

EVA AND THE HOPELESS PRINCE

By Ursula Jones

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Once there was a girl called, Eva, who lived in a house that stood all by itself, far out on the plain. She had an orchard, a barn and a hay field, and there was a deep pool in the river to bathe in. And there she lived and worked alone.

One rainy night, there was a scratching at her door and when she opened it, a poor, weary dog was standing there, soaked to the skin.

“Come in,” Eva said, “and dry yourself at the fire.” And the dog limped into the room.

Eva bathed its paw and gave it water to drink but it could eat nothing. Exhausted, it fell asleep in front of the fire but Eva sat up all night to be sure the fire stayed in to keep the dog warm. It looked near to death.

In the morning, the dog wagged its tail at her—one thump on the floor where it lay, hardly able to move—and when Eva offered it a little food, it ate hungrily. And from that day on, the dog got better and better until it was well enough to be on its way. But instead, it stayed with Eva.

That dog went everywhere with her! At first, Eva was always ahead, because the dog’s paw was still mending but before long, the dog kept up with her and by the end of the summer, the dog was in the lead. And Eva would laugh and the dog would grin and they’d roll down the hayfield together and laugh and roll down it again and then they’d swim in the pool and so it went on. And Eva called the dog, Gladdo, because she was that glad of his company.

One evening, Gladdo set up a barking and a handsome young man came riding by.

“I can’t sleep in this house,” he said to Eva.

“Nobody asked you to,” said Eva.

“Well, I can’t anyway,” said the young man, “because I’m a prince.”

“Is that a fact?” Eva said. “Your horse looks tired out. Put it in the barn and give it some hay and doss yourself down there, too, if the house doesn’t suit.”

And she shut the door on him. But after a while there was a knock at the door and the Prince was standing there.

“What’s hay?” he asked.

Eva sighed and went out to the barn and showed the prince how to feed his horse. And then she said goodnight.

“I can’t sleep here,” said the prince. “Princes only sleep in palaces.”

So Eva went and fetched an old plank from the woodpile and nailed it over the barn door and on it she wrote: ‘BARN PALACE’.

“There you are,” said Eva. “There’s your palace. Now can we all get some sleep?” And she and the dog went into the house.

Next morning there wasn’t a sign of the prince until after midday.

“Princes always sleep late,” he told Eva.

“Well make yourself some breakfast before you go on your way,” she replied. But the prince didn’t know how to make breakfast so Eva did it for him.

“You’re hopeless,” she said.

“I know,” the prince agreed. “That’s why my father sent me off on a quest. He said ‘You’re hopeless, son. Go on a quest and don’t come home until you’ve learned how not to be hopeless.’”

“It’s a long time then,” said Eva, “that you’ll be away from home, I’m thinking.”

After breakfast, the prince thanked Eva for letting him stay the night.

“I’m afraid I can’t marry you in return,” he apologised. “I can only marry a princess. It’s a royal rule.”

“That suits me,” said Eva. “I wouldn’t want you. You’re too hopeless.”

“I know,” agreed the prince and mounted his horse. “That’s a fine looking dog,” he said with a nod down at Gladdo. “You wouldn’t think of letting me have him?”

“Not on your life,” Eva said. “You’re too hopeless to look after him.”

The prince was quite hurt. “I’m a prince,” he said. “You’re supposed to give me whatever I ask for. It’s a rule.”

“Is that so,” said Eva. “Well, if you want that rule to be kept, you’d better be sure to ask people for no more than you are certain you’ll be given.” And the prince set off in a state of puzzlement trying to work out what she meant. But to Eva’s surprise, Gladdo went with him, barking and jumping by his horse’s side.

The Prince’s horse shied. “Watch out,” said the prince.

His horse reared. “Steady,” called the prince.

His horse bucked. And off flew the prince into the river and knocked his head on a stone and Eva dragged him out to prevent him drowning.

“Like it or not, Prince” said Eva, “you’ll have to come into the house now while we mend you.” And she put the prince in her own bed and she slept on the sofa downstairs.

Gradually, the prince recovered. When he was strong enough, he began to forget about being a prince and helped. He helped Eva with packing up the apples to send to market. He learned to cut the hay. He even helped build a haystack, though his side of it was not as good as Eva’s—plain wonky, in fact, but that made them laugh—and he learned to feed the dog and to chop wood and how to groom his horse. And everywhere he went, Gladdo was beside him. But sometimes, Eva would catch the prince watching her with an unhappy look to him that she couldn’t understand but he’d soon cheer up again with a lick of the hand from Gladdo.

The weeks passed and, at last, the prince remembered he’d a quest to be getting on with. So Eva filled his saddlebags with apples to be sure he wouldn’t go hungry or thirsty. “We’ll miss you,” said Eva as she waved the prince off, then she went into the house and shut the door. “That’s over and done with,” she said.

She patted Gladdo on the head and they looked around the room. It was terribly quiet without the prince. “There’s a sad side to having a friend, Gladdo,” said Eva. “It’s when they leave.”

The next morning, Gladdo was missing. Eva searched the house and the barn and the pool and the orchard and the hay field but he wasn’t there. At last, she did what she dreaded to do and looked out across the plain. Sure enough, there he was—a tiny dot in the distance—walking away from her. Walking the way the Prince had taken. And as she watched, the dot dwindled to nothing and was gone.

“Ah, well,” said Eva, “That’s over and done.” And she went into her house and shut the door. “I think,” she said, “I’m feeling that sad side of a friendship again.”

That autumn she picked the apples as usual but now, she was sad. And the days grew shorter and the nights grew longer and darker and colder and more lonely. And time passed slowly.

Then one bitter night, in February, Eva was huddled to the fire and thinking of nothing in particular, when there was a scratching at the door. She opened it, and Gladdo lolloped into the house. He was worn out but he wouldn’t rest

until Eva had read the message tied to his collar. It said: ‘Help!’ And it was signed: ‘Prince Hopeless’.

Next morning, Eva set out at dawn, following where Gladdo led her. It was a long walk but at last, they entered a city: the biggest Eva had ever seen. Gladdo led her along the noisy streets till they came to a palace. She followed Gladdo through a back door, past busy servants doing royal tasks, up stairs and down galleries, until they came to a huge, empty, cold room—and there was Prince Hopeless. He was sitting next to a beautiful princess and looking very sorry for himself.

“You look terrible,” said Eva. “What’s the matter?”

Hopeless smiled sadly. “Thank you for coming. We want your advice. Will you give it?”

“Go ahead,” said Eva. And the beautiful princess stopped playing with her long, golden tresses and listened.

“They want me to marry this princess,” explained Hopeless.

“Why?” asked Eva.

“He rescued me from a dragon,” the beautiful princess answered.

“Get away!” exclaimed Eva. “I’d never have thought it.”

But it was true.

Prince Hopeless had ridden away from Eva’s house when, to his surprise, Gladdo caught up with him and refused to go home, however much the prince entreated him. So with Gladdo running next to him, the prince journeyed on and on, until, at long last, they came to a rocky plateau. It was a bleak-looking place, and there, standing on a big boulder, was the beautiful princess, tied to a stake.

“What are you doing up there?” Prince Hopeless asked.

“Waiting for the dragon to come and eat me,” she answered him.

“That’s not much of a future,” Prince Hopeless said. And the princess explained how things had gone so badly wrong.

“We pay the dragon in gold not to lay waste our kingdom,” she told Hopeless. “Dragons love gold. They collect it. But last year, we ran out of gold so we gave him paper money. Well, the stupid creature breathed on it and naturally enough it went up in flames and so now we’re down to feeding him damsels. Damsels are the only other currency he’ll accept. I’m first because I’m royal.”

“That’s a nuisance for you,” Hopeless sighed. “Being royal is a terrible obstacle in life.”

“My boy friend said he’d fight the dragon to rescue me,” the princess explained, “but the king, my father, said he couldn’t. It has to be a prince who rescues me. That’s the rule and my boy friend is only an earl.”

“Well,” said Hopeless after a minute’s thought, “why doesn’t your father promote him to a prince? Then he can get on with the job.”

“Excellent idea,” smiled the princess. “Untie me and I’ll run home and put it to Father.”

But Gladdo prodded Prince Hopeless a warning nudge with his nose.

“Too late,” said Prince Hopeless. The dragon was raging over the horizon towards them at full tilt. When it drew nearer, it opened its jaws wide, then wider and wider and—yawned.

“Oh! No!” it groaned, “Not a damsel to eat. It’s too early. I’ve only just woken up from hibernation.”

“What you could do with,” said Hopeless sympathetically, “is a nice hot coffee.”

“Too bad I’ve got to make do with blood,” yawned the dragon, “so tepid.”

“Eugh!” said Hopeless.

“Don’t you ‘eugh’ me,” rumbled the dragon, “or I’ll polish you off first. You’re a prince, I presume?”

“A hopeless one,” said the prince. The dragon towered over him.

“Come to fight me, I suppose?”

“Nothing of the sort,” quavered the prince. “I’m far too hopeless.”

“Hold on, hold on,” growled the dragon. “That’s not on. We *have* to fight. Whoever wins, gets the princess. If it’s me, I eat her. If it’s you (fat chance!) you marry her. It’s the rule.”

“Franchement,” said the princess, who liked to throw in a little French, “I’m not wild about either outcome.” The dragon clashed his teeth at her.

“Nobody ever asks the damsel’s opinion,” he roared. “That’s another rule.”

He glowered down at Prince Hopeless. “Let’s get started, laddie.”

“Just a sec,” said Hopeless, climbing a tall crag to level up with the dragon’s snout. “Consider the facts: one—you’re not hungry, two—the princess doesn’t want to be eaten by you or to marry me. And three—I’m not looking for a fight. So let’s call the whole thing off. What do you say?”

But the dragon blew a disapproving billow of smoke down one nostril. “That’s a hopeless idea.”

“Precisely,” spluttered Hopeless through the smoke. “But it would work. Save you sacks of indigestion pills.”

“I vote for the hopeless idea,” shrilled the beautiful princess.

“It’s not in the rules,” the dragon persisted.

“Two against one,” the princess shrieked. “We win. Vote for Hopeless. Yah, yah, yah!” The dragon lobbed a boulder in her direction and yawned massively.

“I bet,” he said to the beautiful princess, “you taste as horrible as you sound.”

At those words, Prince Hopeless knew he was going to have to fight the dragon because it was a rule and you have to play by the rules. He wished he’d thought to bring a sword with him or, better still, a cannon or, better still, his father’s army or, best of all (if only it had been invented by then) an air force—he was that jittery about dying and that keen on the idea of being alive.

It was then that Gladdo prodded the prince in the midriff with his head. He prodded him so hard, that the prince’s purse fell out onto the ground with a chink.

“Ouff!” Said the prince but he took the hint from Gladdo and remembering Eva’s advice to only ask for what you were certain you would get, he said, “Permit me to ask a favour, Dragon.”

“Hurry up then,” howled the dragon, who was getting bored.

“They tell me you’re something of a collector,” the prince began but the dragon interrupted impatiently.

“Only of gold. It’s a dragon rule.”

By now, Gladdo was sniffing at the saddlebags on the prince’s horse as though there wasn’t a worry in the world, least of all, a dragon after your gizzard and innards.

“And we all know, sir, you never bend the rules,” the prince said. And taking the hint from Gladdo again, he ran and lifted off the saddlebags. “So I wonder, sir,” he continued, cool as a cucumber, though his heart was beating a royal tattoo, “I wonder if you’d be good enough to give me your opinion of the contents of these fine containers?” And he took out the few gold coins remaining in his purse and ran them through his fingers.

The dragon’s eyes glinted at the sight. A crinkle of blue flame trickled out of his jaws with longing for the gold in the purse and in the big, bulging saddlebags. But he didn’t utter. The Prince said desperately, “Think what you could do with this, sir: buy yourself a boiling hot bath of coffee for a start.” But still the dragon didn’t answer. So Prince Hopeless hung the purse temptingly over one of the dragon’s talons. “All my gold,” he said, “in return for the princess and your promise never to trouble her kingdom again.”

“Agreed!” the dragon roared. “I thought you’d never ask.” and he took off with the purse, snatching up both saddlebags as he soared away.

And the dragon never returned, even after he'd opened the saddlebags and found nothing in them but a change of socks and Eva's gift of apples, because Prince Hopeless had not lied to him. He'd simply tricked him (with a little help from Gladdo) into *believing* the saddlebags were full of gold, too, as well as the purse. And the dragon had fallen for it. But being a stickler for the rules, the dragon had to keep his word and stay away.

"Amazing!" said Eva, who'd listened to the whole tale. "So what's the problem?"

"Well," said the beautiful princess, "no sooner had the dragon flown away than hordes of well-wishers swarmed over the rocks, with my father riding at their head. Before we knew what was happening, he'd given my hand in marriage to Prince Hopeless for seeing off the dragon. We're engaged," she wailed. "They brought us here, measured me up for a wedding dress and, in one hour, we're to be married."

"And we don't want to be," said Hopeless.

"I've already got a boyfriend," the princess wept.

"So what should we do, Eva?" Prince Hopeless asked.

"Say no," said Eva.

"No?" They chorused in astonishment. "But we *have* to marry: it's the rule."

Eva laughed. "There's all sorts can be done with a rule," she said, "and one of them is to break it. You don't want to marry each other so say you won't."

And that's exactly what they did.

Well! The commotion! The prince's father ranted. The beautiful princess's father said he'd never been so insulted in his life and swept his daughter off home. As she went, she gave Eva and Hopeless and Gladdo a happy wink. Meanwhile, the prince's father swore he'd declare a war over it all until Prince Hopeless said:

"You might as well know the worst, Father. I can't marry and I never shall."

The king went pale. "Why not?" he whispered. "Is something wrong with you?"

Prince Hopeless nodded. "My heart is broken."

The prince turned to Eva. "You once made a rule that I should only ask for what I was certain I'd be given. You're the only girl I'll ever love but you said you wouldn't have me because I'm too hopeless, so I can't ever, ever, ever ask you to marry me and I shall be sad for the rest of my life and my heart will never mend."

"You can always *change* a rule?" suggested Eva.

“I’m still hopeless,” the prince warned her.

“And I’m not a princess,” Eva pointed out.

“But even if we flout the rules,” the prince replied, “I’m still hopeless.”

“I wouldn’t alter an iota of you,” said Eva with a smile so radiant that he didn’t care that he’d no notion what an iota was.

And so Prince Hopeless *did* ask Eva to marry him and they had the wedding instantly. Eva wore the dress that was made for the princess but with two tucks pinned in the back. They didn’t show, though, because the long lace train covered it.

And Gladdo’s tail thumped the floor like a drum roll. It wagged so fast and he looked so pleased, you’d almost believe it was that dog that had brought about the marriage.

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