

Princess Florabunda and the Dancing Sleepover

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The princesses could see the steps leading down into the darkness. Princess Tenderness of Hearts had just lifted the trap door that had been hidden under one of the twelve beds.

“Look at those dark, scary stairs,” said Princess Drama, “there are probably spiders down there. Who’s going down them first?”

“I shall be first,” said Princess Tenderness, “because I am eldest and therefore the leader of our party.”

“I’m going with Tender, so I won’t be scared,” said Twinkle of Stars, the youngest of the twelve young princesses. She was bouncing around so much it was difficult to tell if she was frightened or excited.

“It’s all right, Twinkle,” said the older princess. “Hold my hand and I will take care of you.”

“My cousin Twinkle certainly knows how to touch a tender heart,” thought Princess Florabunda of Flowers.

“In the famous story of the dancing princesses ,” said Princess Wendy, “the youngest princess went last.”

“We don’t want to relive that scary story,” said Princess Gloomy.

Princess Tenderness picked up a candle. “Florabunda, would you mind carrying the basket? We'll be awfully hungry before the night is over if we forget the tarts that I have made. I can't carry the basket because I'm holding Twinkle's hand.”

“I wish that we could eat the refreshments that King Doyle and Queen Prudence of the underground will provide,” said Princess Lovely.

“When we met her this afternoon, Professor Wu warned us not to eat any underground food,” said Florabunda. “The original twelve princesses didn't realize it at the time, but it was eating the underground food that caused them to return every night to dance. King Doyle and Queen Prudence understand that we must bring our own food. My grandparents are on very good terms with them. Besides, Tender made the tarts we are bringing. They are delicious.”

Princess Gloomy looked at the basket Princess Florabunda was carrying. “It's a good thing that we all have delicate princesses' appetites, or we'd starve before the night was over.”

Florabunda hoped that she would like Princess Gloomy more when she got to know her better. Earlier in the day Florabunda had met Professor Wu and the Princesses Drama, Gloomy, Wendy, Lovely, Joy, Crystal, Echo, Ivy, and Sapphire. Twinkle was Florabunda's second cousin. Florabunda had known Tenderness of Hearts all her life. Tenderness was, of course, the daughter of the Queen of Hearts, the world famous tart baking queen. Princess Tenderness (everyone called her Tender) liked to cook as much as her mother did, and so Tender had prepared the food that they were going to carry with them.

All twelve princesses and Professor Wu had arrived at the castle belonging to Florabunda's grandparents that morning. They were going to stay at the castle for a few days and then go into the forest with Professor Wu to spend a year at the professor's princess boarding school. They were going to study “Enchantments: How to Avoid Them When Possible and Break Them When Necessary.”

The king and queen had graciously greeted all their young guests and their tutor. Then they left to go on a state visit. They planned to stay with some king and queen friends of theirs until the princesses had left for school. Florabunda smiled. She thought it was strange that twelve young girls could scare off such competent monarchs as her grandparents.

None of the princesses had expected to have their first lesson on the night they arrived at the castle, but Professor Wu said that they couldn't miss the opportunity to practice avoiding enchantments. They would be staying in the bedroom of the famous twelve princesses who danced their shoes to pieces night after night. They could dress in beautiful ball gowns; take a trip to the underground kingdom where the princesses had danced; and (with Professor Wu's instructions) return safely at dawn.

Florabunda stopped her daydreaming when she noticed that Tender was getting ready to go down the stairs. With a candle in her right hand and Twinkle's hand in her left, Tender started down the dark stairs. Princess Florabunda picked up the basket and followed Tender and her little cousin. The other nine princesses followed in a line.



They had gone down a few steps without talking. Then Princess Drama, who was the the last princess in line, cried, “Oh! Someone stepped on my dress.”

Everyone laughed. They thought that Princess Drama was just pretending. In the original story the last princess in line thought someone had stepped on her skirt. Florabunda's grandfather had been the handsome soldier who followed those princesses down the stairs in his invisible cloak and accidentally stepped on the princess' gown.

Princess Drama did not like it when people laughed at her, so she did not say anything else. Almost everyone soon forgot about the princess' experience, but Florabunda thought that the incident was interesting.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Tender was able to blow out her candle. The underground was lit by a soft

light. Everyone looked happily around. In the strange light they could see gold, silver, and diamond trees, just as they expected. “Now this is just like the story,” they all said.

They were disappointed, however, when they reached the silver lake. Instead of twelve small boats with a prince to row each one, there was one barge and four footmen with poles to push it back across the lake.

“This isn't right,” said Princess Drama. “We are each suppose to have our own boat and a prince to row it.”

“Not all of their royal highness have completed their boating lessons,” said one of the footmen. “They await you on the other shore.” He stared straight ahead and seemed a little snooty to Florabunda.

“After all,” said Princess Wendy, “we are younger than the original princesses were when they came here.”

“Yes, but I expected older princes,” said Princess Drama.

The princesses lifted their skirts and did their best to walk gracefully onto the barge.

Twinkle used the skirt lifting as an excuse to hop around and admire her dancing shoes. “Look at my pretty shoes,” she said, “I hope that I dance them to pieces just like Grandmother.”

Florabunda heard Gloomy whisper, “Why is that child coming to princess boarding school? She is much too young.”

Florabunda had wondered the same thing. Was it because they needed twelve princesses for their first assignment? Maybe it was because Twinkle, like Florabunda was a granddaughter of one of the original twelve dancing princesses. Florabunda's grandmother had been the oldest princess and Twinkle's had been the youngest.

While they were crossing the lake, Florabunda heard the footmen complaining about the barge.

“Who would have thought that it would be so much work to push twelve little princesses? The barge is unbalanced and floating low on one side. This feels like a heavy load to me.”

Florabunda was wondering about the conversation she had overheard. It reminded her of her grandfather again. He had ridden in one of the small boats. He was invisible, but his weight made the boat float lower in the water. It also made it harder for the prince to row the boat.

When they reached the other shore, they could see twelve princes waiting for them.

“Good evening,” said the oldest prince as he stepped onto the barge, “my name is Prince Courtly. We will help you ashore. Then we will all go to the castle's ballroom.”

He took Tender's hand to help her off of the barge. The underground princes were trained in good manners. Ten more of the each princes chose a princess and helped her to dry ground. Florabunda's prince carried her basket for her.

Twinkle's prince was named Dashing, and he was as young and bouncy as she was. Some day his name might mean that he was a handsome prince, but right now it fit because he liked to dash around a lot. He was too excited to help Twinkle, so the footman carried Twinkle over a muddy spot to where her little prince was bouncing around.

“You don't want to get your pretty shoes muddy before you dance them to pieces do you?” he said.

Florabunda thought that maybe he wasn't so snooty after all.

When they entered the ballroom, the King Doyle and Queen Prudence (who were the grandparents of the princes) were sitting on a raised platform where they could watch the dance. Florabunda's basket was placed on the refreshment table. The twelve couples bowed to the queen and king. Then it was time to dance.

Each princess faced the prince who had escorted her from the lake. The princesses clasped hands with the princes as the music began. It was a very slow dance.

Forward and back and then forward again.

Back and then bow

Stay back and spin

Forward and back and then forward again

Dance, we'll dance all night.

Who could have imagined that a magical ball could be so boring? There wasn't much to this dance. They did the same thing over and over again, and they did not move except to go forward and back with a few bows and spins thrown in. Everyone was polite and stiff. No one was having a good time. Twinkle and Dashing started yawning.

“How am I ever going to dance my shoes to pieces this way? We are not even going anywhere,” said Twinkle.

Dashing whispered something to her and Twinkle smiled and nodded.

Soon after that Florabunda noticed that they were missing. Everyone stopped dancing to look for the little ones.

Then they heard giggles from under the refreshment table.

Prince Courtly lifted the tablecloth and looked under the table. The two laughed and

waved at him. "They are having such a good time," he said, "we'll just let them have their supper under the table. I think that we are all ready to eat."

The princesses were afraid that they would be embarrassed because they could not eat any of their hosts' food, but everyone understood the problem.

"Our grand parents and great-grandparents hadn't known that eating our food enchanted above ground people when Florabunda's and Twinkle's grandmothers danced here," said Courtney to Tender. "If you will fix some of your food for Twinkle, I will fix Dashing's supper. Then we can enjoy our own refreshments."

The princesses relaxed and enjoyed Tender's wonderful tarts.

Everyone felt better after eating, but they were not looking forward to more boring dancing. Just as they were lining up to begin, Twinkle and Dashing came out from under the table.



"Prince Dashing and I have a new dance," said Twinkle, "listen."

*Dance to the left
And then dance right
Making our steps graceful and light
Dance to the left
And then dance right
Dance, we'll dance all night.*

Twinkle and Dashing danced left and right and did other complicated moves like dancing between the long line of princesses and princes. After a while, the musicians picked up the faster tempo and the dancers caught their enthusiasm. The other couples started following the two youngest dancers and moved around the ballroom, laughing and having fun as they danced.

Florabunda happened to look at the queen during the dance. The Queen Prudence was frowning. Florabunda wondered if the queen disapproved of such a lively dance. Florabunda was having so much fun that she soon quit worrying.

The dance went on and on, but now no one noticed the time. They were all surprised when the footmen who would take them back across the lake appeared at the doors of the ballroom. When they stopped dancing, they discovered that they were ready to rest. Each prince offered his arm to his dancing partner, so that they could escort the princesses back to the barge.

Twinkle looked down at her shoes and said, "I didn't dance my shoes to pieces."

She was so upset that she didn't notice that her partner had left her side. Queen Prudence had called Dashing over to her and was whispering to him. She seemed worried.

Before they could start for the barge, the queen came to speak to Tender Heart and Florabunda.

"It's just as I suspected, when I noticed that the young ones were able to invent such

an lively dance.” said Queen Prudence. “Dashing sneaked one of our enchanting tarts in with Twinkle's food. Now she will have to come and dance here every night unless you can break the spell.”

“I'm sorry,” said Dashing, “ but I wanted to see Twinkle again.”

“Do you know how to break the spell?” asked Tender Heart.

“No,”said the queen. “We never understood how Floribunda's grandfather broke the spell. Don't you know how to break it?”

The party had reached the barge and the conversation seemed to be at an end as the princesses stepped onto it. Florabunda was thinking hard. She had heard the story about her grandmother and her eleven sisters many times.

“Tender,” said Florabunda, “did Grandmother ever tell you the story of Grandfather and the invisible cloak when you were visiting at the palace?”

“I've heard it lots of times. It's one of my favorite stories.”

“Did she ever mention how Grandfather broke the dancing spell?”

“Not really. He brought branches back from the wonderful trees on the banks of the lake. Do you think that we should bring some branches back with us?”

“I don't think so. The branches were just to show that he was telling the truth about this magical place.”

“Well, do you have any idea how he broke the spell?”

“I think that Grandmother and all my great aunts had a long tiring day, while Grandfather was telling the story of the underground dance. They didn't have a chance to nap all during the day. When they went to bed that night, they were so tired that they didn't wake up to go dancing. When they missed a night of dancing, the spell was broken.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yes,” said Florabunda, “we're going to have to keep Twinkle up all day. And that means that all of us have to stay awake all day.”

“I'm almost asleep already and we're not even back yet.”

Florabunda knew the way to talk Tender Heart into things. “Think about that precious little thing going down those dark, scary steps every night. Then she'll have to cross the lake and dance and dance and dance.”

Tender was almost in tears. “You're right. You and I will have to stay awake somehow.”

“And remember that we're going to need to talk everyone else into staying awake all day. This is going to be too much work for just the two of us.”

“How in the world are we going to persuade them?”

“You go around and explain the situation to everyone and I'll start working on Twinkle.”

Most of the princesses had heard enough of the conversations from the queen with Florabunda and Tender Heart to have an idea what was going on. They were all so sleepy that they didn't have the energy to argue with Tender Heart.

Twinkle was so distracted about her dancing shoes that she hadn't really paid attention to anything else. “I danced and danced and didn't dance my shoes to pieces,” she said.

Suddenly Florabunda knew what to do.

“When we get back to the big bedroom, we will just have to keep dancing. We'll dance those little shoes to pieces.”

“Yea!” shouted Twinkle, and she started to dance around on the barge until the footmen told her that it was a dangerous thing to do.

“Where does she get all that energy?” thought Florabunda who was having trouble just standing up.

After they had crossed the lake, the footmen helped them off the barge. They hardly noticed the wonderful trees as they made their way back up the stairs to the bedroom.

Some of the princesses had their night gowns on before Florabunda could stop them.

“I think that we should all put our night gowns on,” said Tender Heart, “even Twinkle. That way we can all fall into bed as soon as it is night again.”

“You're right,” said Florabunda. “This ball gown is getting uncomfortable. We might as well wear our soft nightgowns while we are being miserable all day.”

The princesses had to make plans for the day. They were going to need meals, breaks from dancing, and music. They decided to take ten minute breaks every two hours. They would pair up to keep each other awake. Tender Heart was friends with some of the court musicians and of course all of the cooks loved her. She went to talk to them about food and music during the day. The castle staff was a little surprised. They had expected the princesses to sleep all day, but Tender was able to make all the arrangements. She came back with a basket of food from the kitchen and some musicians. They agreed to take turns singing and playing.

The sleepy princesses were wearing their night gowns and their dancing shoes. The first group of musicians began the music and the princesses started dancing.

At first everyone was able to dance fairly well. As the day went on, they got slower and slower.

Princess Drama closed her eyes. “I think that I can dance and sleep at the same time” she said.

Princess Gloomy held on to her to keep from her from falling. “That won't work,” she said. “You have to keep awake.”

The musicians changed the music and words to match the princesses' new, slow style of dancing.

*Forward and back
And then forward again.
We're too tired to bow
And we're too tired to spin.
Forward and back, for there's no other way,
Dance, we'll dance all day.*

The day went on and on. They took breaks together, had the snacks, and helped each other through the day.

Princess Florabunda had her arms around Twinkle. Every so often during the dance she had to tell her to wake up. Twinkle really was falling asleep on her feet. Florabunda was struggling to stay awake herself. Even with her eyes open she was having trouble seeing. Was something wrong with her vision? Then she saw Tender Heart lighting a candle.



“We did it!” she said in such a loud voice that all the half asleep princesses jumped and looked around wildly. “Tenderness of Hearts just lit a candle. It’s night! We stayed awake all day!”

Everyone thought that they should cheer, but instead they took off their dancing shoes and fell into bed.

Florabunda was taking off her shoes, when she thought she heard a voice whispering in her ear. It was Professor Wu, but she could not see her.

“Well done, Florabunda. As you guessed, I borrowed your grandfather’s invisibility cloak to follow along and make sure nothing happened to you girls. It turns out you didn’t need me at all. You

handled the situation all by yourselves.”

Florabunda was never sure if that conversation really happened or if she dreamed it. She was sure about Twinkle, however.

Twinkle stayed awake just long enough to look at the tiny hole in one shoe, drop it on the floor, and say “I finally danced my shoes to pieces.” Then she was asleep.

*Now that it's night we can all go to bed.
No need to dance, sleep instead.
Take off our shoes
and we'll blow out the light.
Sleep, we'll all night.*