

# THE DANCING PRINCESSES

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A one-act comedy by  
Gary L. Blackwood

Based on the story by  
The Brothers Grimm

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

MICHAEL, a poor but ambitious and clever shepherd, 20s.

THE DUKE, domineering but foolish, 40s-60s.

PRINCE PITEOUS, awkward and unsure of himself, 20s-30s.

PRINCE MAXIMUS, very confident but not very bright, 20s-30s.

PRINCESS LINA, a little spoiled but kind-hearted, 20s.

PRINCESS RAINA, also spoiled and rather haughty, 20s.

THE DUCHESS, patient and level-headed, 40s-50s.

ANONYMOUS PRINCE, may be played by the actor who plays Piteous.

## SET/EFFECTS NOTES

A partial wall with a secret panel and two chairs, representing the Princesses' chamber.

A stuffed sheep on wheels (could also be a puppet or an actor in sheep costume).

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*(At left is a ladies' bedchamber in Beloeil Castle, sometime in the Age of Fairytale. The room has minimal furniture; all that's really necessary is two chairs, elegant but uncomfortable. There is a section of wall upstage of the chairs with a secret panel large enough to walk through. At the moment, though, the lights are up on the bare stage at right, where MICHAEL, a young shepherd, is lying on his back, his head propped up by a stuffed sheep on wheels. He's gazing up at the clouds. During the scene, the light changes to show that night is coming on. Off: we hear the sound of bleating sheep; it slowly fades along with the light.)*

**MICHAEL:** *(Pointing:)* Look at that one, Wooly! Doesn't that look like a magic lamp with a genie coming out of it?

*(Sound of a single sheep, nearer than the others.)*

You don't think so? How about that one? It looks just like a house made out of gingerbread, doesn't it?

*(Baa.)*

Maybe it's just my imagination. Everybody says I have a vivid imagination. Well, actually, what they say is "That boy, he always has his head in the clouds." I can't help it. I like clouds. They're so white and fluffy, like flocks of sheep, grazing on the bluegrass of the sky.

*(Baa.)*

Of course, I like *real* sheep, too. It's just that...well, no offense, but herding you guys isn't exactly the most *challenging* job in the world. You'd think once in a while a wolf or a troll or something would show up and I'd have to fight it off—

*(Makes fighting motions with his staff.)*

But nooooo.

*(Michael shakes the sheep so it appears to be trembling.)*

Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Oh, look. The stars are coming out. Let's make a wish, Wooly. Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight. (*Closes his eyes:*) I wish...I wish I could have an *adventure*. Preferably something involving a princess, but that's not a requirement, just a suggestion. What did you wish for, Wooly?

(*Baa.*)

Oh. I forgot. If you tell somebody your wish, it won't come true. You didn't hear mine, did you?

(*Baa.*)

Good. Because I want it to come true.

**MAN'S VOICE** (*Off:*) Hey! Stargazer! What are you doing out there? Even the sheep have sense enough to come home when it's getting dark!

**MICHAEL:** Sorry! I was just—

**MAN'S VOICE:** (*Off:*) I know, I know. Just get your astronomy in here, will you!

**MICHAEL:** Come on, Wooly.

(*He starts off right, pulling the sheep and takes one last look at the star.*)

Remember— an adventure. Please.

(*As the lights go down at right, they come up on the bedchamber at left, where PRINCESS LINA stands on the apron, staring at the stars, too. She is around the same age as Michael, a bit spoiled but with a kind heart.*)

**LINA:** ...I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight. I wish... I wish for...*freedom*.

**RAINA:** *(Off:)* Lina? Are you getting ready? Or are you just staring at the stars again?

**LINA:** I'm getting ready!

*(She sits on one of the chairs and pulls on her slippers.)*

This is my last good pair of slippers, Raina. What do we do if Daddy doesn't buy us any more?

*(RAINA enters at left, brushing her hair. She's older than Lina, and not quite so kind. In fact, she's rather self-centered and manipulative, but also lively and charming.)*

**RAINA:** Oh, don't worry; when did Daddy ever refuse to give us anything we asked for?

**LINA:** Anything except the right to come and go as we please, to see whoever we like. *Whomever?*

**RAINA:** But we do, Lina, we do.

**LINA:** I suppose. I just wish it didn't always have to be at night, in secret. It seems so...

**RAINA:** What?

**LINA:** I don't know. Sneaky. I don't like having to lie to Mother and Daddy.

**RAINA:** We're not lying to them. We're just not telling them everything. Oh, come on, cheer up. We're going to have a lovely time, and who knows, tonight may be the night. *(Cajoling her:)* The night you meet your knight. The knight who's Mister Right. The knight who's very bright.

**LINA:** *(Trying to resist her wiles, not quite succeeding:)* Hmm. I'm not holding my breath. If there are any halfway intelligent princes out there, they apparently aren't fond of parties and dancing. The ones we meet are always so...dull. All they ever

talk about is hunting. They don't have an ounce of imagination among them.

**RAINA:** But they're all so *handsome*. Don't be grumpy, now, or no one will want to dance with you. Besides, it makes lines on your face.

**LINA:** Lines are a sign of character.

**RAINA:** Princes don't care about character. They care about beauty.

*(Primps a bit, flutters her lashes.)*

And grace.

*(Strikes a graceful pose.)*

Did you practice those dance steps I showed you?

**LINA** *(Mumbling:)* & **RAINA:** No.

**RAINA:** You were too busy reading. Come on. *(Beckons:)* Come onnnnn. *(Singing a waltz tune:)* La, la, la; la, la, la...

*(They waltz around the room; Lina is clumsy, steps on Raina's feet.)*

Good, good, you're doing fine.

**LINA:** No, I'm not. I'm hopeless.

**RAINA:** I wouldn't say that. I might think it, but I wouldn't say it. Well, just try to dance with a very large prince, all right? That way he can sort of carry you around.

*(Sound of a clock off, striking midnight.)*

Oops, time to go. We don't want to miss the boat.

*(She goes to the section of wall, gives it a smart rap with the palm of her hand; it swings open.)*



**LINA:** I still can't believe Daddy doesn't know about the secret passage. He's always saying (*Mimicking:*) "I know this castle like the back of my hand."

**RAINA:** Daddy doesn't know nearly as much as he thinks he does. If he ever read a book, he might have stumbled upon the stuff about the secret passage, the way you did. By the way, I tore out that page and burned it. You never know, he might get a sudden urge to read something.

*(They look at each other.)*

**LINA & RAINA:** Nahhh.

*(They laugh and disappear through the secret panel; it closes behind them. Lights down. Brief dance music. Lights up again. The Princesses are sitting in the chairs. They look exhausted. Raina is trying to embroider, but keeps dozing off, snoring a little. Lina is holding a book; it slides out of her lap onto the floor, startling them. She picks it up, starts to read again, but her head droops. Suddenly there's a horrible pounding sound off left.)*

**RAINA:** What in the world – !? What is that awful racket? Ow! I pricked my finger!

**LINA:** It sounds like it's just outside the window.

*(She goes to the apron, peers out.)*

Oh, dear.

**RAINA:** What is it?

**LINA:** It's Hans.

**RAINA:** (*Alarmed:*) Huns? You mean, like barbarians?

**LINA:** Not "Huns," you goose – *Hans*. You know, the gardener?

**RAINA:** Well, what is he doing? *Dynamiting* the garden?

**LINA:** He's nailing an iron grate over the window.

**RAINA:** Ah. Daddy must be getting desperate. Does he seriously think we're climbing out the *window* every night? How does he imagine we get to the ground? With a rope made out of our hair?

*(Shakes her head.)*

Grates on the window. Locks on the door. What's next? A jailer?

*(Sound of locks unlocking and bolts being drawn off right.)*

**LINA:** Sshh! They're coming!

*(They take up their embroidery and book and try to look like dutiful daughters. The DUKE and DUCHESS of Beloeil enter from left. The Duchess is a pleasant woman who only wants the best for her daughters.)*

**LINA & RAINA:** Good morning, Mother and Daddy.

*(The Duchess goes to her daughters and kisses them on the cheek.)*

**DUKE:** Just barely. It's nearly nine o'clock. I trust you both had a good long sleep.

**LINA & RAINA:** Yes, Daddy.

**DUKE:** You did?

*(The banging starts up again. He goes to the apron.)*

Stop that infernal din at once! Do you hear me?

*(The pounding keeps up.)*

No one ever listens to me. Why does no one ever listen to me?

**DUCHESS:** I'm sure he just didn't hear you, dear.

*(She goes to the apron, speaks in a normal voice:)*

Hans.

*(Pounding stops.)*

Would you take a break, please. Thank you.

**DUKE:** (*Miffed that people listen to her. To the Princesses:*) Well?

**LINA:** Yes, we're quite well, Daddy. Thank you for asking.

**DUKE:** I wasn't asking whether you're well. I was —

**RAINA:** You don't care whether or not we're well?

**DUKE:** Of course, I *care!* (*Gets control of himself:*) Of course I care. But you see, when I said "Well," I didn't mean (*Politely:*) "Well?" I meant (*Impatiently:*) "Welllllll?" You see the difference?

**LINA & RAINA:** (*Look at each other, feign innocence:*) No.

**DUCHESS:** What he means is, would you please show us your slippers?

**RAINA:** Oh. Why didn't he just say so?

**DUKE:** We've been through this a hundred times. I thought by now —

**DUCHESS:** Not a hundred, dear. Twenty, perhaps.

**DUKE:** All right, then *twenty* times. You'd think by now that —  
(*They hand him the slippers.*)

Oh.

(*He looks at them, sighs.*)

Not again. I don't understand this, I don't understand it at all. How do you manage to wear out a pair of shoes every single night, without *going* anywhere? I mean, aside from the fact that you're always exhausted and half asleep, there's the expense. You think shoes grow on trees?

**RAINA:** Of course. Haven't you ever heard of shoe trees?

**DUKE:** (*Doesn't get it:*) Shoe trees?

**DUCHESS:** (*Pats his arm:*) Never mind, dear. (*To Princesses:*) We're concerned about you, that's all. Look at you; you can barely keep your eyes open. I really wish you'd tell us what's

going on, why you – and your shoes – are so worn out every morning. I know that young women must have their secrets, but when your health is at stake –

**DUKE:** You're wasting your breath, Mother. It's obvious that they have no intention of telling us. Well. I was hoping I wouldn't have to resort to (*Ominous:*) Plan B, but you leave me no choice.

**RAINA:** (*Giggles a little, exchanges glances with Lina:*) Plan B? What on earth is Plan B?

**DUKE:** You may titter all you like, but once Plan B is in effect, you'll be tittering out of the other side of your mouth.

*(He turns and stalks off.)*

**LINA:** What is this *Plan B* of his, Mother? It sounds drastic.

**DUCHESS:** Heaven only knows. I suppose I'd better go and find out. In the meantime, get some sleep?

*(Lights down on stage left, up on stage right as Michael enters, pulling Wooly.)*

**MICHAEL:** Ah, another day, another...oh, wait. That's right. I don't get paid for this, do I? Of course not. That might give me some sort of...*motivation*. So why, you may ask, do I keep on doing this, day after day?

*(Baa.)*

I'm glad you asked. The answer is, I keep on doing this day after day because...I have no idea why. Because it's what we've always done, I suppose. My father was a shepherd – until the rheumatism got him. *His* father was a shepherd – until he threw himself off that cliff over there. And *his* father was a shepherd – or was he a sheep? I don't remember. Anyway, we're all a lot of sheep, going where we're told to go, doing nothing but eat and sleep and –

(He steps in a pile of sheep poop, scrapes his foot.)

—and you know what.

(Baa.)

What's that, Woolly? A *visitor*? Nooo, surely not—well, put me in a dress and call me Sally. It *is* a visitor. He must be lost.

(PRINCE PITEOUS enters from up right. Though he's dressed like one, he's hardly the model of a fairy tale prince—scrawny, sad, insecure—in short, a loser, yet contemptuous toward those of lower rank.)

**PITEOUS:** I say, could you help me? I seem to be lost.

**MICHAEL:** What did I tell you?

**PITEOUS:** I beg your pardon?

**MICHAEL:** I said, "How can I help you?"

**PITEOUS:** I just told you. I'm lost.

**MICHAEL:** Of course you are. Well, why don't you sit down and have a bit of a rest—just not there (*Where the poop was:*)—and we'll try to work this thing out.

**PITEOUS:** There's nothing to work out. Just tell me where the road is.

**MICHAEL:** The road... (*Looks around:*) The road...

**PITEOUS:** Could you be quick about it? I'm in a bit of a hurry.

**MICHAEL:** Are you? I expect you're on an *adventure* of some kind, aren't you? Damsels to slay, dragons to save, that sort of thing?

**PITEOUS:** Actually, it's none of your business. Could you possibly just—

**MICHAEL:** No, wait, I know. There's a ball at the palace, right? And you have to get there before midnight, or the beautiful

young lady's dress will turn to rags, and her coach will turn into a rutabaga, and –

**PITEOUS:** Will you please shut up and tell me how to get to the road?

**MICHAEL:** Actually...no.

**PITEOUS:** Why not?

**MICHAEL:** Because. I don't know where it is. I've never been any place except this meadow, and that hut down there. No, I lie. See that hut over there? I went there a few times. My auntie lived there. Until they took her away. (*Confidentially:*) She started insisting that she was the Queen of Sheba.

(*Baa.*)

What's that?

(*Baa.*)

Oh, very funny. He says, "The Queen of Sheep-baa?" Sorry. When you've got no one else to talk to, you start to – Anyway. Which road was it you were looking for?

**PITEOUS:** Never mind. I'll find it myself.

(*He starts downstage; Michael pulls Wooly in front of the prince, who stumbles over it, falls.*)

You stupid creature! Why don't you watch where you're going?

**MICHAEL:** Are you all right?

**PITEOUS:** Of course I'm not! Look at these grass stains!

(*He breaks off as he sees that Michael is paying no attention; it's the sheep he's worried about.*)

**MICHAEL:** Oh, Wooly! You poor fellow. Did he hurt you? (*To Piteous:*) These sheep may be just creatures to you, but they're my livelihood, my responsibility. If you injure one of them, it

comes out of my wages. Well, it would if I had any. My dad will take it out of my hide instead.

*(Fakes crying.)*

**PITEOUS:** I'm sorry. I didn't mean to— He just ran right in front of me and I couldn't— Listen, I'll pay for any damages, all right? However much a sheep is worth, I have no idea—

*(Digs out his purse.)*

One sovereign? Two?

**MICHAEL:** I don't want your money.

**PITEOUS:** You don't?

**MICHAEL:** Well, I do. But there's something I'd rather have.

**PITEOUS:** Really?

**MICHAEL:** Yes. Tell me where you're going. And why. Is it an adventure?

**PITEOUS:** Well, sort of. It wasn't my idea. It was my father's. And you *don't* disobey my father. Ever. I'm to go to Beloeil Castle. The duke has two daughters, you see, and apparently they're a bit wild—

**MICHAEL:** *(Intrigued:)* Oh, dear.

**PITEOUS:** Every night he locks them in their chambers, but the next morning, when he checks on them, he finds they're exhausted and their shoes are worn to a frazzle.

**MICHAEL:** Why?

**PITEOUS:** Well, that's what I'm supposed to find out.

**MICHAEL:** Ooh, the classic locked room mystery! Got any theories?

**PITEOUS:** Unfortunately, no. The duke has promised that whoever discovers their secret will get half his lands, plus the hand of whichever daughter he chooses.

**MICHAEL:** Just her hand? Ewwwww.

**PITEOUS:** Her hand in *marriage*, I mean.

**MICHAEL:** Oh. Are they pretty?

**PITEOUS:** Does it matter? They're princesses. Their father has lands and money.

**MICHAEL:** My father has lands and — Well, he has lands. Well, land. This meadow.

**PITEOUS:** My father doesn't have much of either one. That's why he sent me on this —

**MICHAEL:** Knightly quest?

**PITEOUS:** I was going to say fool's errand. I mean, if their own father can't figure out what's going on, how am I supposed to?

**MICHAEL:** What happens if at first you don't succeed? I'm guessing you don't get to try, try again.

**PITEOUS:** No. I'm afraid you only get the one chance, and if you fail —

*(Michael draws a hand across his neck, with a questioning look.)*

What? Oh, no, no, nothing like that. Chopping heads off is so tenth century. No, if you fail, instead of you getting the duke's lands, he gets yours.

**MICHAEL:** Oh. That's not quite as exciting.

**PITEOUS:** I guarantee you, if I lose all our lands, my father will be *very* excited. I suppose I'd better get on with it. No sense delaying the inevitable.



**MICHAEL:** No, no. If you go in there with that sort of attitude, you're sure to fail. You've got to be cheerful and confident and brave. Come on, let me see a big cheerful, confident smile.

*(Piteous manages a wan, sickly smile.)*

That's the ticket. All right, now. Get in there and show those princesses what you're made of!

*(Michael gives him a push. Piteous treads in the sheep poo, stumbles off the stage and down the aisle. Baa.)*

You're right, Wooly. It's very *much* like sending off a sheep to be sheared.

*(He shakes his head, exits. Lights down. Spot on down left. The Duchess enters, hobbling stiffly, and sits on the apron. She's convincingly disguised as an OLD CRONE, and speaks in an appropriately crone-y voice. She carries a plain-looking cloak. Piteous approaches up the aisle.)*

**DUCHESS:** *(As Crone:)* Alms, sir, for a poor unfortunate woman who has nothing to her name but the rags she wears and the lice that inhabit them. In fact, she doesn't even have a name. Some of the lice have names, however.

*(Picks off a louse.)*

This one is Henry. I think.

*(Piteous gives her a disgusted look and a wide berth.)*

A bit of food, then? Please, sir. I haven't eaten in four days, sir. Five, actually. It might even be six; I'm so hungry my brain is all fuzzy wuzzy –

*(Piteous exits down left.)*

*(To herself:)* Heartless git. *(Calling after him:)* Didn't anyone ever teach you you're supposed to be kind to helpless old ladies? *(To herself:)* I swear, I don't know what this generation is coming to.

*(She exits down left, spot off. Lights up on bedchamber. Raina works on her embroidery, Lina reads her book. They take turns yawning broadly. Sound of locks unlocking, they sit up straight, pinch their cheeks. The Duke and Piteous enter.)*

**DUKE:** And these are my lovely...*disobedient* daughters. Daughters, this is Prince Pitiless.

**PITEOUS:** Actually, it's Piteous, Your Grace.

**DUKE:** Whatever.

**PITEOUS:** *(Smiling his sickly smile, he bows awkwardly:)* Ladies. I'm charmed to make your astounding – er – appearance – er – acquaintance. *(Makes it plural:)* Es.

*(The Princesses glance at each other, trying to hide their amusement.)*

**DUKE:** He will stand guard over you tonight.

**LINA:** What, in here?

**DUKE:** Of course not! He will be stationed in the antechamber. However, he will be looking in on you from time to time, to make *absolutely sure* that you are *not* – *(More controlled:)* that you are tucked peacefully and safely in your beds.

**RAINA:** *(Wheedling:)* Oh, Daddy, don't you think that's rather harsh? Prince Piteous is liable to think you don't trust us.

**DUKE:** *(Steels himself:)* I'm sorry, daughter. But if you insist on – on – whatever it is you're doing, I'm afraid I have no choice. *(Takes Piteous aside:)* Now listen, Pitiful –

**PITEOUS:** Piteous, Your Grace.

**DUKE:** Whatever. You know the rules. No falling asleep. No peeking while they're dressing for bed. If you hear anything suspicious, anything at all, check on them at once.

**PITEOUS:** I understand. Are you certain they're up to something, Your Grace? They look so...beautiful—er—innocent.

**DUKE:** Don't let them fool you, Bilious. They're very sweet girls, but they're also very clever. Just do your job, all right, and report to me in the morning.

*(He exits. Piteous paces back and forth down left. Raina takes a flask and a wine glass from her embroidery basket.)*

**LINA:** Are you sure there's no other way of doing this? I mean, he looks so hopeful. And so clueless. He's going to be crushed when he fails.

**RAINA:** You want to give up what little freedom we have—our only chance to have a little fun and meet some suitable suitors?

**LINA:** No. But maybe we could just skip this one night. If we don't go dancing, then there's nothing for him to discover, so he won't succeed, but he won't fail, either.

**RAINA:** And tomorrow night there'll be another hopeful, clueless prince, and another.

**LINA:** Well, then, maybe we could take him with us. He could meet some nice girl at the dance—

**RAINA:** Are you crazy? He'd tell Daddy everything, and Daddy would blow up the secret passage or something, and we'd stay locked up in these rooms forever.

**LINA:** *(Sighs:)* I suppose you're right. You don't think there's any chance that one of these hopeful, clueless princes will be worth considering?

**RAINA:** If they were, they wouldn't have to resort to *this* in order to find a bride, now would they?

**LINA:** I suppose not. All right—let's do it.

*(She carries one of the chairs to Piteous. Raina carries the flask and glass.)*

**RAINA:** We thought you might like a bit of refreshment.

**LINA:** And something to sit on. It's going to be a long night.

**PITEOUS:** Thank you. I prefer to stand. It'll help me stay a week – er – awake.

**RAINA:** Suit yourself. At least have a drink.

*(She pours some of what looks like wine.)*

Go on. It's not poisoned, I promise you.

*(Laughs. Piteous laughs, too, nervously swallows some. More nervous laughter. Piteous begins to look dazed. Lina slides the chair under him and he collapses into it.)*

All right, sister! Let's have some *fun!*

*(They exit through the secret panel. Lights down at left, up at right. MAXIMUS enters. He's big, athletic, super-confident and conceited. He looks around, momentarily disoriented. Wooly utters a baa.)*

**MAXIMUS:** Bah, indeed. You'd think they'd put up a sign or two, wouldn't you? DANCING PRINCESSES, THIS WAY. Oh, well—after I'm done they won't need signs anymore. Game over.

*(Michael enters.)*

**MICHAEL:** I expect you're lost, are you?

**MAXIMUS:** Lost? *(Laughs:)* I've never been lost in my life. I have an excellent sense of direction. I once chased a wounded stag for twenty miles through the Forbidden Forest and still made it home in time for supper. Who are you?

**MICHAEL:** Michael's the name. Although most people call me Stargazer. I'm a shepherd. For now.

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*(Holds out his hand.)*

**MAXIMUS:** Maximus. I'm a prince.

*(He grips Michael's hand, a bit too firmly. Michael winces and, when Maximus turns away to survey the landscape, shakes out the pain.)*

By my reckoning, the road should be right over...there.

*(He looks to Michael to confirm it.)*

**MICHAEL:** Could be. I guess you're going to try your luck with the princesses, eh?

**MAXIMUS:** How did you know that? Only princes know about that.

**MICHAEL:** Princes...and soothsayers.

**MAXIMUS:** Surely you're not saying you're a soothsayer, shepherd?

**MICHAEL:** I'll bet you can't say that three times in a row, fast. As a matter of fact, I am. I can see everything that happens, anywhere in the land, simply by consulting my magic...*(Looks around, picks up a pile of sheep droppings:)* sheep droppings.

**MAXIMUS:** Magic sheep droppings?

**MICHAEL:** From my magic sheep.

**MAXIMUS:** Oh. So. You can see everything that happens, anywhere in the land?

**MICHAEL:** Very good. You're a quick study.

*(He pats Maximus on the back, surreptitiously wiping his hand on the man's doublet.)*

**MAXIMUS:** Can you tell me the princesses' secret? Where they go at night, how they wear out all those shoes? I'll make it worth your while.

*(Reaches for his purse.)*

**MICHAEL:** Please. We soothsayers do not sully our gifts by accepting *money*.

*(He closes his eyes, intones an eerie "oooohhhhh," waves a hand over the sheep droppings.)*

Oh, magic sheep droppings. Show me the dancing princesses.

*(Stares at the droppings.)*

**MAXIMUS:** What do you see? What do you see?

**MICHAEL:** Ahhh. How fiendishly clever of them!

**MAXIMUS:** How do they do it? How do they wear out all those shoes?

**MICHAEL:** They *don't!* *(Stage whisper:)* It's the same...pair...of shoes! They just keep showing their father the old ones, and throw the new ones out the window!

**MAXIMUS:** How fiendishly clever!

**MICHAEL:** I just said that.

**MAXIMUS:** I can't thank you enough, my friend! When I've won those lands, I want you to be my Official Head of Shepherding. Assuming I keep sheep, of course. Which I probably won't. I'm more into hunting animals, you know, not herding them.

**MICHAEL:** Of course. Well, good luck, Gluteus.

**MAXIMUS:** *Maximus.*

**MICHAEL:** Good luck, Gluteus Maximus.

**MAXIMUS:** Thank you, but I won't need it. You say the road is over that way?

**MICHAEL:** Actually, I'm not sure. Would you like to consult my sheep droppings?

**MAXIMUS:** Umm, no. That's all right. I'm sure I can find it.

*(He heads down one aisle, up the other. The Old Crone, aka the Duchess, enters, takes her place as before. Spot up.)*

**DUCHESS:** *(As Crone:)* Alms, sir, for a poor unfortunate widow who lost her only beloved husband in the wars.

**MAXIMUS:** Wars? What wars?

**DUCHESS:** *(As Crone:)* Take your pick. I have neither food nor shelter nor any means of getting them – *(Distastefully:)* Except for working. But what work could I possibly do with this poor, frail, wraithlike body?

**MAXIMUS:** You don't look so wraithlike me. In fact, I'd say you could stand to lose a few pounds.

**DUCHESS:** *(As Crone:)* It's these rags. They make me look fat. If you gave me a sovereign or two, I could buy some new rags, a bit more form-fitting, you know.

**MAXIMUS:** *(Laughs:)* Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes, old woman. I may be a prince, but I know what things cost. Here. Here's a shilling. That should buy you a perfectly good set of rags.

*(He exits.)*

**DUCHESS:** *(As Crone:)* Well. Forget him. He doesn't even have the sense to lie to a woman about her figure.

*(She exits, hobbling less than before. Spot down. Lights up on the Princesses' chambers. Maximus is pacing back and forth in the anteroom while the Princesses confer.)*

**LINA:** You were right. We're getting nothing but an endless string of losers.

**RAINA:** I don't know. I kind of like him.

**LINA:** *Like him? What is there to like? He's conceited and tactless and, frankly, not very bright.*

**RAINA:** Oh, Lina, you put far too much importance on brains.

**LINA:** And you put far too much on attractiveness.

**RAINA:** Well, you have to look at a man's face every day; you never have to look at his brains – with any luck.

**LINA:** I hope you're not thinking of telling him our secret.

**RAINA:** Of course not. Although, I must say, he is the best of a bad lot so far. I wouldn't mind *so* very much if he asked for my hand.

**LINA:** That may be. But what if he asked for *mine*?

**RAINA:** All right, all right. Bring the chair. Oh, Max!

*(They go through the same sequence as before, without dialogue. But after Lina leaves, Raina takes a note from her bodice and sticks it inside Maximus' doublet. The girls exit through the panel. Lights fade down, then up. The Duke enters, finds Maximus asleep and shakes him.)*

**DUKE:** Wake up at once, young man!

**MAXIMUS:** *(Snorts:)* Huh? What – I – I wasn't sleeping. *(Rises:)* I was just...thinking.

**DUKE:** Princes aren't supposed to *think*! They're supposed to *act*! You were to follow my daughters and find out where they're going and what they're doing. Did you do that?

**MAXIMUS:** I did not.

*(The Duke throws up his hands and gives a growl of disgust.)*

That's because they didn't go anywhere.

**DUKE:** Really? Then how do they manage to wear out all those shoes?



**MAXIMUS:** They don't.

**DUKE:** Are you some sort of idiot? I've seen the shoes! Forty or fifty pairs of them!

**MAXIMUS:** Ah, but that's where you're wrong. (*Triumphantly:*) The truth is, they showed you the same worn-out shoes, over and over again, and threw the new ones out the window.

**DUKE:** Out the window?

(*Maximus nods smugly.*)

That window?

(*Maximus nods.*)

The one with the iron grate nailed over it?

**MAXIMUS:** Iron...grate?

**DUKE:** Get out! Get out of my sight! Aggggh! How can there be so many pudding-headed princes in the world? They must all be related!

(*He exits. Maximus starts down the aisle, adjusting his doublet and notices the note. Puzzled, he pulls it out and reads it. A grin spreads over his face as he heads down the aisle. Lights down at left, up at right. Michael is lying propped against Wooly again. Piteous comes up the aisle, looking totally beaten.*)

**MICHAEL:** That one looks like a cloud castle, doesn't it? – with towers and a drawbridge and everything.

(*Baa.*)

And that one...that one looks just like a shoe. A very worn out shoe. (*Looks toward Piteous:*) And *that* looks like a very disappointed and dejected prince. How did it go? Let me guess. You didn't succeed.

**PITEOUS:** (*Sits next to him:*) No. And now my father has to hand over all his lands to the Duke. He'll never forgive me.

**MICHAEL:** What happened?

**PITEOUS:** I—I fell asleep.

**MICHAEL:** Oops. Well, you'd had a long journey. I'm sure you were tired.

**PITEOUS:** But that's just it. I wasn't tired at all. I took a long nap before I went to the castle, to make certain I'd stay awake. But then they gave me a glass of wine, and a chair to sit in, and—

**MICHAEL:** Wait, wait. A glass of wine? And you *drank* it?

**PITEOUS:** I like wine. And I was thirsty.

**MICHAEL:** Oh, dear. You fell for the oldest trick in the book, my friend.

**PITEOUS:** Book? What book?

**MICHAEL:** The one with all the fairy tales. If someone gives you an apple, it's sure to be poisoned, and if they give a glass of wine, nine times out of ten it's going to contain either a love potion or a sleeping potion. My guess would be the second one.

**PITEOUS:** Ohhh, I've been a complete fool. What am I going to do? I can't go home and face my father. I wish I'd been born a shepherd, like you. Everything would be so much simpler.

**MICHAEL:** Well, you know, just because you were born a prince or a shepherd doesn't mean you have to stay one, does it?

**PITEOUS:** Doesn't it?

**MICHAEL:** Noooo. I mean, if you *really* want to try your hand at shepherding, I might be persuaded to take a bit of time off—let you give it a go.

**PITEOUS:** You mean it?

**MICHAEL:** Why not? My father won't care, as long as the sheep are adequately herded. He probably won't even notice. Of course, you'd need some proper shepherding clothes. Try herding sheep in that getup and they'll just laugh at you.

*(Baa.)*

See?

**PITEOUS:** I've got an idea! Why don't you and I trade clothing?

**MICHAEL:** Brilliant! Why didn't I think of that?

*(They strip to their underclothing – Michael's is plain, coarse linen; Piteous wears something flashy and ridiculous – and trade outfits.)*

**PITEOUS:** I didn't think to ask – you don't have any, well, any sort of –

**MICHAEL:** Creepy crawlies? No. Neither do you, I hope.

*(Piteous looks indignant.)*

Just asking. You can't be too careful. You don't think the princesses will recognize these clothes, do you?

**PITEOUS:** I'm sure they won't. They hardly even noticed I was there. Wait. You're – you're not thinking of – of –

**MICHAEL:** Why not?

**PITEOUS:** Well, it's obvious, isn't it? I mean, this is a contest for *princes*. You're not a prince.

**MICHAEL:** But they won't know that, will they?

**PITEOUS:** They will when you fail, and the Duke finds out you have no lands to forfeit, just a meadow full of sheep. He's liable to chop your head off!

**MICHAEL:** I thought you said they no longer did that.

**PITEOUS:** They don't, to royalty. But you're a shepherd!

**MICHAEL:** Not anymore. (*Hands his staff to Piteous:*) Woolly, you behave yourself, now. No tripping and no playing hide and seek.

(*Baa.*)

**PITEOUS:** How do I look?

**MICHAEL:** Very sheepish. Good luck. Oh, and don't cry "Wolf!" will you, unless you actually see one? (*Starts down the aisle:*) And be careful; they've been known to wear sheep's clothing!

**PITEOUS:** Really? Oh, ha, ha. Very funny. You *were* kidding, right? Right?

(*Lights down. Spot up. The Crone enters. Michael approaches her.*)

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Alms, sir, alms for a poor unfortunate working woman whose livelihood was taken away by the heartless owners of big corporations who have formed monopolies and outsourced all their jobs to sweatshops in foreign countries.

**MICHAEL:** (*Sits next to her:*) Oh, dear. What sort of work did you do, madam?

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) I made invisible clothing.

**MICHAEL:** Oh. Um, pardon me, madam, but I wouldn't think there'd be all that much market for invisible clothing—except for the occasional emperor, of course.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) No, no, the clothing itself isn't invisible. It makes *you* invisible, when you wear it.

**MICHAEL:** Oh, well. That's different. Thank you for clearing that up. Um, there's just one other thing—

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Yes?

**MICHAEL:** What are *alms*, exactly?

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Money.

**MICHAEL:** Oh. I'm sorry, I really wish I could help you, but I don't have any — Hold on.

*(He pats his waist. There's a jingling sound. He realizes for the first time that Prince Piteous included his purse in the bargain.)*

I *do* have money. Lots of money. How much would you like?

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Oh, just a penny or two.

**MICHAEL:** I don't know what a penny looks like, actually. I've never had any money before. (*Hands the purse to her:*) Here. Just take what you need, all right?

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone, surprised and pleased at his naivete and generosity:*) All right. (*Takes a single coin:*) There. What's your name, young man?

**MICHAEL:** Michael. But most people call me Stargazer.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Stargazer. I like it. I like *you*, in fact. You're just the sort of young man I always hoped...

*(A beat.)*

Do you mind if I ask where you're going?

**MICHAEL:** To Beloeil Castle, to solve the riddle of the dancing princesses and win their hand in marriage. Well, one of them. I don't know which one, since I haven't met them yet.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) You seem very sure of yourself.

**MICHAEL:** (*Shrugs:*) I have nothing to lose. I don't have any lands, or any money, except for that.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) You could always lose your head.

**MICHAEL:** I wish people would quit saying that.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) It'd be a shame. It's such a nice head.

**MICHAEL:** I've grown rather attached to it myself.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) I'll tell you what. Since you've been so kind to me, I'm going to lend you this wonderful cloak.

*(Holds it up.)*

**MICHAEL:** Oh! (*Dubiously:*) Thank you. But you don't really need to—

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) I know, I know. It doesn't look like much. But watch!

*(She puts the cloak over herself. Michael cannot see her.)*

**MICHAEL:** What— How— Where did you go? (*Reaches out, touches her shoulder:*) I can feel you, but I can't see you!

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone, takes off the cloak:*) Can you see me now?

**MICHAEL:** That's amazing!

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) You remember the invisible clothing I told you about? This was our best-selling number. I've heard that the ones they turn out in those foreign sweatshops are just cheap knockoffs. They don't make you completely invisible, just sort of...transparent. But as you see, this is the real thing.

*(Hands it to him.)*

You'll be able to follow anyone without being seen.

**MICHAEL:** Princesses, for instance.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Exactly.

**MICHAEL:** (*Rising:*) I—I don't know how to thank you, madam.

**DUCHESS:** (*As Crone:*) Solve the riddle and win the princess' hand. That'll be thanks enough.

*(Hands him the purse.)*

Here – you'll want this. You can't be a proper prince without a purse full of money, just as you can't be a proper crone without rags and a squeaky voice.

*(Michael exits.)*

Good luck to you, young man! Don't lose your head!

*(She smiles knowingly. Spot down. Crone exits. Lights up on chambers. Raina and Lina are occupied as before. Michael enters the anteroom area. He buttons up his collar, but it makes it difficult to speak.)*

**MICHAEL:** Um...knock, knock?

**LINA:** Who's there?

**MICHAEL:** Michael.

**LINA:** Michael who?

**MICHAEL:** My collar's too tight.

**LINA:** *(Laughing:)* You may come in, Michael Arstootite.

**RAINA:** Where's our father?

**MICHAEL:** He let me in and then left. Said something about "What's the use, what's the use?"

**RAINA:** I don't know what he's complaining about. Thanks to us, he's doubled the size of his dukedom.

**LINA:** Maybe he's feeling guilty. I know I am. So, you've come to solve the riddle of the dancing princesses.

**MICHAEL:** That's right.

**RAINA:** And what makes you think you can succeed where so many others have failed?

**MICHAEL:** Well, you see, it's like with sheep.

**RAINA:** I *beg* your pardon?

**MICHAEL:** When one of them goes missing, it's no good wandering around aimlessly, calling "Here sheepie, come back little sheepie."

**LINA:** It's not?

**MICHAEL:** Nope. If you want to figure out where he's got to, you have to think like a sheep.

**LINA:** (*Intrigued:*) So, what you're saying is, you're going to solve the puzzle by thinking like a princess?

**MICHAEL:** Right.

**RAINA:** But you're a man—well, a boy, anyway. What makes you imagine you can think like a woman?

**MICHAEL:** I have a good imagination.

**RAINA:** Really. Well, we'll see. Your guard post is in there, in the anteroom.

**MICHAEL:** Thank you. Would you mind if I borrow a chair? It's liable to be a long night.

**LINA:** (*Raina is indignant, Lina is amused:*) Of course. You may have mine.

**MICHAEL:** Thank you, princess. I don't suppose you have a book I could read?

**RAINA:** You read books?

**MICHAEL:** When I can find them.

**LINA:** Would you like this one? I've read it six times already.

**MICHAEL:** Ooh. *The Seven Voyages of Sinbad*. You like adventure stories?

**LINA:** They're my favorite.

**MICHAEL:** Mine, too. Now, if you'll excuse me, ladies—

**RAINA:** Wait! Wouldn't you like a nice glass of wine?



*(Holds up the flask and glass.)*

**MICHAEL:** It won't make me sleepy, will it?

*(Raina and Lina look at each other, wondering whether he suspects something.)*

**RAINA:** Of course not. It's just wine. Just ordinary wine. From grapes.

*(She pours a glass for him.)*

**MICHAEL:** Thank you. Cheers.

*(As he goes into the anteroom, he takes a mouthful of the wine. As soon as he's out of their sight, he spits it back into the glass, pours it into something offstage, sits and opens the book, smiling to himself.)*

**RAINA:** I can't decide whether he's very stupid or very clever.

**LINA:** He's very cute, anyway. And he *reads!*

**RAINA:** Now, don't get any ideas, Lina.

**LINA:** Well, you were attracted to that Maximus fellow. Can't I be attracted to someone?

**RAINA:** Of course. As long as you don't do anything you'll regret. Or that *I'll* regret.

*(Clock bongs.)*

It's time to go. He should be out of it by now.

*(They peer into the anteroom. Michael abruptly slumps in the chair, snores softly.)*

So much for thinking like a princess. Let's go!

*(Lina takes the book from his hands, gazes at him wistfully for a moment.)*

Lina!

**LINA:** Coming!

*(As soon as she goes, Michael dons the cloak, follows them. He gets to the door just as Lina is closing it, grabs it. She tugs at it.)*

Raina! The door won't close!

**RAINA:** Leave it! If we don't hurry, we're going to miss the boat!

*(Michael slips through. The three of them cross to the apron, where an ANONYMOUS PRINCE, holding a pole, helps them into an imaginary boat. Michael takes his hand, too; the Prince is startled, stares at his hand.)*

**LINA:** Is something wrong?

**PRINCE:** No! Nothing!

*(He begins poling, they walk slowly down the aisle as if being ferried along.)*

**RAINA:** We seem to be going much slower than usual. Can't you pole harder?

**PRINCE:** I'm trying, Princess. For some reason the boat seems heavier than usual.

**RAINA:** Are you suggesting that we're putting on weight?

**PRINCE:** No! Of course not! I'll pole harder, shall I?

*(They cross behind the audience, start up the other aisle.)*

**LINA:** Oh, look at all the stars! They're just like giant dot-to-dot puzzles, aren't they? If you connected those dots there, it would look exactly like a horse.

**RAINA:** If you say so.

*(She's taken out a compact and is powdering her face. The powder flies in Michael's face; he tries to suppress a sneeze and can't.)*

**LINA:** What was that?

**RAINA:** What?

**LINA:** That sound.

**RAINA:** Oh, probably just an owl or something.

**LINA:** A sneezing owl?

*(Sounds of dance music off right. The "boat" pulls up in front of the stage, and the Prince helps the ladies out. Michael takes his hand again; the Prince gapes at it, shakes his head. The Princesses put on masks, stand swaying to the music. Michael circles around Lina, admiring her. The masked Prince approaches Raina.)*

**PRINCE:** May I have this dance, princess?

**RAINA:** I suppose. If you don't think I'm too *heavy* to drag around.

*(They begin to dance.)*

**PRINCE:** Not at all. You're light as a feather.

**RAINA:** Flattery will get you —

*(She stops in mid-step as Maximus enters, wearing a mask.)*

Hellooo!

**MAXIMUS:** I believe you promised the first dance to me.

*(He brushes the Prince aside and takes a very willing Raina in his arms.)*

**RAINA:** Did I?

**MAXIMUS:** Well, if you didn't, you should have.

*(They dance energetically off right. The Prince watches them despondently. Lina clears her throat, fixes her hair. The Prince ignores her, crosses left. Lina throws up her hands.)*

**LINA:** I don't know why I even bother coming to these things. There's obviously no one worth bothering with. I just keep hoping...

*(Michael crosses to the Prince, takes off his mask and puts it on himself. The Prince is really spooked now, rushes off. Michael removes his cloak, approaches Lina.)*

**MICHAEL:** May I have this dance, my lady?

**LINA:** Are you sure? I'm not much of a dancer.

**MICHAEL:** That's all right. Neither am I. We can just sort of stagger around in circles, I guess.

*(She laughs. They begin to dance tentatively.)*

**LINA:** You're not so bad.

**MICHAEL:** Well, my auntie used to give me a few lessons, before they took her away.

**LINA:** Oh, dear. Someone usurped the throne?

**MICHAEL:** Something like that.

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