

"The Lute Player"
Russia

Once a king gathered an army and set sail to a faraway land. There, in the middle of a battle, he was captured. The king was thrown into a dungeon to die. For a full year he lived in the prison, working like a slave in the fields. At last, one day he was able to smuggle out a letter to his wife, the queen.

When the queen received the letter from her husband, she began to weep, for what he had asked seemed impractical and impossible: He wanted her to sell everything in their kingdom and to give the money to the king's captor. Her husband believed he would then be released from prison.

What could she do? She could not take the money to the man who had captured her husband. He would most certainly make her one of his own wives. And even if she could trust someone to take such a treasure to her husband's captor, she suspected he would not free her husband anyway.

And so she worried, and wondered about what to do. At last she had an idea. She cut off her hair, removed her gowns, and dressed herself as a minstrel lad. Carrying a lute, she set off for the far-away kingdom.

The queen traveled by caravan and ship. Along the way, she practiced her beautiful lute playing and singing each evening, to the delight of her co-travelers.

After a long journey, she reached the land where her husband was imprisoned.

She walked directly to castle of the local king, and there she played and sang. The local king was so entranced by her music that he forgot to eat, he forgot time, and at moments even forgot himself. "What wonderful music!" the local king said. "It has driven all weariness and grief out of my heart."

He begged for more, and for three days the queen, disguised as a lute player, played.

Finally, on the evening of the third day, she said, "Sir, I must set off."

"Very well," said the local king. "But please allow me to give you a gift. Ask me for anything."

The queen pretended to think for some time. At last she said, "Well, I am often lonely when I travel. Would you give me one of your prisoners to keep me company?"

"Of course," said the local king.

He led the queen into the dungeon and said to her, "Take your pick."

The queen immediately spotted her husband, even though he was thin and not well-kept. Pointing to her husband, she said, "Please give this man to me."

The local king, still entranced by his memory of the music and thus true to his word, released her husband

The queen was so well-disguised, her husband did not recognize her.

She wanted to get home first -- so she gave money for the journey to her husband and told him to take his time, to physically recover from his ordeal, and to buy the finest clothes -- so that when he would arrive he would be admired by all.

She herself boarded a ship towards home immediately.

When she reached their land and castle, she entered the castle from the back of it, without anyone seeing her.

Some days later, the king arrived.

The servants rejoiced at the sight of their beloved king. He smiled and hugged his old friends.

A moment later, the queen, dressed in one of her loveliest gowns, entered the hall, eager to embrace her husband.

But the king said, "My wife, did you not receive my letter? If you did, it seems you did not do as I asked. It seems you left me to die in prison."

The queen hung her head.

The king's adviser said, "I myself gave your letter to her. She disappeared that very day. She re-appeared only recently."

"Can you explain yourself?" demanded the king of his wife.

The queen walked to her chambers. There she dressed again in her minstrel's clothing, and she picked up her lute. She hurried outside into the courtyard, and she began to play and sing.

When the king heard that sound, he turned to his adviser and said, "I hear the song of the one who saved me! Go out to the courtyard and bring the player to me."

The adviser did as he was asked. When the king saw the minstrel, he reached out, took his hands, and said, "Yes, you are the lad who saved me! Please, ask me for anything. I will give you your heart's desire!"

"My heart's desire?" the queen disguised as the lute player asked.

"Yes, anything," said the king.

She removed her disguise and revealed herself. "You are my heart's desire," she said.

The king could not believe his eyes. He stood very still and was speechless. At last, he knelt on one knee and said, "I beg you to forgive me. I should never have doubted your courage and the strength of our love."

That night in the castle there was a great celebration in honor of the king's rescue, the queen's wisdom, and the power of love.