone. For Him, She was gone: She was dead. And I believe that when You really love someone and They die, They go on living inside You: They're never completely gone. She didn't go on living inside Him. Where She'd been, there was nothing. And that's why I say that He hadn't really loved Her.

But She *did* go on living, because there *was* somebody who really had loved Her. That was Ella. And, although Ella was very sad for a time after Her mother died, She got over the worst of it, and continued to find joy in life. In the evenings, after dinner and before washing the dishes, She'd sit outside and watch the sun set and the stars begin to show themselves. And often She'd think: "Mum used to like watching all this." And while She was doing the housework, She'd remember little tricks Her mother had taught Her to make the jobs easier. Ella had to do everything around the house now, because Her father (let's just call Him Harold to save bother) was often drunk, and always miserable, and didn't care to do anything. Ella felt sorry for Harold, and tried to help Him get interested in life again, but it was no good. He was so sunken in His helplessness and self-pity that He didn't appreciate anything. It wasn't long before He stopped going to work, and so lost His job.

After that, They lived for some time off Harold's savings. But then that money ran out and Ella decided She'd have to look for work Herself, as Harold just didn't care. She found work scrubbing other people's floors, washing other people's dishes and clothes. In this way the two of Them lived together for three years - Ella looking after Herself and Harold, and Harold looking after His bottle of wine. Then something happened to change Their lives. Harold got married again! This is how it happened:

One of the houses where Ella went to work belonged to Harold's old boss, a well-to-do businessman named Robert. He had a wife, Ernestine, and two daughters, Gladys and Primrose, who were a little older than Ella. Robert used to tell Ernestine how good a worker Harold had been, and that if only He could find another wife, someone who could make Him stop sulking and drinking, He'd probably still be a good worker. In fact, Robert had been thinking of making Harold His second-in-command in the company, before this sad business of His wife's death.

And then Robert, too, died, leaving a wife and two daughters who'd always been used to a life of idleness and comfort, never having to worry about money. And, for a time, They tried to continue living as They always had. They still hired Ella to do Their housework - They felt They were "too good" to do it Themselves.

But it soon became obvious to Ernestine that, without Robert to look after it, His business was doing badly, was losing money. There soon wouldn't be enough money to live as They always had, and - unless some hard work were done to keep the business going - at some point there would be no money at all.

Now, Ernestine didn't want to do this hard work Herself - She was used to spending money: not to making it. And anyway, what did She know about running a business? But She didn't want to just hand the business over to somebody else. Then She remembered what Robert had said about Harold, and decided that *She* could be the woman to put a stop to Harold's drinking and sulking, could turn Him into the good worker He'd once been.

Well, Harold wasn't interested in marrying Her. He wasn't interested in anything but His fake sorrow and His bottle. But this didn't stop a determined woman like Ernestine. Somehow She got Herself into Harold's life, made Him depend on *Her*, and got Him to marry Her. And, before He really knew what was happening, She'd made Him stop His drinking, and He'd taken over Robert's business and was turning it into a success. Because, with a woman like Ernestine behind Him, He *had* to be a success.

"She's just what He needed," said the neighbours. "She's made Him forget His first wife and love Her instead." Again I disagree with Them. Harold had long before forgotten His first wife, and I believe that He was incapable of loving anybody. He just needed someone to depend on, and a woman had finally come along who knew how to make Him depend on Her.

Ernestine made Ella give up working for other people. ("The *shame* of having someone from this house cleaning other people's floors!! Why, She's almost a member of the family.") So Ella stayed at home, and only did all the housework for Ernestine, Harold, Gladys, and Primrose. ("My daughters weren't brought up to do such things, They're too delicate for that hard work.") The three women continued to treat Ella as a servant. Harold didn't raise any objections: for one thing, He was out of the house for most of the day, leaving very early in the morning and coming home late in the evening; for another thing, He was too weak to stand up to Ernestine [in a way, He, too, was Her servant.] And besides, He'd been treating Ella like a servant for so long Himself - often not even noticing that She was there.

Every morning, long before the others were awake, Ella had to clean the cinders out of the fireplace, and light a fire, so that the house would already be warm when the other women ventured out of bed. She'd fix breakfast for Harold, and see Him off to work, then wash the floor, make sure everything was tidy, and rush off to buy fresh cream, fruit, and other nice things for the other women's breakfast. The rest of the day, She had to fetch and carry, come here, go away, do this, do that, *faster* can't You?! until They went to bed, and left Her to the quiet of the night and the last jobs before She went to bed Herself.

I'm not saying She had no time for Herself during the day: She did. But the time She did have could be cut short at any moment by an order to do some job that the others were "too good" to do. And on top of everything else, They made fun of Her for not being as lady-like and refined as They were. They called Her "Sweep" and "Char" and "Wish-Wash" and other silly names. But the name They used the most was "Cinder Ella", because She was so rushed, running about getting things ready before They got up, that She often had no time to have a wash, and would have smudges from the cinders on Her face or clothing.

Now, the king, King Richard V, had a son, Cyril, whom He was trying to get married. The king kept introducing the prince to "suitable" princesses, but Cyril wasn't interested in any of Them. Nor in dukes' daughters, nor in counts' cousins, nor in generals' granddaughters. Not in any of Them in fact.

"They're all so unnatural He'd complain. "They cover Their faces in powders and paints, and They think too much of the way They dress. They pretend to be interested in things that They're not at all interested in, just so I'll be interested in Them. They're all so interested in

Me, but only because I'm a prince. They don't give two farts for what I'm like as a person, but They all pretend to like Me. Well, I'm not going to pretend I like *Them*."

The king got angry, but He couldn't *make* the prince change His mind. The only thing He could do was to keep introducing Cyril to more and more "suitable" young women, to hold dances where princesses, and the daughters of ambassadors, generals, dukes, and so on could show off Their dazzling attractions for Cyril to choose from. Many men were dazzled, many were attracted. But not Cyril. A few minutes talking with any of the young women was enough to convince Him that She was just as vain and empty as all the others. He kept asking His father to invite ordinary people to the palace, so that He (Cyril) would have a chance to meet "natural" people. The king kept refusing until, in exasperation, one day He agreed. "You'll see!" He said sternly to His son, "You'll soon find out that there's no attraction AT ALL in the 'ordinary people'. Then maybe You'll come to Your senses, and marry some nice princess."

So it was that the next day there was notice given of a

GRAND BALL

TO BE HELD AT THE

WINTER PALACE

OF

HIS GRACIOUS
MAJESTY

THE KING

All UNMARRIED YOUNG WOMEN

between the ages of

SIXTEEN and TWENTY-NINE;

All YOUNG MEN between the ages of

TWENTY and THIRTY

are invited to attend

“This will have to be paid for out of YOUR allowance!” growled the king to the prince. I’m not having a mob of louts and commoners enjoy Themselves at MY expense.”

That day, Ella ran home with the news She’d heard and read in the market. Everyone there had been talking about it. Some were too young or too old to be included Some said: “That’s not for the likes of Us: that’s for fine ladies and gents. They wouldn’t let You or Me in. We’ve got no fine clothes or jewels to wear” Others said: “I don’t care *how* much it costs: I’d spend three months’ housekeeping money for a dress fine enough to wear. They say the prince’ll be there. I don’t expect He’d dance with the likes of Me, but it’d be so nice to see Him close-to like!”

Whatever They said, whether They resigned Themselves to not going, or committed Themselves to starving to be able to afford it, *everybody* had been talking about the ball.

When Gladys and Primrose heard the news, They were wild with excitement. And Ernestine couldn’t stop thinking: “Here, at last, is a chance for My girls to meet the prince! I’m sure He’ll be charmed. They say He’s looking for a wife. When My girls are dressed properly, how They’ll shine!” But when the three of Them realised that Ella was also thinking of going, They burst out laughing. “Cinder Ella wants to go to the ball! Isn’t that ridiculous? What do You think You can do there, Cinders - clean out the royal fireplaces? And They collapsed in wicked laughter.

But Ella didn’t stop thinking of the ball: Her mother had loved dancing, and had taught Ella how. And even now, Ella’d dance while doing the housework, humming to Herself. But a ball! And with real musicians, playing real instruments! *That* She’d *have* to experience.

She’d been working on a new dress for Herself in the odd moments She had, and now She hoped that She’d have it finished in time for the ball. It was nothing fancy, but then She wasn’t expecting to be noticed by the prince. She just wanted to go to the ball, to dance to real music.

The day before the ball, the dress still wasn’t ready, so She stayed up late into the night, putting the finishing touches to it by candlelight. The next day, She was kept busier than ever. Primrose and Gladys had to have Their hair brushed three times each, and of course Ella had to do it. She had to run to the shops for some blue ribbon, and, when She’d returned with it, She had to run back, because Gladys had changed Her mind and wanted pink instead. Ernestine got out Her jewellery, and Gladys and Primrose each had to choose which pieces to wear. They both put on as much as They could, fighting over some of the pieces. They powdered Their faces, and painted Their eyelids, lips, and fingernails. At last, half an hour before it was time to leave for the palace, They were ready. All this time, Ella had been running around for the three of Them - Ernestine had made up Her mind to go “as a chaperone. I must look after My girls.” So *She* had to be dressed up as well. But at last, Ella had half an hour to get Herself ready. She had a quick wash and put on Her new dress, and She was ready.

When the others saw Her, They all stared. “Just what do You think You’re doing?!” exclaimed Ernestine . And when Ella said that She was going to the ball, They looked shocked. “In *THAT?!!*” hooted Primrose, “You want to go to the ball in *THAT?!!* Why, it’s hardly nicer than the clothes You wear for doing the housework. And anyway, if You tried to dance, You’d trip up everyone with those huge feet of Yours.”

“Speaking of housework...” menaced Ernestine , “You’ve let the fire burn out! Just You get it started again. We don’t want to come home to a cold house.” And She pushed Ella towards the fireplace. Ella tripped and fell in the still warm cinders. Her new dress! She jumped up and brushed Herself off, but the damage had already been done.

“You’ve got far too much work to do this evening: I want clean sheets on My bed.” (“And Mine.” “And Mine.” chimed in Primrose and Gladys.) “So just You forget any silly ideas of the ball... Come, Girls!” And the three of Them flounced off to the carriage that Ernestine had hired especially for the night.

Ella sat down on a stool by the fireplace, and began to cry. After a few minutes, there was a knock at the door, and in came the little old woman, named Maeve, who’d just recently moved into a house at the end of the road.

“Good evening!” She said, “I’ve just come around to - Why, My Dear, You’re crying! Whatever for?”

“Nothing,” said Ella, wiping Her eyes on the hem of Her dress.

“Come, come! I don’t believe You cry for nothing. Tell me about it. Maybe I can help.”

Years and years of being treated like a servant in Her own house, of living with Her father and looking after Him, while He often didn’t even seem to know or care if She were there: all this had been bottled up inside of Ella, and now this last thing - the way She’d just been treated - and She couldn’t keep the top on the bottle anymore. Before She could stop Herself, She was telling Her new neighbour the whole story.

“...And now My dress is all dirty from the cinders, and I haven’t got anything else that isn’t covered in patches... I’m sorry, but I don’t think there *is* anything You can do.”

“Ah, Dear Child,” said old Maeve, “You don’t know what I *can* and what I *can’t* do... Your mother is dead, and Your stepmother is no kind of mother to You. Your father hasn’t been a good father, either. Now, I don’t mean to make Myself into a mother or father for You, but I hereby declare Myself Your godmother... That means I’ve got some responsibility to see that You get through life alright. Now, how’s that?”

“You’re very kind,” said Ella, “but...”

“Now wait now wait now *wait !*” said Maeve. “Of course, one doesn’t make a decision like this lightly. I know more about You than You know about Me. I mean, there’s all that You’ve told Me just now, and I’ve also been hearing about You from one or two of the neighbours, so I have some idea of what I’m letting Myself in for. But what do You know about Me? Just that I’m ‘that crazy old thing who’s moved in at the end of the street.’ No, You needn’t bother: I know what They’re all saying about Me already...”

“Well, of course You shouldn’t accept just *anybody* as Your godmother. So I suggest a trial period, and after that You can decide. We can talk about the whole business in more detail later on. But first things first. It’s the evening of the ball, and it’s only getting later while We sit here, jabbering. Now, tell Me: would You or would You not like to go?”

“Yes, but...”

“Alright then, We’ll start with the “yes” - the “but” can wait for a while. Will You trust Me?”

“Well... how...? I mean...”

“Well now!! Remember I’m Your godmother - at least on a trial basis. Are You trying to tell Me that You don’t even trust Your own *godmother* ?! “

Ella had to laugh at this. Maeve *was* being very nice to Her, trying to cheer Her up. And, looking at Her smiling, friendly face, it was difficult *not* to trust Her. “Well, alright then - I trust You.”



“That’s better. Now then, look into My eyes... No, not like that: look really *deeply* into My eyes... *that’s* it... keep looking...”

Ella had no idea how long She looked into the eyes of the little old woman. She started to feel sleepy and dizzy at the same time. But still She looked. Then She heard Maeve say:

“Now: look at Your dress... You see, it’s changed into a lovely gown of white velvet, set with diamonds and sapphires.” And so it had!! Gone was the dress Ella’d sewn for Herself, and in its place the most beautiful dress She could possibly have imagined. “Right, now,” continued Maeve, “come over to the window. You see that big pumpkin there in Your vegetable patch? Well, it’s going to change into a carriage made of solid gold. Ready?... NOW!” and She snapped Her fingers. Ella gasped to see a beautiful carriage, in the shape of a pumpkin but much bigger, and made of solid gold - how it shone in the moonlight!! - standing in the middle of the vegetable patch. “And those two frogs over there. Why They’re footmen in green uniforms.” Snap, and They were! “And those four mice are snow-white horses... and that moth there, see? She’s the coach driver in a cloak that shines like silver in the moonlight...” “And every time Maeve snapped Her fingers, everything was just as She said, while Ella looked on in wonder. “There, My Dear,” said Maeve, “*there’s* a carriage to take You to a royal ball!”

Ella stared and stared at the golden carriage with its elegant green footmen, its silent and mysterious driver wrapped in Her shimmering, silvery cloak, and the four white horses that pawed at the ground and breathed out huge clouds of steam. Then She felt a gentle tap on Her shoulder, and turned to see Maeve, Her godmother, looking up at Her.

“Look into My eyes again,” said Maeve, ‘deep, deep, deep into My eyes... Now, My dear Ella, I want You to see things as they really are.”

And, all at once, the splendid carriage was a pumpkin, the horses were white mice, the driver was a moth, the footmen were frogs... and Ella was wearing the stained dress She’d spent so long, and taken such care, in sewing.

“It’s all illusion, My Dear, it’s all illusion. It can be a lot of fun to get dressed up, it can be fun to paint Your face. But many people think They *need* illusions like these to seem more interesting, more attractive to others. All the fine clothes, all the jewels, all the make-up, and the fancy carriages: they’re all *un-im-por-tant*. They don’t change the person You are inside. That’s all that *really* matters ... Now, would You like to go to the ball?”

“Is that all illusion, too?”

“What do You think?”

“Well... a lot of it is, I suppose: most of the people there will be all dressed up, like Gladys and Primrose, trying to make a big impression, hoping the prince will notice Them... *But...* the music...”

"Good music is never an illusion. I can’t promise that the music tonight will be good. But You won’t find out unless You go. And dancing: dancing can help to free the person inside You.”

“It would be nice!... I’LL GO! And it doesn’t matter what anybody says or if everybody laughs at Me. The person inside Me wants to dance!” And She kissed Her godmother, then twirled around. “But I’ll have to be home in time to clean up before the others get back. I’ll have to leave by midnight... But what was it You wanted when You came ’round this evening? You didn’t finish saying.”

“Oh, I just came to see if You had any honey. I’ve run out, and I wanted to bake a honey cake for My trial-basis goddaughter, who’s coming around tomorrow to tell Me how She enjoyed Herself at the ball. “

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So Ella gave Maeve a pot of honey, and the two of Them went out to the street, where They parted, one to go home to Her baking: the other to go to the ball, with Her outdoor shoes on Her feet, and a lighter pair for dancing in Her hand.

Chapter 2

Cyril, the prince, was having an argument with King Richard V, His father, over what He was to wear to the ball. He'd ordered a suit to be made for Him - a suit as plain as possible, as the ball, He thought, was for plain, ordinary people. But the king was insisting that He wear something much more regal, with useless golden ropes hanging in loops from the shoulders, and medals that Cyril had won merely by being the prince, the son of a king who loved medals. The king ended the argument by threatening to cancel the ball, even at this last moment, if Cyril didn't wear the fancy suit. So Cyril, at last, gave in.

Downstairs, in the ballroom, most of the guests had arrived and were waiting for the prince to appear. Most of the nobility had stayed away from this ball, feeling that to attend a social gathering with mere commoners would be beneath Their dignity. There were, however, a few unmarried daughters of minor nobles and court officials, who'd decided that it'd be risky to pass up this chance to attract the attention of Prince Cyril. They were busy ignoring all the other guests - daughters of rich families or market-stall workers, it was all the same: They weren't nobility, so They didn't count.

Then there were the guests from the richer and "more important" families. These were busy pretending that They were quite used to being guests at the palace, though for most of Them it was Their first time inside the palace gates. They were also trying to make quite clear to the poorer, "less important" guests that They (the poor ones) were to remember Their place and stay well out of the way - especially once the prince or the king appeared. They couldn't understand at all why these unimportant people had been invited to the ball, and were worried that Their first chance to meet the prince face to face might be ruined by "these common milkmaids, basket-weavers, and vegetable sellers."

Most of this last group, the poorest, also couldn't understand why They'd been invited. They had no real expectations of making an impression on the prince - or on anybody. But They *had* been invited, and so They'd come. They were busy watching the "pretty" people, and keeping out of Their way, as was expected of Them.

When the prince appeared at the head of the ballroom staircase, the musicians started playing a grand march, and every eye was turned on Him. He was immediately surrounded by a flock of brightly dressed young women, which made it difficult for Him to move. And each of these women was trying Her hardest to get His attention. The king entered a few minutes later - with an even more impressive march being played - and at once made His way to a boxed-in row of chairs, where He could keep an eye on things without letting any of the "common rabble" get too close.

Cyril looked around Him, rather alarmed. He didn't enjoy being the centre of so much attention, in the middle of such a press of young women. More to gain a bit of peace than for any other reason, He asked one of those closest to Him if She'd like to dance. She fluttered Her eyelashes, curtsied, and sighed: "I'd be delighted, Your Highness," while most of the other women turned looks of envy on Her. More than one thought: "Why *Her*? Why not *Me*?"

The music started, and Cyril and His partner sailed away. For a short time, They were the only ones dancing, but soon the disappointed women - the ones He hadn't chosen - accepted other partners, and the room was full of swirling colours. Cyril soon found He hadn't escaped attention at all. All the dancing women were gazing at Him, and some -whirling close by with Their partners - were evidently trying to capture His attention. Meanwhile, His own partner kept up a ceaseless patter of talk designed to flatter and impress Him (which it didn't). At the

end of the dance, He escaped from Her by asking to dance one of the other young women who rushed to surround Him as soon as the music stopped. But with this partner He fared no better. After a few more dances, with various partners, He retreated to where His father sat.

“Well, We trust You’re enjoying Yourself with the commoners,” the king sneered sarcastically. “*Natural* enough for You?”

“No, They’re not - at least not the ones I’ve danced with,” admitted Cyril. “But at least They’re no worse than princesses or countesses. And maybe They’ll begin to act more naturally once the novelty of the situation has worn off.”

“That We leave You to discover for Yourself. We can’t stand this any longer. We’re going. We’ll just say that this is the last commoner’s ball at the palace while *We’re* king.” With that, He summoned His attendants, and glided out of the ballroom. Cyril remained where He was for a while, watching the dancers, but They - at least the women - seemed to be dancing for Him: trying to attract His attention, rather than for Their own enjoyment.

Looking around the ballroom, He saw some guests that He hadn’t noticed before: more poorly dressed than the ones who’d been crowding about Him. None of Them were dancing: They were standing by the walls at the end of the ballroom. He decided to go over and talk to Them. But - as soon as He left the royal box - He was once again surrounded by a brightly dressed crowd.

Slowly, trying not to be impolite or push anybody, He moved (and of course the bright women moved with Him) towards the end of the ballroom. But when They arrived, the poorly dressed guests were no longer there. Seeing the prince and the “nice ladies” moving towards Them - and not knowing that He *wanted* to see Them - They were doing what came naturally and keeping out of the way. Cyril tried to reach Them a few more times, then gave it up. He danced a few more times, then left the ballroom. As He reached the head of the staircase that climbed out of the great room, the music for that dance ended.

He turned to look at those below, and called out: “Ladies and Gentlemen, please continue to enjoy Yourselves.” After that short speech, He turned and was gone. Hurrying to His rooms, He flung off His clothes, leaving them lying on the floor. He put on the other suit - the plain one He’d had made and, looking in the mirror, made His hair as untidy as He could, and further disguised Himself by pasting a false moustache to His upper lip.

Ella stood by one of the columns that supported the high ceiling, and watched the colours swirling past. At first, when the prince had disappeared, all the guests had been disappointed. But now, people had started to dance again, and seemed to have started enjoying Themselves at last. Now that Prince Cyril wasn’t here, They no longer had to try to attract His attention.

Ella had asked several men to dance with Her, but the rich ones had taken one look at Her smudged, simple dress, and made Their excuses. And the poor ones had just shaken Their heads, and stayed close to the walls. So Ella had spent Her time either dancing by Herself, or watching the other dancers.

“It may be all illusion,” She told Herself, “but it’s pretty, all the same! “

Then that dance finished, and the band started playing another, so lively and happy that Ella just had to dance. Around and around She danced, up and down, not caring that passing dancers were staring or even laughing at Her for dancing by Herself. She was enjoying Herself... Then She noticed a young man who wasn’t dancing, only looking at Her. Not staring in an amused or shocked way, just looking. After a while, He too began to dance by Himself, up and down, around and around. People started laughing at Him as well, and He began to blush, but He kept on dancing. Whenever He passed Ella, He smiled at Her - a friendly smile, just a little bit shy. When the dance ended, They found Themselves quite close to each other.

“Would You like to dance with Me?” asked Ella. “Everybody else seems to be afraid of being laughed at if They dance with Me, because I’m not dressed very fancy. But You don’t seem to mind being laughed at.

“I’m not at all *used* to being laughed at,” He replied, “but it doesn’t seem to be so scary. Yes, I *would* like to dance with You. That is, if You don’t mind being laughed at for dancing with *Me*.”

So the two of Them danced several dances together. Sometimes Ella made mistakes because She didn’t know the rules to some of the dances, and once or twice They tripped up, and everyone around Them laughed, but that didn’t stop Them enjoying Themselves. They just laughed as well, and Ella’d wag Her finger at Her own big feet and say: “Now You two behave Yourselves!” And when They wanted a rest, They’d sit down at the side of the ballroom and talk - about what, I don’t know: but I do know that in a short time They thought of each other as old friends.

During one dance, a man in a fancy uniform came up to Them, and, bowing, said: “Excuse Me, Your Highness, but His Majesty The King wishes to see You.” Cyril looked at Ella, to see how She’d react (because, You see, He hadn’t told Her that He was the prince). She looked surprised, but didn’t blush or curtsy or turn away embarrassed or anything like that. In fact, He seemed a lot more embarrassed than She did.

“Will You wait for Me here?” He asked, and She nodded.

When He’d left Her, She stood still for a while, thinking. She’d been dancing and talking with the prince all this time, and hadn’t known it. And neither had any of the other guests, or They’d never have laughed at Him. Then She noticed that it was only half an hour before midnight. She danced some more, hoping that Cyril would come back in time. When the clock struck midnight, She decided to wait a little longer. But then She saw that Gladys had noticed Her, and was coming towards Her from the other end of the ballroom (where She and Primrose had been watching the stairs like hawks, so They could be the first ones to pounce on the prince, should He return to the ball.) She looked angry.

Ella slipped away through the crowd of guests, and went outside, to where She’d left Her other shoes. Changing into these, She hurried home, not noticing that Cyril had returned to the ballroom and seen Her go.

Cyril was feeling hot and bothered. He’d had quite an uncomfortable meeting with the king, who’d demanded to know the meaning of His behaviour after He, the king, had left the ball. (At least Cyril had had the presence of mind to remove the moustache before facing His father.)

“Wearing commoner clothes and dancing: not only with commoners, but with *shabby commoners!* Have You no self-respect?! And, if not, haven’t You at least some respect for Your position as prince?!... As You know, We’re planning to visit the three main cities in this region, on matters of state. We had planned to leave You here at the palace, but who *knows* what You might get up to if We did. So You’re coming with Us. No arguments!! We leave tomorrow.”

He also made Him change back into the fancy regal clothes before He’d allow Him to return to the ball.

And now, just as Cyril got back to the ballroom, He saw His new friend slipping outside. And before He could free Himself of the young women who once again had crowded about Him, She was gone. He ran down the drive to the palace gates, but it was no good: She really was gone. They’d talked and talked, like old friends, but He didn’t know Her name! (He hadn’t asked Hers, because He hadn’t wanted, yet, to reveal His own.) How could He find Her again? He walked sadly back towards the ballroom. Then, on the ground, He saw... a

shoe! He recognised it at once as one of Hers, because She'd pointed them out: "They're not really dancing shoes," She'd explained. "They're just the shoes I wear indoors, because the others are too heavy."

So Cyril had an idea for how to find His friend. This shoe was too big for most women's feet. He took it to His most trusted servant (one He trusted not to tell His secrets to the king) and explained His plan.

The next day, the king and prince set off on Their royal tour, and Cyril's servant, dressed as a cobbler, set off around the town. He called at each house, carrying the shoe, and asked if there were any young woman in the house whose foot would fit it. For two days, He had no luck in His search. The third day, He came to the house where Ella lived.

Ella was out at the market, so Primrose answered the door. When She was shown the shoe, She snorted: "I don't expect You get many customers with feet *that* size! So *that's* why Ella's been walking about the house barefoot..." Then She muttered to Herself: "*When* She's at home... She spends most of the day at that mad old hag's..." (Ella had taken to spending an *hour* or so each day at Maeve's, who'd become a very dear friend *and* a godmother on a permanent basis.) "With all the work there is to do around this house, I don't know what She..."

"Oh, His Highness will be pleased!" sighed the "cobbler".

"What's that?!... His Highness?!... Prince Cyril?!" demanded Primrose.

"Yes. His Highness is very eager to find the young woman whose shoe this is."

"Why, that's MY shoe!" exclaimed Primrose, snatching it from the other's hand.

"But I thought You said..."

"Never mind what I said. This is My shoe. You may now take Me to His Highness," She ordered. But the servant insisted She try on the shoe, and it was obviously too big for Her. "I *like* to wear My shoes too big," She wheedled, but the servant wasn't fooled. Then in came Ernestine and Gladys, and when They'd heard the story, They had to go and try on the shoe as well. But it wobbled about on the foot of both of Them.

"I thought You said something about an Ellie or something," started the servant. "Wouldn't She..."

"No Ellie here!" snapped Primrose. And Gladys said "Ellie who?"

"My name's Ella," came a voice from the doorway. "Can I help You?" and in came Ella, carrying the shopping. One look at Her feet was enough to convince Cyril's servant that He'd found the one He'd been looking for. Somehow, the two of Them got away from the others and had a private talk. I can't tell You what They said, because it was private, but three days later, as soon as Cyril came back - from a tour He hadn't enjoyed at all - He Himself came around to Ella's house.

Only, it wasn't Ella's house anymore. Gladys, Primrose, and Ernestine had become very jealous of Her, and had said some *especially* horrible things to Her. Then They'd suddenly changed Their tune, and started treating Her in a sickly sweet way. It seemed that They were all *terribly* fond of Her, and hoped that when She was married to Cyril, and living at the palace, She wouldn't forget Her dear relations.

Ella had told Them that She had no plans to marry the prince - that She'd only met Him once. They'd told Her not to be silly, that everyone *knew* that the prince was looking for a wife, and that He'd obviously chosen Her. When Ella had insisted that there'd been no talk of marriage, that She wasn't thinking of marrying, They'd changed "Don't be silly" into "Don't be stupid", and got more and more upset with Her.

Of course, Ella'd understood from the beginning that They were only interested in Their own hoped-for position of closeness to royalty. Their constant wheedling and advice to grab the prince and hold onto Him before He got away angered Her. Her father, too, tried to convince Her to take advantage of this golden opportunity. The whole business sickened Her so much that She asked Maeve if She could move in with *Her*. And half a day later, She'd moved all Her things to the end of the street.

So that when Cyril, in disguise, dressed up in "common" clothes, showed up, and asked to speak to Ella, Gladys looked at Him coldly, and asked if He were another of the prince's servants.

"No indeed!" answered Cyril truthfully. "No, the fact is," He added (He'd heard of Their awful behaviour from His servant) "that She owes Me something. But if She isn't in, could You..."

"I'm not paying Her debts!" snapped Gladys. "She doesn't live here anyway. She lives with the crazy old woman at the end of the street."

So Cyril found Ella at last, and They had a long talk (and two pieces each of Maeve's excellent spice cake.) After this talk, Cyril would sometimes call Her "My Lady Ella Of The Cinders". He often came to visit Ella and Maeve - who were both always glad to see Him - and spent perhaps the first totally relaxed and completely happy hours of His life there.

Maeve had lived in many faraway places, and had fascinating stories to tell Ella and Cyril of people She'd met, things She'd seen, work She'd done, and experiences She'd had. "But now," She once said, "I've found the goddaughter I've always wanted, and I'll be happy to settle down here with You for the rest of My life. It's so nice to have a family at last, and especially such a wonderful family." And She *did* have a way to make Ella feel wonderful, feel special. Nobody had made Ella feel this way since Her mother had died, and She too was happy to have found this new family.

And as for Cyril, people had *always* tried to make Him feel that He was special. But not because He was Himself, rather because He was the prince. And now at last He'd found two people who didn't care if He was the prince, They liked Him for Himself. And He, too, felt Himself a member of the family. He, too, was happy.

Until one day His father found out, and ordered Him to stop this nonsense. And when He refused to stop this nonsense, His angry father told Him that He could choose between two possibilities - either He could stop having anything to do with the filthy commoners, or He could consider Himself no longer a prince. He added that He, the king, would NOT be made to look like a fool, and that if He, Cyril, wanted nothing else *but* to look like a fool, He would be no son of His, the king's.

For three days, Cyril stayed in His rooms, thinking and rethinking what He should do. On the third night, He stole out of the palace and made His way to Ella's. It was late and He had to wake Her up, but there wasn't any other way of seeing Her without risking His father's finding out.

Ella coaxed the fire in the kitchen back to life, then sat on a stool and stared into it, with Her arms hugged around Her knees, and listened while Cyril, pacing up and down the kitchen, told Her what'd happened.

"And I've thought and thought about it, and I've come up with two ideas. One is simply to wait Him out. He's an old man, and it won't be so very long before He dies. Then I'll be king, and can do whatever I like. Until then, I'll have to do as He says. But maybe We'll find a way



to see each other now and then... The other is..." He gulped, "that We get married. Maybe He's only bluffing, trying to scare Me, and once We were already married and He couldn't stop it, He might accept it."

Still for some time, Ella stared into the fire, not saying anything. When She did speak, She seemed to be speaking to the flames. "I'm sorry, Cyril. You've got a difficult decision to make, and *I'm* not going to make it any easier for You... First of all, let Me say that We can forget the second idea: I like You a great deal. I might even say that I love You, in a way. But not that way. I don't want to marry You, and I'm not going to do it just to force Your father into a corner..."

She stood up, and went over to Him. Putting Her hands on His shoulders, She looked Him in the face. "You don't *really* want to marry Me, do You?" Cyril whispered: "I don't *know!*" Ella looked at Him for a while longer in silence, then continued: "As for the other idea... it's a bit more difficult to explain, and it might seem like I'm being unfair to You... For years, I was treated by My father as if I weren't there. I looked after Him and waited - waited for the day He'd notice Me, maybe even love Me. He finally did notice Me again, after He'd married Ernestine, and given up drinking. But then He felt so guilty about the way that He'd treated Me before, that love was simply impossible.

"And if I now wait for years for You, until Your father's dead, how do I know what kind of person You'd be by then? Maybe You wouldn't want Me for a friend then. You might feel ashamed of Me... or maybe ashamed of Yourself.

"I'm not willing to wait around for *anybody* to notice Me. I'm not willing to wait until I'm acceptable. I've learned that I'm too important for that. Oh, I'm important to You, I'm important to Maeve; but that's not what I'm talking about. Maeve helped Me find this out, and You've helped as well. But if I lost the both of You, I'd still have learned My lesson: I'm important to Myself. Too important to hide in any corners until the respectable people are out of the way, like I've been doing with Ernestine, Gladys, and Primrose. I want to be proud of *all* My friends. And I want Them to be proud of Me... I can't offer You an easier choice than Your father has. I'm sorry..."

Back at the palace, Cyril spent another three days in His rooms. He had to choose between giving up being a prince (and of course becoming king later) and giving up His friendship with Ella and Maeve, His "new family".

He balanced the easy life He had as a prince against the fun He had with Ella and Maeve. Ella didn't want to marry Him... but when He thought about it, did *He* really want to marry Her? Wasn't this whole idea of marriage His father's? What He'd needed was a friend. And He'd found two of Them: Maeve and Ella were surely the first real friends He'd ever had.

On the other hand, there was all the good He could do for the country when He became king. Because *He'd* be a better king than His father... Or *would* He? Maybe He'd change with the years. If He was the sort of person who could give up His only friends to become king, what kind of a king would He be?... The truth was, as a prince He'd always felt Himself to be a prisoner of His position. As a king, wouldn't He be even more so?...

But a good king would accept His responsibilities: He'd have to think of *all* the people in His kingdom, not just a few friends. *That* would be selfish and unfair... But then, how did His *father* think of the people in His kingdom? Filthy commoners... a mob of louts and commoners..." Still, *He* wouldn't be like His father, surely not... *WOULD He???* And then...

It was a hard decision, but after three days, His mind was made up.

{the end}