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*The Hand
Of The
Princess*

Dedicated to Martha and Chan Tse

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*(Chapter 1)**The Princess Neglected (And well-Loved)*

King Peter VI wanted a son. He wanted a son who would be brave, and strong, and clever. A prince, who would one day be king, King Peter VII, and rule the kingdom in his father's place.

Now, the king had a daughter, a princess, and she was brave, and strong, and clever. Of course, the king didn't know that she was, as he was waiting for a prince, a son. He didn't pay much attention to the princess, because he was one of those kings who believe that a princess just doesn't matter as much as a prince. As long as a king has a prince or two, then a princess can come in useful: he can always get her married off to the prince of a different kingdom, and so try to keep the two kingdoms friendly - keep it all in the family, as we'd say. But if he hasn't got any prince, then what good is a princess? Some prince will come along and marry her, and later become king.

"I want my son to be king after me: not some other king's son!" complained King Peter VI, and kept praying for a son. But no son was born to him, and that was that.

He'd never have expected his daughter to be brave, and strong, and clever: a princess just doesn't need to be. These are qualities that a prince (a future king) should have. But a princess will never be king: she'll only be (maybe) married to one. So all she needs to be is charming and beautiful, so that some brave, strong, clever prince will want to marry her.

And was Princess Martha charming and beautiful? Well, yes and no. She wasn't always charming when she was supposed to be, when she was told to be charming, for example, to visiting lords or ambassadors. But if she liked someone, she could be... well, I don't know if "charming" is the right word - it sounds so formal - but she could be very nice to be with. And - as for beautiful - most people, seeing her for the first time, wouldn't exactly say that she was beautiful (unless they were just trying to be charming). But her close friends, people who really got to know her, all thought that she was. Of course, they meant that inner kind of beauty - not the way somebody looks, but the way they are.

Her father hadn't ever got to know her well. He hadn't had the time: there are just too many important matters to attend to in ruling a country. So he never got to know that she was beautiful, or could be (let's use this word) charming. Her mother, Queen Eleanor, didn't have much time for her either. She knew what was wanted of a queen, and spent most of her time being beautiful and charming, and praying for a son, so that the king would be happy.

Ever since she'd born, Martha had been left in the care of a nurse named Alice.

"I were working in the royal dairy at the time," Alice would tell her, "and I don't know if it were drinking all that fresh milk, or if it were just being 'round all them cows so much, but the truth is I had so much milk meself, when Jeb were born, that all the servants used to talk about it. A regular cow meself, they said I were. And some of them as said it with wonder, and others as said it as a joke and something to be ashamed for. But why were I to be ashamed for being likened to a cow? I've always found cows to be nice creatures: gentle and strong and quiet and warm. Nothing I never see to be ashamed for in that.

"Anyway, when you were born, yer father - he'd a heard the talk of how much milk I had - said I were to feed you. 'Yer son's old enough to wean now,' said yer father, 'you can give'm watered-down cows' milk.' 'Please, Yer Majesty,' said I, 'I'm sure I've got enough for the two of 'em.' 'As you like,' said yer father, 'on'y you'll feed the princess first, and make sure she

gets enough, before you give to the other.' And he looked that surprised I'd want to bother with feeding the two of you. Well, he'll never know how nice it can be, and that's a fact."

It was Alice who'd carried Martha about as a baby, and Alice who'd rocked her to sleep. It was Alice who'd comforted her when she was crying, and sung songs to her when she awoke in the middle of the night, frightened. Alice who told her stories and explained things to her. It was Alice who was most like a mother to her, and Martha loved her more than anyone else in the whole world.

And after Alice, Martha loved Jeb best. Oh, there'd been jealousy between them, of course. Jeb would be jealous of the way Martha always had to be first: fed first, taken care of first, listened to first. And Martha'd be jealous of Jeb, when she had to be dressed up in a stiff and stuffy dress, to be presented to his Excellency Lord Whatnot, Ambassador of Wherever, and his wife, Lady Whatnot; then sit through boring conversations, and mind her manners through an endless dinner, while Jeb would be eating bread, cheese, and apples in the orchard with Alice. Or when she had to start taking lessons in how to act like a proper princess: how to speak correctly, how to dance in a ballroom style, how to sit up straight and look majestic, while Jeb was running and laughing outside, and listening to Alice's stories.

But, once they began to understand that it wasn't each other's fault that these things happened, and that it wasn't Alice's fault either: that she loved them both, they were able to get over their jealousies, and become great friends.

"My brother Jeb," Martha would call him, "two months older than me." And one day, when they were ten years old, she said: "If you're my brother, why, you should be a prince! Just think of it: 'Prince Jeb'."

But Jeb scowled, spat on the ground, and said: "Shit! I don't want to be no prince. Grow up to be a king like yer father and not have no time for nothing fun anymore. Being grumpy and bossy all the time. Boring, it'd be. Why, if I were prince, I wouldn't be allowed to go swimming in the pond with the others from the village. Yer father don't like that kind of thing. When we see his carriage coming, we've got to hide in the bushes or he sends a couple of soldiers to chase us."

And Martha grew sad, because she knew that she'd never be allowed to swim in the pond in the meadow with the others.

That year, Jeb began to work in the dairy. He helped to clean out the cows' stalls, and fill their feeders with hay. Martha and Alice would stop by at least once a day and lend a hand if there was lots to do. If there wasn't, they'd sit and chat with Jeb and the other dairy workers. Alice liked especially to show up at milking time. It was her chance to practice her old job for a short time. She'd settle onto the milking stool with a sigh, put the milk-pail under the cow's udders, and, leaning her forehead against the cow's warm side, talk soothingly, almost singing, to the cow, as her fingers squeezed the teats gently but firmly, and the milk hissed into the pail.

"It's good to get a chance to keep my hand in," she'd say. And the princess also got a chance to get her hand in, because Alice taught both children how to milk a cow, even though it wasn't yet part of Jeb's duties - and never would be, of course, part of Martha's. "Still," as Alice would say, it don't do you no harm, do it? And it's a good thing to know where your milk comes from, and how." she told the children not to forget that the cow was a living animal with feelings, and should always be treated with kindness and respect. After milking, she always stroked the cow's head, and thanked her for the milk.

When the king got to hear that his daughter spent some of her time in the dairy, chatting with the servants, he was angry. He ordered her to put a stop to it at once. Of course, he didn't have any time to spend with her himself, but some solution would have to be found to keep her out of mischief.

Now, it happened that the king was also at this time upset with one of his advisers: the oldest adviser, in fact, whose name was William. William's advice was too peaceful for King

Peter. He gave such advice as to think about it, to be careful, to be not so harsh and strict. The king was tired of listening to this advice, and was thinking of getting rid of William, but he was such a good baldy player, and the king did enjoy a game of baldy. ("Three bald men", called "baldy" by everybody for short, was - or is - a very complicated board game, that was very popular with the more educated people in this, and surrounding, kingdoms. I've never played it myself: in fact, I've only ever seen it played once, so I'm not going to be able to explain it to you.) So now, the king decided that he could solve both problems by making William Martha's personal teacher. That way, Martha would be kept busy, and William - no longer adviser to the king - would at least have a job that would keep him in the palace, on hand in case the king fancied a game of baldy.

So Martha started spending her mornings with William. She learned to read and write and deal with numbers. From him she got her first lessons in the history and geography of her land and the lands around it. He also taught her to play baldy, and showed her the stars through his telescope. In fact, he would talk to her about anything that she wanted to, and would teach her anything that she wanted to learn.

"Because," as he'd say, "intelligent children should be encouraged to use their intelligence, to think about things. If not, they become bored and boring." you see, William was intelligent enough himself, and observant and interested enough, to recognise that Martha was intelligent.

In the afternoons - when Martha didn't have dancing lessons, and there weren't any important visitors to be entertained (in very unentertaining ways, thought Martha) - she'd sometimes go for a walk with Alice, and sometimes she'd find something to do in her rooms (she had a whole set of rooms to herself): sewing or painting or reading. She couldn't go to the dairy to see Jeb, and she knew that if her father saw them together, or heard of it, he'd get all upset again.

She had to wait until the evening, after she'd had dinner, and Jeb had finished his work, if she wanted to see him. She'd curtsy to her parents, wish them good night, and retire to her bedroom. There, she'd change into a simple, rather shabby-looking set of clothes that she'd made from cloth that Alice had brought her. (In these clothes she didn't exactly look like a princess, and it was easier for her to move about unnoticed.) Then, she'd scramble through the window and, feeling with her fingers and toes for cracks between the stones of the wall, make her way to the ground, where Jeb would be waiting for her, and they'd be able to have a few hours together. Sometimes they went for walks, and sometimes they went into the village to be with other young people there.

On Jeb's days off work, Martha would also arrange with William to have a day off lessons, and she and Jeb, sometimes with Alice along, would take something to eat, and go for a long walk, into the woods or along the cliffs by the sea.

It was on such a day as this, exploring the sea cliffs, and carefully following the steep tracks in them that - until then - only sheep had used, that they found their way down to a tiny sandy beach on a bay totally surrounded by cliffs. Martha flopped down on the sand and kicked her sandals off, lying on her front and looking out to sea. She let out a sigh of happiness, and dug her fingers and toes down into the extremely fine sand. Jeb, meanwhile, had flung off his clothes, and was running down to the water. Martha sighed again - not as happily this time - and watched him splashing and diving and swimming to and fro.

After a while, he was back and lying beside her. He'd brought a jumble of seaweed - the kind with the air bubbles in it - and they were both hunting through the seaweed, popping the bubbles between their fingers. It was a very warm day, and Jeb returned several times to the water, to cool himself off with a quick dip. Martha too had taken off her clothes, and was using them, rolled up, as a pillow under her chin.

When she'd decided that there weren't any more bubbles to pop, she sat up and looked out to sea. Then she looked around again at the beach and the cliffs surrounding it. Digging her

hands into the fine dry sand, she lifted a double handful up, and allowed it to trickle through her fingers, down onto Jeb's back, where it stuck. She picked up more sand and continued. Soon he was covered from neck to toes in a thin layer of the sand. Martha laughed.

"You look like you've been fried in bread-crumbs!"

"Yer turn now," said Jeb, and Martha lay down, while Jeb kneeled beside her and started pouring sand, in a very fine stream, onto her back.

"It don't stick!" he complained. "Yer back's not wet."

"Don't stop though!" pleaded Martha. "It feels nice. It's like tickling... No," she corrected herself, "it's like someone blowing very gently on my back, only warm. Mmmm! ... Jeb? ..." she continued, "could you ... could you teach me to swim?"

"I mean," she added, "it looks like there's no way onto this beach aside from that steep path, and I shouldn't think anybody ever comes here, except for sheep, so my father shouldn't ever find out about it ... Oh, Jeb, would you?"

Jeb went on sifting sand up and down her back, and didn't answer immediately. "Alright," he said at last. "If you'll teach me to read..."

Martha turned over onto her back, and, shading her eyes from the sun with one arm, looked up at Jeb. It was the first time she'd ever heard him say that he wanted to be able to read, and she was surprised, but she quickly agreed.

So, on future trips to the beach, Martha took along books, paper, and sticks of charcoal for writing with. And for an hour or so she'd teach Jeb reading and writing. Then it'd be Jeb's turn to teach her swimming. They kept their lessons a secret, and never took anyone to their beach – except, of course, for Alice. Alice was delighted with the beach. She'd always loved swimming, but the king wouldn't tolerate any of the palace workers going swimming in the village pond, so it had been ages since she'd been able to swim at all.

Sometimes in the evenings, Jeb would climb up to Martha's window, and they'd have reading and writing lessons in her rooms as well. Martha also taught him to play baldy, which he found difficult at first, but soon got to be quite good at it.

And then one day, when they were fifteen years old, it all had to end. Jeb was called from the dairy and told to appear before their Majesties. And to be QUICK about it!

When he entered the throne room, Jeb saw the king and queen on their thrones, looking angry (the king) and sternly puzzled (the queen). Martha and Alice were standing to either side and a little behind the royal couple. They looked upset, and a little frightened.

"Is this the boy? This Judd, or Jeb, or whatever it is?" growled the king.

"My name is Jeb, Yer Majesty," answered Jeb, bowing.

"Your name is Jeb, is it?" roared the king. "Well, boy, word has reached our ears that you and the Princess Martha have been seen swimming in the sea ... and WITHOUT any clothes on! Is this true, BOY?"

"Y-yes, Yer Majesty, it is," said Jeb, his ears going bright red: not through shame at anything he'd done, but simply because he was being shouted at.

"Yes, your Majesty, it is," mimicked the king. "And YOU!" he growled at Alice. "You're his mother *and* the Princess Martha's nurse. Did YOU know about this, or were you not keeping a close enough watch on your charges?"

"I don't see the harm in it, Yer Majesty," answered Alice. They grew up together ... I used to bathe them together when they were little."

"You WHAT?!!!" roared the king, while the queen looked shocked. "No, don't repeat it – we heard what you said. And on WHOSE authority?"

"There didn't seem to be any harm to it," repeated Alice.

"No HARM in it, eh?" growled the king. "Well, you see where it's led to! Seeing each other naked at their ages! We suppose you see no harm in that?!"

"I've said I don't, Yer Majesty," said Alice, trembling and brave. She didn't add that she, too, often went swimming with them. She didn't think that mentioning that would help the situation at all.

"A fine nurse you are for a princess!" sneered the king, and turned back to Jeb. " ... And we suppose that you're going to tell us that it hasn't gone any further than that?"

Jeb stole a quick look at Martha, who made a very small movement of the head: no, and answered: "No, Yer Majesty – that is, I mean yes, Yer Majesty."

"No, your Majesty, yes, your Majesty? What do you mean, boy?"

"Yes I mean to say that it hasn't gone any further ... I mean, we do spend a bit of time together, being friends ..."

"Yeeees! We've done a bit of asking around, and it seems to us that you two spend a bit too much time together, and that you're altogether too good friends for our liking. Why, you work in the stables, don't you, boy?"

"In the dairy, please Yer Majesty ..."

"Stables, dairy, what's the ...? What kind of friend is that for a princess?!" he turned to Martha: "you, my Dear, are to stop making friends of the servants. It's certainly not becoming behaviour for a princess. We'll have to find you a few suitable young ladies to act as ladies-in-waiting."

"I believe," interrupted the queen, "that the Duke of Markham and Count Yammany both have quite presentable daughters ..."

"Just so, just so. We'll send messengers to tell them that they may have the position ... You," he turned to Alice, "are to continue as nurse until the arrival of the two young ladies, and then you may go back to whatever it was that you were doing before you became nurse. Ah what was it that you did?"

"I worked in the dairy, Yer Majesty."

"In the dairy, eh? Like your son ... Speaking of whom," said the king, turning to Jeb, "you, YOU, boy, may go with the messenger to the Duke of Markham's castle. And if he hasn't got any work for you, you'll just have to look out for yourself. We don't want to see your face around here again. Now, go!"

"No, Father, wait!" burst out Martha. "Why should he be punished?" It wasn't his fault. I ordered him to spend time with me, because I haven't got any other friends."

"Well, you'll have other friends in the future. We'll see to that. So you won't need him any more. And what's this talk of punishing? He's being sent out to Markham, where I'm sure there are plenty of opportunities for a young man like him." The king smiled thinly. "And besides, if his mother's to go back to her old job in the dairy, we have to make room for her. No," he said, holding up a hand to stop her from interrupting, "we have decided. One day, you'll realise that we've done the right thing. I said you could go, boy."

Jeb bowed, and, before turning to go, looked at Alice and Martha, and smiled reassuringly. Both of them had gone white.

As Jeb was leaving, the king turned again to Alice, and said: "Now, until the Princess Martha's new ladies-in-waiting arrive, we want you to keep a stricter eye on her. We don't want any more of this kind of trouble, or there'll be trouble for you. Understood? ... Good. Now, the two of you may go. ... No," (to Martha, who'd turned to go out the same way as Jeb.) "We think it'd be better if you didn't see him before he goes. You may spend the rest of the day in your chambers." he beckoned one of the guards from the side of the room, and said: "Have two of the royal messengers sent in to us at once. And send someone to assure that the Princess Martha doesn't leave her chambers."

For the rest of that day, Martha, shut up in her rooms, wasn't able to concentrate on anything. She tried reading, she started sewing, she tried to get interested in a model of the village she'd been working on. But she couldn't spend more than four or five minutes doing any

of these things. She spent most of the time pacing up and down, or leaning out of the window. She didn't see Jeb, but then she hadn't expected to. The road he and the messenger would take to Markham lay on the other side of the palace. She did see the other messenger on his way to Count Yammany's, but that didn't cheer her up very much.

In the meantime, Jeb had been gathering his things together and spending a few last hours with Alice, before setting off to begin life in a new place. And what a place! For news was always coming to the palace of the troubles in Markham. Bandits roamed the hills and forests, and could almost never be caught. The duke's soldiers were attacked again and again as they rode out in the countryside. It was a dangerous place to live, from all accounts, and Alice was worried.

"Now, don't you worry, Alice," said Jeb, hugging her. "I can take care of myself. You know that ... I'm only sad about leaving you and Martha."

"Oh, Jeb! Don't leave. You could just run away and hide near here. Then we'd be able to see each other."

"Disobey the king? Then I'd be an outlaw, hunted like an animal. No, my Dear, I'll have to go. But I'll come back some day, when the king's forgotten me."

"Well then, I'll come too!"

"No, I don't think you can. The king's told you to look after Martha until these two young ladies arrive. He won't let you go. And if you ran away, you'd be an outlaw. Besides, we'll have to travel to Markham on horseback, and the king'd never lend you a horse for the journey. You just stay here and look after Martha. Listen here: this messenger I'm going with isn't a bad 'un. I know him from years back, and he's the one who usually carries the messages between here and Markham. Now, I'll get him to bring you letters from me, and you get Martha to read them to you. And if you want to say anything to me, you just tell her, and she'll write it down, just like you were talking to me in the same room. Then you give what she writes to this same messenger, and I'll know how you are, and what all's happening here. Now don't let the messenger know that Martha's got a hand in the letters, or it might cause trouble we don't need."

Soon after this, the messenger came in to say that all was ready. Jeb hugged his mother once more, and kissed her again and again. "Say goodbye to Martha from Me, and give her this kiss ... There now, you take care."

And picking up his sack, with tears in his eyes, he went out to the stables, mounted a horse, and followed the king's messenger out of the palace gates and along the road to Markham.

*Chapter 2)**The Princess Outlaw (And Possibly In-law)*

Martha was bored. Her two new companions had arrived: Lady Caroline, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the Duchess and Duke of Markham; and Lady Isabel, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Count Yammany, whose wife had died five years before. Martha found them quite trying company. They'd walk together in the palace gardens, but whenever Martha suggested going for a walk outside the palace grounds, Isabel would ask why on earth they had to walk when they could ride in a carriage; and Caroline would start talking about bandits, and the horrible, dirty people who lived outside the palace.

"My father says that those people don't like to be clean. They prefer to be dirty. And we might catch diseases from them."

They wouldn't run, or play, or shout, and even walking in the garden for half an hour each day seemed to them to be quite enough. When Martha suggested reading stories to each other, she found that Isabel didn't like reading; and that Caroline didn't even know how.

"My father says that young ladies have no need of reading. He says the more a young lady learns, the less pleasant to be with she becomes. My father says we have enough to do with knowing how to embroider, be charming, and sit prettily."

My father says, my father says. Martha soon gave up counting the number of times in a day that Caroline would say: "My father says..."

And Isabel was always talking about how rich things were, how expensive, how much gold, how big the jewels. When they sat together doing some embroidery, Isabel would always use more gold thread than any other kind. The designs she embroidered weren't very interesting or pretty. But they did have lots and lots of gold thread in them.

When Martha suggested they make up stories to tell each other, Isabel's stories were always full of princesses with long golden hair, and she'd spend ages describing the fancy lace and jewels that they wore. They always seemed to wear so much gold and silver that Martha'd wonder how they could move about with all that weight. And they were always being rescued from towers or from dragons by handsome and charming princes who wore golden armour and rode on snow-white horses. Caroline's stories were generally about knights who went around killing bandits – and rescuing fair maidens, to be sure.

Martha asked Caroline about Markham, and was told of a wild land where it was unsafe to go about without twenty or more soldiers for protection.

"My father says those bandits would cut your throat as soon as look at you. He says they'd cut the ears off their own grandmothers if they could get a few pennies for them. My father says we'd all be murdered in our sleep if the castle weren't so strongly built or so well guarded."

And Martha'd worry yet again about poor Jeb in such a dangerous place.

She continued her studies with William, and invited the other two to come along, but they weren't interested. And in a way, Martha was glad, because it meant her mornings, at least, were free of "My father says" and talk of riches.

Sometimes in the late evening, after finishing work, Alice would come and call under Martha's window. And Martha'd climb down to her. Together, they'd go for walks in the moonlight, and talk and talk. But Alice would grow tired quite soon, and have to go home to bed, because she had to get up every morning very early, and work all day.

Not very often, but now and then, Alice would have a letter from Jeb in Markham, and they'd carry the letter and a couple of candles to the far end of the orchard, where Martha'd

read the letter out, while Alice listened; and they'd talk and talk and talk about the letter and about Jeb. On these nights, Alice would always be so excited that her face would seem to glow, with a heat that would burn away all her tiredness. And, much later than usual, it'd be Martha who'd finally have to go back to her rooms, worn out and sleepy. And Alice would walk up and down the orchard on her own for hours, looking again and again at Jeb's letter, although she couldn't read a word.

Jeb's first letters were about himself: what he was doing, his new job. He'd been put to work in the castle kitchen, as a scully: washing dishes, taking out the slops, carrying cauldrons of soup, huge platters of meat, and jugs of wine into the soldiers' dining hall, washing pots and pans, scrubbing the floor, turning spits with whole pigs as they roasted.

Then, as he got to know them, he'd write as well about the other kitchen workers, and the others who shared the room where he slept. There were four beds in the room, and two or three boys in each bed. Some – like Jeb – worked in the kitchen, while others worked in the stables, armoury, or smithy.

From these other boys, Jeb began to hear of what life in Markham was like. He wrote that most of the boys had stories about someone they knew being robbed or beaten – or even killed – not by bandits, but by the duke's soldiers. Most people seemed to live in a state of fear that, at any time, the soldiers might show up at their house to steal chickens, goats, or food from the table. And listening to the soldiers as they ate, Jeb heard much the same story (but told this time not in whispers of fear or in anger, but with jokes and laughter: "So the wretch says: 'you can't treat my pig that way!' And the captain, he says: 'Oh, I can't, can I? Who says I can't? You fool, I can treat you that way.' And he pushes the old wretch into the mud, and begins beating him with the stick. Ho ho ho. That was good, that was!")

Once or twice, Jeb caught sight of the Duke of Markham himself, when he came down to the soldiers' dining hall to give new orders and joke with the soldiers. Jeb wrote that he was just as cruel as his men. Once he kicked aside a servant who was carrying a platter of meat and was careless enough to get in the duke's way, then ordered the man to be whipped for dropping the platter on the floor. The soldiers seemed to regard the duke with a mixture of fear, admiration, and envy.

Jeb also heard about the rebels (or bandits, or outlaws) who now and then attacked a patrol of soldiers. Some of the boys spoke of them with admiration, while the soldiers spoke of them with a pretended contempt, coloured with fear. Few of them could be caught. And those that were could be tortured and killed – and generally were – without giving any information that could lead to the capture of any other outlaws. They seemed to be ordinary people who'd left their homes to become outlaws. According to the soldiers, they were thieves and heartless killers, but the boys said that these outlaws never attacked ordinary people: only soldiers and tax collectors.

"The duke's supposed to collect taxes, and send a part of them on to the king's palace," explained one boy, "but he collects much more than he's supposed to, to keep for himself."

Another boy told how his family had sheltered one of the outlaws for a night. "She told us that if the soldiers found out about it, we were to say that she'd forced us to help her, and that she'd stolen the food. You see, if the soldiers find out that you've helped an outlaw, you get into awful trouble."

Jeb wrote all this to Martha and Alice, as well as news about how he was getting on.

And then, the letters stopped coming. The messenger told Alice that he hadn't seen Jeb on his last three trips, but that that wasn't unusual. They had a secret hiding place behind the stables, where the messenger would leave Alice's letters to Jeb, and collect Jeb's letters for Alice, in case they couldn't see each other. But Jeb hadn't taken away the last two letters from Alice, and there were no letters from Jeb left there.

Of course, Alice and Martha were worried. What could've happened to Jeb? Had he been thrown in prison for some reason, or was he ill? Had he lost his job and been sent away from the castle? Had he run away – maybe to start on his way back to them, as he'd promised Alice? Or maybe to join the outlaws? But then, wouldn't he have left one last letter to say what he was planning to do?

Alice wanted to ask the messenger to find out what had happened to Jeb, but Martha pointed out that if he asked too many questions about Jeb, someone might find out about the secret letters between themselves and Jeb. Then the messenger would get into trouble.

"And not only him. If Jeb's already in trouble there, he'd only get into worse if they found out. And if he's not in trouble already, this might do it."

"Maybe you're right," answered Alice, "and it'd be awful to get him into trouble if he's not already in it ... But what if he is? Wouldn't he write if he weren't?" She sat for a long time biting her lip and looking down at her hands. Suddenly, she looked up at Martha, and said: "I'll go to Markham. I'll go there and find out what's happened to him."

"But what if he's on his way here? He said he'd come back. What if he's already on his way?"

"He would've sent a message to say. No, I've thought it out and I'm going there to see what's happened to him and if he needs help."

Nothing Martha could say would make Alice change her mind. She was set on going.

"I'll miss you, of course, but it's been two years I've been missing Jeb, all because of yer father. Ordering people around, deciding our lives for us. I've had enough of it. I've had it all my life! You can't do that, you must do that. Go there, come here, and jump! You must feed the princess first, before yer own son, and make sure that she's had enough before he gets a drop. If I'd a had less milk, it would've been Jeb not got enough. He'd a growed up weak, maybe, or even died. It's happened to others like that."

Alice was talking to herself, really, saying things out loud that she'd always kept deep within herself. She'd forgotten that Martha was even there, until she happened to look up and caught the look in the young woman's eyes.

"Oh, my Darling Dear!" she cried, flinging her arms around Martha. "Don't look like that! It's not yer fault, and never has been. You know I love you as if you were my own child. And you love me too, and've never ordered me about. And I did manage it with the both of you, and Jeb didn't go wanting. But he could've done, for all yer father cared. And I'm not having my life pushed around like that anymore."

By now, she was crying. And Martha, hugging her tightly, was crying too. They cried for a long time, silently and deeply.

When the sadness, the sorrow, the bitterness had dulled a little, they began to talk about Alice's plans for going to Markham. Martha offered to give her a horse, but Alice refused it, saying that that would only draw people's attention to her and make it easier to get caught. She'd go on foot, and would no doubt get lifts now and then in farmers' wagons. Martha gave her some money to help her on her way.

The night before Alice was due to leave, Martha couldn't sleep. She climbed out of her window and down to the ground, then made her way in the dark to Alice's room. She slipped into Alice's bed, and at last, with her arms around the older woman, was able to fall asleep.

After Alice had left, Martha became even more bored – as well as sadder – and found the company of her two ladies-in-waiting to be even more distasteful. She took to escaping from the palace more and more. Sometimes she'd go into the village, to visit friends there, though she had to be very careful that she wasn't seen and recognised by the king's soldiers. No longer could she sit around with large groups of friends in the tavern or the village square – as she had in times past with Jeb – telling stories, laughing aloud, or singing together. Now she had to visit her friends secretly, shut indoors in their houses, hid away from spying eyes... and always

with the fear that she might be found, and that her friends would then get into trouble. She thought of Jeb's letters, of the outlaws in Markham who brought danger to their friends and families, to anyone who helped them.

"I'm an outlaw," whispered Martha to herself, "I'm an outlaw princess!"

And – because they were *his* friends as well and she could trust them (didn't they prove this by the danger they ran for her?) – she told their common friends about Jeb's reports from Markham. They became a subject of long, long conversations and debates, the sort that Jeb himself had enjoyed so much.

She would also spend a lot of time by herself, wandering in the woods and along the sea cliffs.

It wasn't too long before she was found on one of her wanderings by a group of her father's soldiers, and escorted back to the palace, where she was delivered to her father. The king got extremely angry with her, and ordered her to be confined to her rooms for a full week. In the meantime, he'd think about a more lasting solution for his disobedient and wilful daughter.

Only a few days after this, came news that the Duke of Markham, along with twenty of his soldiers, had been killed when they'd tried to force into obedience an entire village that had refused to pay its taxes. The report said that it'd apparently been a trap, the village being full of bandits, just waiting for the soldiers to appear. When Martha heard the news, she thought that it was just as likely that the villagers had got fed up with being pushed around, robbed, and beaten, and had finally decided to fight back.

The king was outraged with the news. He almost visibly shook with fury, and called all his advisers together. For six hours they passed suggestions back and forth, but the final plan was mostly of the king's invention.

The king – as you may have noticed – was particularly fond of plans that solved two problems at the same time. And he was considerably pleased with his present idea.

There was to be a contest of skill, bravery, intelligence, and strength. Whoever won the contest would be granted the hand of his daughter, the Princess Martha, in marriage, and the county of Markham, as a separate kingdom.

All Martha's protests were in vain. The king's mind was made up. As he explained to the queen, by setting up Markham as a separate kingdom, and handing it over to someone else, it would stop being a problem for him to worry about. And, by sending Martha to live there, she wouldn't be his problem anymore either.

"The kind of man who could rule Markham is the same kind of man who could control Martha. And, as queen, especially as queen of Markham, she'll soon have to become respectable and responsible... And if she doesn't, well, that'll be her husband's problem, not mine."

Queen Eleanor didn't like the plan, but her protests weren't anywhere as strong as Martha's, and she soon (as she always did) accepted her husband's decision as final.

And so messengers were sent out to every corner of the land with the announcement of the contest for the hand of the princess and the new kingdom of Markham. The king shut himself in his rooms for several days, to work out the details of the contest.

When Martha heard what the contest was to be, she cheered up, just a little. It was to be divided into three tests:

The first test was to carry a very heavy weight from the palace courtyard to the top of a nearby hill, without once letting the weight touch the ground. Guards were to be posted along the way to make sure this didn't happen. Anyone who dropped the weight was out of the contest. Only contestants with strength and endurance would be left for the second test.

The second test was to tell the king what was written on a piece of paper that the king himself was to write and put in a box. The box would then be put in a deep pit in the island in the bay, and two of the palace guard dogs would be left in the pit to guard the box. The king

would order the village fishers not to use their boats on the days of the contest, so that contestants could use them to get to the island. Only brave, skilful contestants could pass on to the third test.

And this was to beat the princess' tutor, William, at a game of three bald men. Nobody who wasn't intelligent and skilful could pass this test, and it was this that cheered Martha up, just a little. William was a very good baldy player, and maybe nobody would be able to win against him.

But what if somebody could? And anyway, Martha hated the idea of being the prize (or part of the prize) in a contest – even if nobody won. She continued to protest to her father, but he was set on his plan. Once, when she cried out that she was to get no choice in the matter, he replied, hoping to quieten her objection:

"Well, here's what we can do: if more than one contestant win through all the tests, you can set a test of your own choice, to decide the absolute winner. But I warn you: if you refuse to set a test, or set one so difficult that nobody can pass it, I will choose the winner."

More than this he wouldn't allow, and he shut himself to all Martha's arguments and pleadings.

When Caroline and Isabel heard of the contest (though, of course, they weren't told what the tests were to be: this was kept a secret of the royal family – and William, who was to play such an important part) they were wildly excited, thinking the plan was "romantic".

"Just think of all those princes and knights and lords who'll be competing against each other for your hand!" cried Caroline. "Aren't you excited?"

Martha was excited, of course, but not in the way that Lady Caroline meant.

"My brother is sure to come," added Lady Isabel. "Oh, just imagine: if he wins, you and I will be related!"

This, however, didn't serve to cheer Martha up at all.

William was sympathetic, but he told her that there wasn't much that he could do: "I've already spoken to the king, to express my strong objection and shock, but he said that if I refuse to take part, he'll get Arthur to take my place. And, although I say it Myself, Arthur would be easier for the contestants to win against."

"Oh, William, don't refuse to take part, whatever you do!" pleaded Martha. "If my father can't be persuaded to drop the whole horrible idea, you're my best hope." But neither of them stopped worrying, and the day of the contest drew closer and closer.

Chapter 3) *The Princess Prize (And Prized)*

The king stood on the platform that had been especially built for the occasion, and spoke to the crowd of contestants. Behind him sat his wife and daughter, that is, the queen and the princess.

The crowd was large, including all the princes from all the neighbouring kingdoms, impatient for a kingdom of their own, now, to add to the ones that they'd (in the case of eldest sons) inherit from their fathers some day. Of course, princes who were second or third sons wouldn't inherit a kingdom, but here was their chance to win one – even if it was a small one: just one duchy, in fact, being called a kingdom.

In addition to the princes, there were several unmarried dukes, earls, and counts – including not only Lady Isabel's brother, but also her father, Count Yammany – as well as knights, and quite a few hopeful commoners. For a tailor to become a king! It was a dream that just might come true.

When the king explained what the three tests were to be, most of the would-be contestants shook their heads. They should've known it was impossible. Here was the second of the tests to read a piece of paper, and where were they, poor tailors or farmers or fishermen, supposed to have learned how to read?! Quietly, or grumbling, they left the crowd of contestants and joined the crowd of onlookers, either looking sheepish or snapping back angrily when others, their neighbours and friends, ribbed them about their lost dream of a kingdom of their own.

The king had known that this would happen – in fact, it was part of his plan, to make sure that no commoners could marry his daughter or win part of his kingdom – and waited for them to leave, for the contestants' crowd to become smaller. Then he continued.

"All contestants who pass the first test will be given a copper ring. Those who pass the second test will be given a silver ring. And those who pass the third test will be given a gold ring. Only if you have all three rings can you hope to marry the princess and rule in Markham. If there is more than one contestant with all three rings, the Princess Martha will set a fourth test to decide the absolute winner.

"The contest is to end at sunset tomorrow. All three rings must be won by then. The Princess Martha then will have until the next morning to set her own test... Let it begin."

And so it began. For the first test, only twenty weights had been prepared, and there were more than a hundred hopeful contestants, so they drew lots to decide in which order they were to start. The king explained to them that they might test the weights and make several attempts to pick them up, but that once each had carried the weight through the palace gates, there'd be no turning back: only by reaching the top of the hill without dropping the weight could they continue the contest.

Of the first twenty, two couldn't pick up the weights at all (they were heavy) and so stepped out of the contest. As one of them – Count Yammany, in fact – said, "What's the use of killing myself, trying to win?" their places were taken by two others. Several dropped their weights once, twice, or three times before they left the palace courtyard, but were, according to the rules, allowed to pick them up again, as they hadn't yet stepped through the palace gates.

Three had the misfortune to drop the weight a short distance outside the palace gates, and so had lost their chance. They had their left thumbs stained with purple ink, to make sure that they couldn't try to start again. Already, the number of competitors was slowly dropping...

Of the first group of twenty, only nine made it with their weights to the top of the hill, where the captain of the palace guard was waiting to present them with a copper ring each. As

each received his ring, he ran down to the sea, where the fishing boats were waiting, pulled up onto the beach. The weights were taken back by cart to the palace, where more contestants awaited their turns.

In the throne room sat the king, with Martha and Queen Eleanor on either side of him. The first contestant entered, limping, and with bloodstains on his trousers. He bowed to the king, then to the queen, and to the princess.

"Well?" asked the king. "What's the message?"

"The message, your Majesty, is 'The Princess Martha could soon be mine.'" And he smirked at Martha.

Martha felt her face flush, and asked herself if it was more shame she felt, or more anger. She started to protest yet again to her father, but he ignored her protest and nodded his head at the contestant.

"Quite right," he said. "Step forward." And he handed him a silver ring, and dismissed him. He could go on to the third test, the game of baldy against William. This was where Martha's hopes lay, and, excusing herself, she went out to watch the game. William won, easily, and Martha's hopes began to rise.

Down at the beach, meanwhile, things had been happening. The fifth contestant to come down from the top of the hill took advantage of the distance he was ahead of the sixth contestant, and smashed holes in as many as he could of the boats drawn up on the beach, before the sixth contestant showed up. Then, on his return from the island, but before reaching the shore, he smashed a hole in his own boat, and swam to shore as it sank. Soon, others were following his example. By the time thirteen contestants had made it to shore, all the boats were destroyed. Anybody who came later had to swim to the island. And if they couldn't swim? Well, that was bad luck.

When the king heard of this new strategy, he was delighted. "The intelligence test was supposed to come third," he laughed, "but some of the contestants are already showing themselves to be very clever! That should make the contest more difficult, and we'll have fewer contestants for the third round."

Some of the contestants who couldn't swim, and so wouldn't get to the island without a boat, were offering large sums of money to the village carpenters to mend the damaged boats.

When the king had given out twenty-four silver rings, something else happened. The twenty-fifth contestant, a knight, still damp from his swim, although he'd dried off as best he could, entered, looking very nervous, and made his three bows.

"And what is the message?" asked the king.

"The message... is... the message, your Majesty, is..." and the knight swallowed before continuing: "is 'The king is a fool.'"

"WHAT?!" roared the king, furious. "Guards! Have this dolt thrown in the dungeon." And the knight was dragged off by two of the guards.

But, after this, the answer was always the same: "The king is a fool." When Martha heard the mutterings that something strange had happened, she left off watching the game of baldy then in progress, and hurried to the throne room. When she heard the new message, she burst out laughing, but quickly managed to turn the laugh into a cough, as the king glared in her direction.

"Surely, my Dear," suggested the queen, "it's obvious that someone has changed the piece of paper for another one, and that anyone coming with the new message has at least proven that they've made it to the island and back, and read the only message that's there. Shouldn't they be counted as having passed the test?"

"NEVER! Not with that message!" answered the king, fuming.

Martha cheered up even more. This would mean even less contestants for the third test, and therefore less chance of a winner. Only twenty-four had made it through the second test,

and of these, eight had already lost at baldy against William. She did think it rather strange, though, that the later contestants (who in all faith were reporting the message they had read on the piece of paper) were being counted as having failed, when the real culprit, the one who'd cheated and insulted the king by making up the new message, was obviously one of the twenty-four who'd been accepted as passing the test, and might win. At least the poor knight had been let out of the dungeon, as even the king had to admit that it wasn't actually his fault for having read the wrong message. Aside from which, since then the elder sons of two dukes and the prince of a neighbouring kingdom had also reported the false message, and if he'd had them thrown into the dungeon, he'd've been creating problems for himself.

The news was spread that the message on the island had been changed, and that it was no longer worth trying to find it out. The contestants still on the beach, waiting for the boats to be mended, let out a great roar when they heard, as did those finishing or in the middle of the first test. But the king's decision was final.

Now it all depended on William, and as Martha made her way back to the baldy table, she hoped that he wouldn't fail. But, when she got there, she found the same game going on, that she'd left when she'd gone to the throne room. William had taken less time than this one game to beat all the contestants up 'til then. For another hour the game lasted, and it was William who finally lost. Martha's heart sank. Lady Isabel was overjoyed – for who should the winner be but her brother.

So it had happened. There was a winner. Martha watched a few more games, but she felt too numb to pay attention. It didn't matter now that William took only an hour to beat the next four contestants. William looked at her, and she could read in his eyes that he felt he'd let her down. She tried, with her own eyes, to let him know that it wasn't his fault: that she knew he'd done his best.

By evening, of the twenty-four who'd passed the second test, nineteen were out of the contest, two were wearing all three rings, and three were still to play baldy. The king had ordered the baldy table to be moved to the throne room, where he could watch.

Then, the third last contestant, Sir Rodney, did something that left everybody shocked. Hardly had the game of baldy begun when he jumped up, took a stick from under his cloak, and began to hit William about the head and shoulders. Everybody was in uproar, and Sir Rodney was soon being held by four guards, while the king shouted: "What's the meaning of this outrage?!"

Sir Rodney allowed the uproar to die down. Then, bowing as best he could while being held by four guards, he said: "Please hear me, your Majesty. I have passed two tests, and needed to pass the third to be able to win the hand of the princess. Now, I knew that I had no chance of winning a game of baldy against this fellow. Why, I hardly know the game. But, if your Majesty will please remember, the third test was to beat the royal tutor at a game of three bald men. Your Majesty, we were at a game of three bald men, and, as your Majesty has just seen, I have beaten the royal tutor."

The king considered this argument for a while, first frowning... then he burst out laughing. "Well," he said, "the third test was a test of intelligence, and this shows a certain cunning intelligence; and is maybe just the sort of thing that would be useful in ruling Markham. Step forward for your gold ring."

Martha (who'd rushed to William's side, and had been making certain that – aside from being stunned – there was no very great damage) heard the king's words as if in a daze. Now, extremely angry, with all the colour drained from her face, she shouted: "How could you?! I'd die first rather than marry this... this..." But she could find no words to describe William's attacker. She ordered William to go straight to bed, and then announced that she was going to her own rooms. And she was NOT to be called the next day to watch any more of this spectacle.

"And," she concluded, "if William isn't in good condition tomorrow, you may consider the last two to have won their gold rings as well. I'm not having William dragged out of bed if he's not completely alright."

And, with that, she was gone. She locked her door from the inside, and wouldn't let anyone in: not even her mother. Her father didn't try to approach her. It was noticed that the light in her room was on until late in the night, and the next day, she didn't come down to breakfast, or to lunch.

As for William, he was feeling perfectly alright, and had no trouble in winning his last two games of baldy.

In the middle of the morning, there was a surprise. A new contestant showed up. A contestant who didn't have the look of a duke, or a prince, or even a knight, being dressed in rough cloth, patched in several places. And he must have come a long way, the people pointed out to each other, for he was covered in dust and dirt. And, they continued, he could hardly be a rich man, with that ragged cut of hair and beard.

The newcomer asked to see the king, asked to be accepted as a contestant for the princess' hand.

"I realise I'm late, Yer Majesty, but it's a long road I've travelled. I understand from some people I've seen today that I've got 'til this evening to complete the three tasks."

"And did these people tell you what the three tests are?"

"Yes, Yer Majesty, I know what they are."

"And didn't they tell you that there's no hope in trying, as someone's changed the message on the island, and I'll only accept the original message?"

"I've heard that too, Yer Majesty, and that everybody thinks it's hopeless. But I don't believe in giving up hope. Maybe I've got a talent for reading messages that are no longer there. That'd come in handy in Markham, doesn't Yer Majesty think?"

"To hear that you can read at all surprises me. Many of your sort dropped out of this contest because of not being able to read. Where did you learn to read, then?"

"A friend of mine taught Me, Yer Majesty."

To all of the king's questions, the newcomer had an answer, and the king decided that he might as well be allowed to try the tests. There was no way he could win, but that was his problem, not the king's. So the newcomer was shown back down to the courtyard, and the weights were pointed out.

"And I've got to carry one of them to the top of that hill? Without dropping it, of course. Well, that should be easy." And, emptying the sack that was slung over one shoulder, the stranger put the weight into it, and lifted it back onto the same shoulder, then started out, slowly but surely, in the direction of the hill. The king recognised the cleverness of using the sack. Well, there was nothing in the rules against that. He sent two guards along with the new contestant, to make sure that he didn't drop the sack and weight before reaching the top.

Before very long, they were back, and the stranger was given a copper ring. Then on to the second test. But before going down to the beach, the stranger looked up at Martha's window. Now, how should he know just which window was hers?

By now, the news had spread about the new arrival, and all the villagers, as well as many of the visiting contestants (or ex-contestants) were on the beach to see him check that none of the boats there was seaworthy, before plunging into the water and swimming to the island. There was a general buzz of talk while waiting for him to come back. How could he possibly read a message that was no longer there?

And then they saw him, clambering over the rocks towards them from further up the coast. He must have swum a longer way back to shore. Or had a sea current carried him off course?

"What's the message? What's the message?" cried the villagers as they crowded around the wet figure making its way up the path towards the palace.

But the stranger replied: "The true message I can tell only to the king in private. The message that's there now, that's worthless," (a pause) "as far as the contest goes, is 'The king is a fool.'"

The crowd roared with laughter when they heard this, because, although they'd heard that the message had been changed by somebody, nobody'd yet told what the original, or the new, message was. They were all for this newcomer.

The king received the newcomer in private, and was told that the original, the true message was "The Princess Martha could soon be mine." The king couldn't understand how this newcomer had found this out, but he handed over a silver ring, and it was on to the third test.

Sitting down across the baldy board from the royal tutor, the new contestant looked at him carefully and asked: "I hope that you're well after your beating yesterday, my Friend?"

William looked up in surprise at the newcomer, and stared a little while at the dark face before replying: "Yes, completely recovered, thank you, Friend... Shall we begin?"

It was another long game, and the king watched it with interest. There were one or two points in the game when he wondered whether the beating of the day before hadn't shaken William up more than he'd admitted, because he played some rather strange moves. The newcomer, too, showed some surprise, and seemed to consider possible traps being laid, but ended up taking advantage of these seeming mistakes in William's game. After two hours, the newcomer had won, and received the third, the gold ring.

The crowd outside had grown restless, and when they heard the news, a cheer went up. One of their own, a commoner, had won through to the final test! Now it all depended on the test the princess would set. But the princess knew nothing of this newcomer. They knew, for news had leaked out, that the princess had been locked in her rooms for the whole day.

That evening, at sunset, the king himself went to the princess' door and pounded on it. "It's sunset: the time is up, and there are four who've passed all three tests." No reply. "If you haven't got a test to set by tomorrow morning, I'll choose your husband for you..." Still no reply, and the king made his way angrily down to the dining hall. Well, at least he would soon be rid of her hard-headedness, one way or another.

Two hours later, Martha opened her door, and asked for supper to be brought to her rooms. When the servant brought the supper, Martha asked her about all the excitement she had noticed earlier in the day from her window, and was told about the new contestant. She seemed very interested, and asked the servant all kinds of questions about this new contestant, which surprised the servant, as Martha had never before shown such positive interest in the contest. Truth to tell, the servant had felt sorry for Martha, as had many in the palace, for Martha was well liked, and it was known how much she objected to this whole business. After she'd finished eating, and listening to all that the servant had to tell her, Martha asked the servant to wait, while she wrote a message for the king:

She had thought it over, and was willing to set a test, and to go to Markham with the winner, as long as the king would grant her two requests: that William – and anybody else from the palace or the village who so wished – was to be allowed to accompany her to Markham, and live there. And that the king would provide a horse for each of these people, and enough wagons to carry their combined possessions. On the other hand, he wouldn't need to send an armed escort.

She pointed out that the king could well afford to do without William, for he was getting old. And – as for the king's need of an excellent baldy player in the palace – several of the competitors had beaten William at the game, and the king would surely be able to persuade one of them to take William's place. After all, only one of them would win the final test and be going to Markham.

"Wouldn't Sir Rodney make a good playing partner for you?" she thought wickedly, but she didn't write that, of course. There was no point in needlessly angering him now. That

would only make him less likely to accept her conditions. For the same reason, she didn't call them conditions: but requests. And she didn't write that she'd refuse to go, or cause a big fuss, if he rejected her requests. She didn't need to. He was intelligent enough to work out for himself that letting William go was a small price to pay for her obedient coöperation. As for the horses and wagons, that would be no problem: he could spare them; and besides, he'd be sure to assume that none of his subjects – aside from possibly William, who *was* obviously fond of the girl – would willingly follow her to that dangerous place... She ended the message by politely asking him to think the matter over and have a reply for her in the morning.

The next morning, Martha came downstairs looking quite submissive, with a shawl over her head. She insisted that she'd explain her test on the platform outside the palace gates. When the villagers saw that something was happening, they hurried up to watch.

First she quietly asked her father if he agreed to her requests. He said that he did – as long as her husband-to-be didn't raise any objections. He added that William had already been informed, and was in agreement. Martha then turned to the crowd, and in a loud voice, so that all there could hear, she announced that her father, the king, had graciously granted the following requests. Then she allowed the king to tell the crowd just what he had graciously granted. A buzz of whispering went through the crowd. When it had died down, Martha asked for the four remaining contestants to step forward. But only three presented themselves. The crowd let out a sigh of disappointment. The newcomer wasn't there!

"No matter," said Martha. "They tell me that he's travelled far. Perhaps he's resting... As the fourth test will not actually take place until this evening, all the contestants will have the whole day to relax..."

"I would like to thank my father the King for this opportunity to start a new life in Markham ..." [Another buzz spread through the crowd: Did you hear that?! Didn't you tell me she was upset at this whole thing? And now *thanking* the king! A "new life" in Markham! My oh my! Just look at the face of His Majesty! He looks just *that* surprised by what the Princess has said...] "For some time now I have been rather unhappy here and I will be glad to leave. I shall be sorry to leave behind friends that I have made here" [here ladies Isabel and Caroline simpered...] "and only hope that some of you will have decided – or perhaps will soon decide – to join me in this new adventure." [... and here they coughed and spluttered.]

"They say that Markham is a dangerous place. This may be true, but there seems to be some doubt as to who suffers most from this danger. Some of us have been privileged to receive other reports from Markham ." [Here the King looked even more surprised.] "Perhaps it could be made into a less dangerous place to live for *everybody* . I certainly hope so. Up until now, violence and overtaxing seem to have been the methods used to deal with the unrest." [The King looked *very* thoughtful indeed.] "Violence and overtaxing have proved to be worth than useless to solve *anything* . I will have no husband who plans to use these methods", she said, staring hard at sir Rodney.

"The fourth test, the test I set, will – I hope – show which of the contestants is brave enough and inventive enough to try other methods of persuasion..." She paused. The crowd was transfixed by the contrast between her subdued attire and her far-from-subdued discourse. A few from the village (and from the palace service) who hadn't yet made up their minds were being swayed. "So far in this contest, there seems to have been a fair amount of cheating going on. Violence, trickery, bribery, favouritism. To try to control this, the fourth test will be judged by..." [Yes? Yes? The crowd were all ears. Martha knew this and played her pause to full advantage] "... a cow." [The King was just about choking by now. He had already decided on his favourite of the four remaining contestants, and had been waiting to hear what the test was to be, so that he could plan how to... influence the outcome. A cow!!!]

"When the cows are being brought in from their pasture this evening, the one called Brownie is to be separated from the rest and brought here in front of this platform. The four

contestants will be spaced in a wide semicircle around her.” [She swept her arm to indicate a semicircle between where the cow would stand and where the villagers were gazing at her now.] “Whichever contestant can persuade the cow to come to them will be considered the winner, will have won the new kingdom of Markham and my own hand. Violence and threats will not be tolerated. If any of the contestants frightens the cow, he will be considered a loser. As for his punishment, he will be handed over to...” [another one of her royal pauses. She was actually *enjoying* this, wasn't she?! Who would have thought it?] “... the villagers. I think you will know how to deal with him, won't you?”

There was a smile on every villager's face. Many laughed out loud. Some laughs were harsher than others. The three contestants who were present glanced nervously at each other.

“To lessen the chance of bribery, anyone shouting out from the crowd to scare the cow towards one particular contestant – in fact, anyone who shouts out or scares the cow in any way will be dealt with by the villagers... Any questions?... Oh, yes, if you wish to try to bribe the *cow*, that *will* be tolerated.” The whole crowd of villagers, many from the palace, even a soldier or two, laughed right out loud at this.

“I thank you all for your kind attention. I would appreciate it if you all returned this evening to see that justice is done.” [Now it was totally *unnecessary* for her to have said *that*. No one who had witnessed the scene just described would miss the *grand finale* for anything!] Martha curtsied to the crowd, then to her father, then to the crowd again [im *pert* inent young scrap!] and went indoors to have breakfast.

As Martha had expected, the king had assumed that nobody would take him up on his offer of a free passage to Markham. The place was just too dangerous! But he'd underestimated Martha's popularity, both in the palace and in the village. Not to mention the effect her little performance of this morning had caused... Even while Martha was having her breakfast, here and there, quite a few people were throwing together their few possessions into bundles, and beginning to tell their neighbours and co-workers goodbye.

The day passed. Martha spent a good deal of it in consultation with William, another part of it in packing a box or two of special belongings. She laughed out loud when word was brought to her that one of the contestants had been seen walking up and down in the pasture, talking very earnestly to Brownie. Brownie hadn't seemed to be paying much attention to him. [Perhaps it should be explained here than Brownie had been Alice ' particular favourite of the cows in the royal herd.] But then a worried look crossed Martha's face. “Perhaps I shouldn't laugh: you never really know with cows... They *do* listen, even when they're pretending they don't. Oh, Brownie, you wouldn't let me down, would you?”

They also told her that the mysterious contestant wasn't to be seen anywhere. That even though the king had ordered his soldiers to *find him!*, they weren't having any luck. Martha only added to the mystery by smiling at this news. She also stole a sidelong glance at the tall closet in the corner of her room, but luckily nobody noticed that...

Half an hour before the cows were to be brought in from the day's pasturing, the *whole* village, *everyone* from the palace who wasn't actually on duty at that moment [and even some who *were* supposed to be working...] was gathered together in front of the platform. Except for Martha. After another quarter of an hour, William walked to the edge of the platform and addressed the crowd:

“The Princess has asked me to tell you that she still has one or two things to do to prepare for our new start. She asked me to ask you all to excuse her and to remind you of her request of you to see that fair play is ensured. She has a lot of confidence in you... Would you all please move back a little? We'll need a space here in front. A bit further back, please... Princess Martha was very specific that the cow should not be frightened... That should be space enough, thank you.

“Now will the four contestant please step forward? Two... three... Will the fourth contestant please step forward?... I'm afraid that if he doesn't present himself, he'll be disqualified. [A *groan* from the crowd. You can guess which of the contestants was missing, can't you?]

“Oh dear oh dear!” William murmured, “This is rather...” but if anybody had been looking closely, they would have noticed a twinkle in his eye. Nobody was looking closely: they were all craning their necks in all directions, looking for the mysterious contestant.

“We're going to have to begin. I shall count to twenty. If the fourth contestant hasn't come forward by then, the contest will be between the remaining three...”

The three contestants looked hopeful [as did the king]. One was holding a bunch of grass, another held an apple in each hand, the third a bunch of carrots. It seemed they had all opted for bribery.

William began counting, very slowly. It appeared he didn't *want* to reach twenty... The crowd was becoming more and more uneasy, the contestants more and more hopeful, the king more and more relaxed...

When William had reached thirteen, there was a stir in the crowd and someone from the thickest part of the crowd started pushing forward, toward the platform. A *HUGE* cheer went up. How could they have missed him?! There was their *champion*, the newcomer, with the well-known sack over the shoulder. This time the sack seemed full of something bulky and with sharp angles.

At a glance from the king, a few soldiers moved in the direction of the newcomer. But the crowd noticed and faced the soldiers, forming a protective wall around the newcomer. They were taking *their* Princess' request to see fair play done most seriously. The soldiers looked at the king, who shook his head almost unnoticeably, and then they backed away.

William smiled. “I AM glad you made it,” he said to the newcomer, which caused another cheer from the crowd. [The other contestants looked a bit green about the gills.] “And now, silence please! The judge is about to arrive.” The crowd laughed loud, then quickly became quiet. “Make way there for Brownie, please!” An opening was formed in the crowd and shortly afterwards, Brownie was led up to the platform. She rocked her head slowly from side to side, looking at each of the contestants. The newcomer untied the mouth of the sack now on the ground and pulled out... a pale and a milking stool. If the crowd weren't being *very* careful not to make any loud noises, another laugh would have rung out. They watched the newcomer sit down on the stool and wait, while the other contestants held out their offerings tentatively and temptingly.

“Let Brownie loose,” ordered William, and the dairymaid let go of her bell collar. Brownie looked doubtfully from one contestant to another. She had spent the whole day out at pasture, had had her fill of fresh, juicy grass, so the one contestant's offering of a rather wilting bunch of grass was *not* that tempting. What she really needed was to be milked. But she was rather partial to carrots... Maybe...

And then the crowd heard *Alice*' voice call out! Wasn't this against the rules?! Wouldn't this get her *and* the new contestant punished? But the rules stated no shouting and no scaring Brownie. Well, Alice wasn't shouting, and the cow was certainly not scared. In fact, she was looking more relaxed by the second. And then people began to realise that *Alice*' voice was coming *from* the newcomer! Low and gentle: “Come on then, My Dear... You know what you *really* want... Come on, Dearie, My Brownie, My Beauty...”

The last of Brownie's indecision disappeared. She ambled over to the newcomer, who began to gently milk her. The head buried in the warm flank of the cow, the voice soft and soothing, almost singing. The milk hissing into the pail...

You can *ask* a lot of a crowd, and they did actually keep their voices down to whispers. But *nobody* could have stopped those whispers! “Is it really *Alice*?! Has she come back?” “I

heard she fled the country, accused of theft.” “Don't be silly: she went off to Markham , looking for Jeb. Where else would she go?” “Well, is that her? Surely not! How could it be?...”

The king, however, *knew* who it was: “I should have guessed! It's been a few years since I last saw him, not that I paid more attention to him than was strictly necessary. Maybe I should have paid more... Well, anyway, he's had time to grow up, grow a beard. His voice has changed too, I think. But imitating his mother's voice has given him away. And what am I supposed to do *now* ?! Should I annul the contest? I don't like the look of this crowd. Could turn nasty... Ach! What difference does it really make? If they really think they can solve Markham 's problems with pails and stools, good luck to them!... And good riddance to *her* , the tricky, wicked little...” He stomped over to William. “You knew who it was from the first, didn't you?”

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty: not from the *very* first. But when I'm called “My Friend” by a *true* friend, I pay attention...”

“You *let* him win at baldy!”

William smiled, *very* amused. “I had an excellent rival, Your Majesty. May I also add, one of the most interesting games I've ever played in my life. But it *is* true that I'm getting a bit old. I'm afraid my rival took advantage of one or two of my weaknesses.”

The king glared at him. “Well, good riddance to *you* as well!”

William bowed. “Your Majesty.”

By the time Brownie's milking had finished, the king had calmed down, at least outwardly. Best to put a brave face on it. If anybody was going to make a fool of themselves, let it be this trio of conspirators. No wonder Martha had given up all resistance to the contest once she'd heard that that *boy* had shown up!

When the newcomer had finished the milking, the full pail was handed to the attendant milkmaid. [“Who's actually *winking* at him!” fumed the king. “Just how many people are in on this conspiracy?! Well, she'll have to go!” (As a matter of fact, the milkmaid *was* going. In fact, as yet unknown to the king, the *whole* of his dairy staff would be leaving the next day...)] While the milkmaid led Brownie away, the king waved the new contestant to climb the platform.

“I hereby declare this young, er, man to be the winner of the contest. I grant him the new kingdom of Markham and the hand of my daughter, the Princess Martha.” Then in a bitterer, sarcastic voice: “May they both be happy together... What was your name again, Boy?”

“My name is Martha, Father.”

The king looked up suddenly, surprised. After having finished milking, but before standing, the newcomer had removed two wads of cloth that she'd had puffing out her cheeks, and once again sounded like his daughter. Now she stripped off the false beard and moustache that she'd made from her own chopped-off hair.

The crowd caught on quickly to what had happened. If the king had felt sick at earlier cheers from them, the one that was let loose now positively turned his stomach. It was a long while before it was quiet enough for Martha to speak again.

“You see, Father, I've won my own hand, and now I'm free to do as I like. I'm not your problem anymore. I can understand that you might be uncomfortable hosting *this* particular head of a neighbouring state - even if I assure you that I hope our future relations will be as cordial as possible - so I think I'll spend the night at the village tavern. I believe a going-away party will be organised. And then, in the morning, we'll be on our way to our new home. There's quite a lot of work to be done there.”