

Queen Imperia

It was on a fine autumn day, when the trees were all russet and gold, and the air was cold and crisp, that the wisest and oldest counsellors were summoned to Queen Imperia's royal audience chamber. They went as a group, huddled together, for though they were respected throughout the wide lands of the empire, who knew what the great queen wanted, and no one in his right mind would want a lashing from her royal tongue without the support of his peers.

So, they went together, Counsellor Kant from Germany, Counsellor Kang Fuzi from China, Counsellor Khayyam from Persia, and Counsellor Gandhi from India, old men with long white beards, up the stone steps to her audience chamber in the fourth turret of her great palace. The Queen was pacing up and down, her silken dress clothing a form as lovely as the sunrise that bathed the land.

"Ah, there you are," she said, and continued to pace across the room. They knelt in humble obedience – though with some laboured difficulty – on the richly carpeted floor. Her handsome nurse, Freyasdottir, stood silent, by a window, her fair hair fanned by the morning breeze.

"Give me that petition, Nurse," commanded the Queen, and taking the vellum scroll from her nurse's hand, quickly scanned its contents, and tossed it to her kneeling counsellors.

"So! The people wish me to marry!" she exclaimed, in vexed tones.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the counsellors humbly. "It is our earnest request that Your Majesty may consider marriage to a suitable prince, for your people want a King, and your noble family, which has ruled this great land for a thousand years, must have heirs to rule it for another thousand!"

The Queen turned her large lustrous eyes on them. "Have I not ruled you all well for the last seven years?" she asked imperiously.

"Indeed, Your Gracious Majesty!" agreed the counsellors hastily. "No monarch could have ruled us better, not even your revered father who sat on the throne for fifty-seven years!"

The Queen turned away, and there was an uncomfortable silence for several minutes.

"Your Majesty will soon be twenty-three," reminded Counsellor Kang Fuzi softly.

"The people long to see your children," suggested Counsellor Khayyam hopefully.

"It is the counsellors' duty to arrange royal marriages," said the Queen at long last.

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“It is beyond our wits to do so,” cried all the counsellors in unison. “How can we mere mortals find anyone to match your wisdom, your beauty, your strength, your... your love for the people!”

“Your Principia Mathematica is now the only textbook in all the universities of the world,” said Counsellor Gandhi.

“The Miss World contest has been discontinued,” said Counsellor Kant, “since people want to gaze only on you.”

“There is no match we can find for you,” said Counsellor Kang Fuzi despairingly, “none since you ran the Marathon in one hour nine minutes and twelve seconds!”

“We cannot find a King to sit beside you,” said Counsellor Khayyam finally.

“No, you can’t,” agree the Queen reasonably. “What you have to do is find four consorts to help me rule.”

“Four!” cried the Counsellors aghast.

“Yes, four,” said the great Queen. “Just think, dear counsellors, I shall want a consort to advise me in state affairs, will I not? He would have to be very wise, otherwise how is he going to be of any use, and if he is to be wise, he will necessarily be quite old, right?”

They all nodded in agreement, shifting their weight from one knee to the other on the thick Persian carpet.

“But an old man will be a dead bore during all the parties I must give to all the heads of state, and the mayors, and the scientists, and the sportsmen who come calling,” continued the Queen in the same reasonable tone. “So, I would need a merry consort for all those parties, which means I must have at least two consorts.”

The counsellors were confused, but saw the logic of her statements, and again nodded unhappily.

“Well, and that is not all,” continued the Queen. “We are a great empire, and we have wars and disturbances all the time around our distant frontiers. I need a consort who can be a fitting *dux bellorum*, who will do the fighting for me, when I am busy in the Royal Observatory, or writing a thesis on the categorical imperative. That makes three consorts, right, for one cannot expect a boon companion in a party to know much about fighting, and what humour does a soldier have? I won’t tolerate barrack-room jokes at my table!”

The counsellors looked at each other wildly, and then under the Queen’s piercing gaze once again nodded most unhappily.

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“And, if I am to marry,” continued the Queen with a soft smile, “I will have a bed-fellow of my choice, someone who knows how to make love to a woman, a queen. My father had a thousand queens to keep him happy, I am asking just for one good bed-fellow, for I believe there should be moderation in all things. So, dear counsellors, scour the world for four worthy prince consorts! Go!”

The old counsellors rose in trembling obedience, and hurried off to the Great Council Chamber where they told all the royal administrators what the Queen had commanded. No one had heard of such a thing before, but the Queen was loved as much as she was admired, and she was admired as much as she was respected. So, messengers were sent to all the other countries to identify suitable consorts.

All the great people of all the lands were astonished, but none could gainsay the Queen’s impeccable logic, and since even at her tender age she was renowned throughout the world for wisdom, beauty, courage, and virtue, many came to the empire’s capital to sue for her hand, or rather for one-fourth of her hand.

The great men of war were the first to arrive since they were always ready for any contingency. As the first test of fitness, the Queen instructed that every one of them should fence with an officer of her personal guard. Those few who won were quickly beaten in the second round by the Captain of the Queen’s Horse. Finally, the day came when the great Chaka Zulu defeated them all, and stood smiling in front of her. He was magnificent to behold, tall, handsome and bronzed. The Queen smiled at him sweetly, for she was very fond of beautiful men, and rising from her throne led him to her own fencing gallery for a bout. Perhaps, she half hoped he would win, we do not know, but with a quick flip of her wrist she had disarmed him in the first pass itself. Graciously she kissed him goodbye and sent him home to Africa, his caravan loaded with rich gifts.

By then, the wise men who dared to compete had arrived in their litters. There were not very many in any case. The Queen invited them *en masse* to a colloquium. The courtiers sat on benches in the Grand Hall of the palace, while the queen and the wise men sat at a round table in the well of the hall. The conversation ranged far and wide, the queen asking them about global warming, and social engineering, about genetic cloning, and fusion energy, about the Riemann hypothesis, and who might win the Oscars next year. It soon became clear to all that none of the wise men were half as wise as their own dear Queen, who sadly sent all the wise men home, but with their litters heavy with ancient books and modern treatises, some of which she had authored.

Affairs of state kept her busy for a whole fortnight. When she next turned her attention to the question of her marriage, her counsellors informed her that the cleverest management gurus awaited her pleasure, along with talk-show anchors, stand-up comedians, famous wits, and playboys of the Western World. Alas for them and her! Within half an hour of their presence, she would yawn, fidget, or even unavoidably fall asleep. “Ah! William in ‘As You Like It’ was not so witless!” she lamented, and hurriedly sent them off, but consoled with contracts from numerous management schools.

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Her people hoped that the Queen might make at least one suitable marriage, if a famous lover could be found, and the capital buzzed with excitement when there appeared Vatsayana from India, Don Juan from Spain, and Casanova from Italy. The Queen had read the Kama Sutra with interest, so she tried the Indian first, but told her counsellors next morning, "Like all Indians, he is very good in theory, but poor in application!" She declared that Don Juan while vigorous lacked subtlety, and as for Casanova, she told him that numbers were totally unimportant, while timing was critical. So the three went their several ways dejected, with only her advice as their precious gift.

Months passed, as months are apt to do, and the people were beginning to get accustomed to the thought that their young, beautiful, wise and great Queen might never get married. To add to their woes, the land suffered a great draught, and prices of onions and tomatoes went through the roof. When they tried to borrow from banks, they were told there had been a flight of capital, or a financial meltdown, or a liquidity crunch, words which economists kept inventing with great rapidity, but which meant little to them or anybody else.

The Queen of course was very worried about all this distress, and opened her own blog on the imperial website. All the economists, and management gurus, and chartered accountants, and financial forecasters sent her pages of advice every morning, which she deleted as fast as she could for it was all stuff and nonsense. Then, one day, as she was switching off her PC in disgust, up popped a single phrase. It read:

"Put food in everybody's pot."

That's all it said. Her counsellors who were leaning over her shoulder were angry.

"What nonsense is this!" they cried in vexation. "Wasting Your Majesty's time with simplistic tripe. The fool does not understand anything about economics, or the free market, or trade, or capital convertibility. We shouldn't allow all and sundry to write idiotic things onto your blog. We will trace the fellow out, and have the police examine him. He could be a terrorist!"

"Yes, find him," said the Queen absently. "And when you find him, bring him straight to me."

A few days later, the police brought in a man dressed in old, shabby clothes to the royal audience chamber.

"Who are you, friend?" asked the Queen kindly.

"I am a potter, Your Majesty," said the fellow boldly.

"And what made you write in to my blog?" persisted the Queen.

“Well, Your Majesty,” said the man, scratching his head, “it’s like this. I have made pots all my life. Pots to hold water, pots to hold food, for simple people, like myself. When I see these pots I made looking empty in every household, I feel sad, for they are not mere *objets d’art*, they are meant to sustain life. And since most people just have pots like the ones I make, and not gold plates to dine off, like Your Majesty, I thought you should fill them first with food, if you want to solve this – this financial crisis.”

“Take him away!” shouted the counsellors to the police. “The man is an idiot – or worse!”

“No, let him stay,” said the Queen quietly. “Come and sit beside me, and tell me more of your thoughts.”

That evening the Queen called her counsellors to her chamber. When they had knelt before her, she said: “This potter is the wisest man I have met. He has shown me what should be my first duty, indeed the first duty of any sovereign. He shall be my consort and advise me in all things!”

Great was everybody’s rejoicing, and the marriage was celebrated with the pomp and ceremony befitting the greatest monarch of the world.

Only one thing marred the festivities that went on for several weeks. The Israelis and the Arabs were at each other’s throats once again, and every TV program echoed to the thump of artillery, the whoosh of rocket fire, the rattle of musketry, the cries of hurt infants, the wail of veiled women. It was intolerable for people celebrating their queen’s wedding. So, the counsellors told the Israelis and the Arabs to send their presidents, their prime ministers, and their commanders to the Queen’s palace, for they were confident that she, the wisest woman in the world, would be able to solve their problems and bring about peace.

The Israeli and the Arab dignitaries came grudgingly, they came defiantly, they came in sorrow, they came in anger, but they came in the end to the Queen’s council chamber. The Queen presided over the meetings, which went on day and night over three weeks. The Israelis and the Arabs talked and drank and ate all round the clock for the three weeks. They shouted at each other, they threw down papers that were handed to them, they stalked out, and then came back to the table. At the end of those three weeks, the Queen herself opened the council chamber doors and announced to a delighted world that from that day on the Israelis and the Arabs would live in peace with each other.

Great now was the jubilation throughout the world, and pretty compliments, awards, and honours were received in the palace everyday from every corner of the world. The counsellors, of course, were the first to kneel at their queen’s feet and offer their congratulations.

“We knew, Great Queen, that you in your wisdom would bring to an end even this most intractable of world problems,” they said. “Happy is the land with such a queen!”

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The Queen shook her head thoughtfully.

“No, it was not me who made them change their minds,” she said smiling at them. “Send for the chef!”

Soon, the royal chef, a rather heavy man with a large black moustache, stood before his queen.

The Queen looked him up and down.

“You know that it was you who brought peace among the Israelis and the Arabs, don’t you?” she asked at long last. “Those dishes you kept sending up through all those long nights and days, the soups, and the meats, the desserts, the wines, the fruit, and the cakes, were all timed to perfection, cooked to suit the temper of the moment, to sooth feelings, to ignite new thoughts, to bring in fellowship, to eclipse the past! How did you manage all this with such skill, such finesse?”

The chef smiled, and smoothed his moustache. “Ah, Your Majesty, that’s the real art of cooking, which is the greatest art of humanity, for it is meant for everyone, and for everyday, to remind us all every moment that we are one people around one table!”

“Why, you are the boon companion I have searched for all this while!” cried the Queen happily. “Be my consort and accompany me at every table!”

So, to everyone’s delight, the queen’s second marriage blended in with the first, like a delicately whipped up mousse.

Many happy days passed, the empire came out of its financial troubles, everyone had plenty to eat and save. And yet the Queen was anxious, because she was a good queen. She travelled ceaselessly through her lands to learn at first hand whether her people were happy or not. She sometimes went about as their queen, but more often she went amongst her people dressed as a poor girl to learn the truth at first hand.

In a distant mountain village, the mayor told her that they had lost a lot of livestock due to foot and mouth disease, but a shepherd, skilled in traditional medicines, had saved many animals. Her scientific curiosity aroused, she made her way to his farm, refusing any escort. It was a large rambling place, more like a zoo, she thought, for animals from several continents were running free in its pastures. The shepherd himself was surprisingly young, tall and strongly built, with a handsome pleasant face under a broad forehead topped with black curls.

“Who might you be, lass?” he asked, his eyes smiling down at her.

“The mayor sent me, Sir,” she said bobbing him a curtsy, “he thought you might need some help at the lambing.”

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“Aye, that I do,” said the Shepherd, turning away. “I hope you have the skills to take care of some of the strange animals you will find here.”

She had never birthed any animal before, but she was keen to find out what this distant citizen of her empire knew, and so she followed his directions, using commonsense more than any specialised knowledge. Once, when she was clumsy with a llama, the shepherd laughed at her kindly.

“Lass, if you do that again, she will spit in your eye, she has a temper, she has!”

“Why do you keep llamas?” she asked, a little breathless.

“For the wool, of course, silly,” he said, giving her a cuddle.

She flushed, but he had turned away to look after another animal. She had never worked on a farm before, let alone a strange one like this. It was hard going at first, but the pleasure of learning a new skill kept her at his side. She noticed that he was both strong and gentle, his low voice soothed the animals, he worked fast, more by instinct, she thought. He was very kind to her too, and taught her how to hold an animal in labour, to quiet its fear, and ease its pain. She herself felt secure with his great arms guiding her, his head close to hers, his curls brushing her ears. The rhythm of their work was like a dance, and once, after a mare’s difficult delivery, she thankfully rested her head on his broad chest. He was a stranger, and yet she felt she had known him forever. A small scientific voice inside her said it’s just the pheromones, but she was past caring. At long last, there was no more to be done, and she turned to him, close beside her, and raised her eyes to his.

He was smiling at her in that protective way he had had through the evening.

“It’s late already. I would not have you go back alone to the village, I saw some wolves in the woods down below. You can sleep in the barn, the hay is fresh and clean, and I shall get you a woollen blanket to keep you warm.”

With that he was gone. She lay on the hay, which was softer than her eiderdown bed, and more fragrant than any perfume she had worn. Tired, sleepy, and strangely content, she lay half asleep half dreaming, till she felt him covering her with a thick blanket. She ran her fingers over his arms, and no words were needed to be said. He kissed her softly, his great arms cradled her, his broad chest sheltered her. Her arms crept round the back of his neck, and she held him close like a baby. As she slept, she dreamt that Cupid himself had flown down to her side, and taking her into his arms, made love to her as she floated on a moonbeam, and the stars sang to them both.

“Ah, so this is real love,” she breathed softly, still half asleep. “I never dreamt it could be so enchanting.”

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“Indeed, love, nor did I,” said the shepherd gently, holding her in his arms, and kissing her. She lay there contentedly for some time.

When they had got up, and she was combing her long, silken hair, she asked him, “How did you ever learn to love anyone like this?”

“Dearest love,” said the shepherd, “I tend sheep in these pastures, I bring young lambs into the world, and shelter ewes from the cold in my humble croft. And I look after all these animals, like a friend. If I did not know how to love, who would?”

She nodded quietly, and though she did not tell him then that she was queen of that great land, she sent for him as soon as she could and they were married in the great cathedral. So, the Queen lived happily with her three husbands, and all the people were happy as well.

That is, they were happy, till the Great Khan, lord of all the barren lands north of the high mountains, crossed the high passes with his teeming armies, and their war elephants and cavalry horses, to lay siege to the capital. The Queen made rapid preparations for war, while the people wrung their hands and wished their queen had by then found a suitable warlord to marry. But they were a brave people, and though the Great Khan’s army stretched from one horizon to the other, they were determined to put up a fight and teach that fellow a lesson he would not soon forget.

When the Khan’s Mongol emissaries approached the Queen formally to demand her surrender, she laughed them away in scorn, but as was her kindly custom ordered that they should receive refreshment from the kitchens before they departed. Her nurse, Freyasdottir, led the Mongols to the kitchens for a meal and a drink, and as she was also a kindly person chatted with them merrily while they ate. The Mongols, of course, were very stiff, and to put awe into her and the fearless people around the nurse, showed her a picture of the Great Khan, which they carried wrapped respectfully in a silken cloth.

When the nurse saw the picture, she laughed loud and long.

“Why, if it isn’t dear little Harelip!” she exclaimed. “Yes, yes, I mean the Great Khan – how funny! Do tell him his old nurse, Freyasdottir, will come and see him tomorrow morning – and he better have washed behind his ears, for I will check, tell him that!”

The Mongol emissaries departed mystified, and after they had grovelled for a bit in front of the Great Khan, fearfully, and with stammering, said that there was a nurse, one Freyasdottir, who wished to be granted the boon of seeing the effulgence of the face of the Presence, and – and –

“Nurse Freyasdottir! Nurse Freyasdottir! She is here?” cried the Great Khan jumping up in excitement. “Of course, of course, you fools, I will see her! I hope you were respectful and abased yourself in her presence. If you have transgressed in any way, your mothers will wish you were never born!”

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Next morning, Nurse Freyasdottir, wearing a newly knitted dress she had saved for just such an occasion, left for the Great Khan's camp. The serried ranks of the Great Khan's infantry parted before her, as the Red Sea's waters had parted before Moses, and she sailed through them, and between the respectful ranks of the Great Khan's cavalry, while his elephants knelt in salute.

The Great Khan jumped up from his travelling throne and hugged her, and danced all round his tent with her. Then, to keep the curious out, he pulled down the flap of the tent and ordered the best dinner his cooks could prepare for his special guest.

That evening, when Nurse Freyasdottir returned, smiling to herself as she thought of the day she had passed and also of times long gone when the Great Khan was little Harelip, the Queen met her with many unasked questions on her lips. Already the city's people could see that the siege had been lifted and that the great army was on its way back towards the distant mountains to the north.

That night, as the nurse was tucking her into bed, the Queen asked, "Do you really mean to tell me that the Great Khan, after marching a thousand miles through sleet and snow, and dragging his elephants over the high passes, has just turned around because – because you were once his nurse?"

"Of course not, dear," said Nurse Freyasdottir, as she kissed the Queen on her brow. "I told him of all your excellent arrangements to withstand a siege of several months, and the skill and strength of your army. While we all stay cosily inside the city during the winter, he would be freezing his unmentionables out there without anything for his army to eat. And if he tried to retreat to the high mountains, he would be harried all the way, because, I told him, you had studied Kutuzov's campaigns against Napoleon quite closely and knew what to do."

"Good Lord! You told him all that?" asked the Queen in amazement.

"Yes, and I held him close and I said I was scared for him," said Nurse Freyasdottir. "I told him it was best he should make peace with you and leave while the going was good, and the high passes were still open."

"And so that was that," said the Queen meditatively.

The nurse nodded. "Yes, it was, and I told little Harelip that to make peace he had to sign a treaty and make concessions, something that will also help him claim victory as well. So..."

"So?" the Queen held her breath.

“So, the high mountains that mark the line of control between your empire and his now has an agreed permanent international boundary all along the crest, the southern slopes are yours, and the northern are his!”

“Marvellous! Marvellous!” said the Queen, clapping her hands. “How did you get to be so clever, Nurse?”

“I am not clever,” said Nurse Freyasdottir placidly. “I just know that the best way to win a war is not to fight a battle!”

“You are the best general I have,” said the Queen with decision. “I shall marry you as my fourth consort.”

The people thought it was a bit unusual, but everyone was very happy because there had been no war, and they celebrated the Queen’s fourth marriage with as much merriment as they had the other three. What the counsellors thought nobody knows. The high priest solemnized the marriage, and gravely pointed out chapter and verse why it was as holy as any other marriage.

The Queen ruled wisely and happily for very many years after these stirring events. She had very many children, some whom she bore, some whom she adopted, and some who were given to her. When in the fullness of time she passed on into God’s keeping, the royal princes and princesses, instead of dividing up the empire as thoughtfully suggested by their wise counsellors, gave the land back to all of the people, to whom it had always belonged in any case.

The End