

The Unicorn, the Princess and the Boy (the first chapters)

Ed Wicke

Published by BlacknBlue Press UK
13 Dellands, Overton, Hampshire, England
blacknbluepress@hotmail.com

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All characters are fictitious.



Mountains

Forest

Castle

King's Woods

Royal Zoo

Gran's House

City

Marshes

Forest



1 Princess Pinetta



‘I have a surprise for you!’ shouted the King as he hurried into the palace dining hall. He was wearing his horse riding gear, and his boots left a muddy trail across the white marble floor.

Princess Pinetta and her governess were eating a lunch of boiled egg and beetroot salad, which the governess said was “good for growing girls” and Pinetta said was “*boring* in every way possible”.

‘Is it sweets?’ asked Pinetta hopefully.

‘It’s even better than sweets,’ said the King. ‘It’s an early tenth birthday present: I’ve caught a unicorn for you!’

Princess Pinetta leapt from her chair and danced across to her father, ignoring the stern looks of her governess. The stern looks meant:

‘Do not leave the table without asking!’ and

‘Do not dance about the dining room!’

‘Is it white?’ Pinetta asked, hanging on the King’s arm and jumping up and down excitedly.

She ignored another stern look from the governess which meant:

‘Do not treat adults as climbing frames!’

The King was easily tall enough and strong enough to be used as a climbing frame. He lifted the princess high into the air, pretended to drop her, then said as he lowered her to the floor:

‘Sorry, no. He’s a dappled grey: silvery, with darker and lighter blotches all over him.’

‘I know what *dappled* means, Daddy. I’m not a baby.’

The King smiled at her. ‘You can see him later this afternoon, once we’ve cleaned him up.’

‘No! Now! *Please*, Daddy!’

The governess couldn’t take any more. ‘Princess Pinetta!’ she scolded. ‘That is *not* how you speak to adults! And it’s certainly not how you address the King!’

Pinetta’s father had only been King for a year, after the old King – Pinetta’s grandfather – had died. The King had several people teaching him how to be a King, and Pinetta had Miss Strictly teaching *her* how to act like a Princess.

Princess Pinetta stopped herself from sticking out her tongue at the governess. Instead she smiled up at her father, who said (as she knew he would):

‘Oh, all right. I suppose you can watch him being washed. But you must promise not to get close to him. He’s rather wild.’

The governess rose and made a deep curtsy. ‘Your Majesty?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Miss Strictly?’

‘The Princess has lessons after lunch. It is good for a child to have a set routine. Perhaps she should view the animal *after* her lessons?’

‘No need!’ said the King. ‘Take the tutor with you; he can do a few lessons as you walk there.’

Miss Strictly made another deep curtsy, which didn’t quite hide the stern look on her face that said: *‘Don’t mess with the Princess’s timetable!’*



The princess walked down a long grassy avenue with tall, narrow trees on either side. This was a private path to their own entrance into the Royal Zoo. With her were the governess, the tutor and a big guard with a long sword at his belt.

Pinetta hated this part of being a princess: she never went anywhere on her own. Every trip needed at least one guard and either a nurse or governess (sometimes both).

Never had she been able to say, ‘I’m just popping down the road to play with my friend, okay?’ or ‘I’m off to the park!’ Every trip took half an hour to

organise, and a nosy adult was always watching every game and listening to every whisper with friends.

Usually this nosy adult was the governess. Although Pinetta liked Miss Strictly, there was no denying that the woman was:

- nosy,
- bossy, and
- old (at least thirty).

The tutor was called Mr Stodge. He was short, bald, ancient (at least forty), plump and rather sweaty.

‘Princess!’ he said now. ‘A few facts about unicorns. Uni – corn means what?’

‘One horn.’

‘Correct. They are *quadrupeds*, which means they have four -?’ He paused.

‘Feet? Legs?’ she guessed.

‘Feet. Or in this case, not actually feet but -?’

‘Hooves.’

‘Good. Some people think they are equines, which means -?’

‘Like horses.’ She knew a lot about horses.

‘Yes. Others say they are closer to the deer family, because of the shape of their shoulders and their ability to jump very high.’

‘How high?’ she asked.

‘Their own height at the withers, easily. Withers being -?’

‘The ridge on their back just before the neck.’

‘Good! Now let’s try some mathematics. Seven eights are -?’

‘Four thousand?’ Princess Pinetta called back over her shoulder. She had speeded up when he said “mathematics”. She hated maths.

Soon the tutor was struggling to keep up with them: partly because he was so plump, and partly because he kept stopping to wipe his sweaty face with a large handkerchief.

The governess said sternly, ‘Ladies do not rush!’

‘I wish ladies didn’t boss!’ Pinetta whispered to herself, not slowing down at all.

2 The Unicorn and the Boy



The Keeper of the Zoo – wearing a bright blue uniform with brass buttons all over it - met them at the Royal Entrance and led them to the unicorn’s paddock. This was a square grassy field with a wooden fence around it.

‘Look, Princess!’ wheezed the tutor, who had managed to catch up. ‘The fence... (*wheeze*)... has six rails, about one royal foot apart... (*pant*)... starting a foot from the ground. (*Wheeze gasp pant*) How high is the top rail?’

‘Six feet high,’ she said, rolling her eyes.

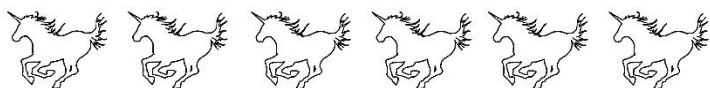
‘Which is how many yards? Or metres, to use the peasant word?’

‘*Grrrr!* Two.’ She bit on a lock of her long, curly reddish brown hair to stop herself from exploding. Maths made her wild.

‘Excellent,’ said the tutor. ‘There are eighteen sections of fence on each side of the field, and each section is five feet wide. So: how long is each side?’

‘Three million,’ she said. ‘And a half.’

‘No! Totally wrong!’ gasped the horrified tutor.



Princess Pinetta could see the unicorn standing near the gate and ran to climb up it, to get a better view. The adults came either side of her, peering over or between the thick rails of the wooden gate.

The unicorn was about the princess’s height at the withers: more a pony than a horse. He was being held by a large man and washed by a small boy using a soft brush and soapy water from a large, steaming,

frothy bucket. More buckets were lined up nearby.

The animal was facing to their right. He turned his head to look at the Princess, then looked away and stamped a forefoot.

He had a lovely long silvery mane and tail, with a slender, spiralling white horn in the middle of his forehead. He had a bandage wrapped about his right rear leg, just above the hoof. He was rather dirty, but not as dirty as the boy.

The boy was about the princess's size and probably around her age. His brownish hair was scruffy. Actually, all of him was scruffy: tangled hair, dirty face, muddy clothes with torn trousers, and heavy black boots coated with mud. The only part of him that was properly clean was his right hand, which was working the brush back and forth along the unicorn's back.

The unicorn didn't know if he should enjoy this, or hate it. His ears flicked forward and back... He snorted, stamped a forefoot, rolled his eyes... Then he nickered softly and leaned into the brush (now

working along his right side)... Then he went back to grinding his teeth and trying to kick the boy.

The unicorn succeeded with a kick and Pinetta was surprised that the boy didn't get angry.

'Ouch!' he exclaimed, rubbed the bruise, then carried on washing. He seemed to be talking gently to the unicorn as he scrubbed and rinsed.

'Boy!' demanded Princess Pinetta. 'Why are *you* washing the unicorn?'

The boy didn't turn from his work but called back to her, 'Because I'm the only one in the kingdom that owns a brush.'

'That's not true!' she protested. 'I've seen plenty of brushes!'

'Ah, but they're all mine,' the boy answered, dipping the brush in the water before starting on the animal's rump. '*Ouch!* Don't kick!' he said mildly, rubbing a new bruise.

'No they aren't!' said the princess.

Miss Strictly shook the princess by the shoulder and whispered severely, 'You must *not* get into

conversations with common boys!

‘Why not?’ asked Princess Pinetta.

‘Because they aren’t worthy of you!’ whispered the governess. ‘And they *lie*. Owns all the brushes, indeed! Look at his ragged clothes: I doubt if he has two pennies to rub together!’

The boy began singing to the unicorn, just loud enough for the princess to hear:

‘Stuck up old sticks-in-the-mud

Never did no one no good.

Talking of worth and birth; but worse:

They only care about your purse.’

The governess banged on the gate with the handle of the black umbrella she always carried. ‘Boy! What did you say? Boy, answer me!’

The boy looked over his shoulder at them. ‘Pardon, Miss? Wasn’t me: that was the unicorn. He sings a lot, he does.’

Pinetta giggled and the man holding the unicorn

fought back a smile; but the governess sniffed loudly and said, ‘You mustn’t make outrageous claims about the King’s unicorn.’

‘Is it the King’s, then?’ asked the boy carelessly.

The governess insisted, ‘Of course it is. He caught it!’

The boy poured the rest of the bucket over the unicorn’s back and passed the brush over the animal again. The coat was starting to shine now: a lovely, cloudy grey with flecks of black and silver.

‘Did he, now?’ asked the boy. ‘Or did I come upon this unicorn stuck in a boggy marsh, lying on his side, hardly able to move?’

Princess Pinetta spoke up angrily: ‘The King caught him! He said so!’

The boy nodded. ‘What the King says is always true,’ he agreed. ‘It must have been a different unicorn I rescued.’

‘Insufferable!’ exclaimed the governess.

The boy laughed, saying, ‘That’s the biggest word I’ve heard this year!’

The Keeper snapped his fingers at the boy and looked sternly at him over the top of the gate. (Pinetta could imagine the tutor asking, *“If the Keeper can just see over a six foot gate, how tall must he be?”*).

‘That’s enough!’ the Keeper growled. ‘Don’t you know who this is?’

‘I don’t know my own name just now,’ said the boy. ‘I spent an hour in a cold, muddy swamp, trying to keep the unicorn alive. Then we were rescued by some men on horseback and brought back here. I’m cold right through to my bones, I’ve got bruises all over me and I haven’t eaten yet today.’

The tutor spoke up: ‘Ah! I know!’ He turned to the princess. ‘Maybe the King’s hunting party was chasing the unicorn this morning, and it escaped into the swamps. The boy came upon it stuck in the mud, and then the hunters came along and helped pull the animal out!’

Miss Strictly said, ‘*Or* the boy is lying - as he lied about owning all the brushes in the kingdom!’

The boy said nothing; he just fetched another

steaming bucket from those next to the fence.

‘Could you turn him around?’ he asked the man holding the unicorn. The animal was turned, showing a lot of mud on the other side. The cleaning – and the boy’s quiet chatter to the unicorn – started anew.

The Keeper called again: ‘You – *boy!* This is the Princess Pinetta.’

The boy looked over his shoulder and nodded. ‘Good afternoon, Princess!’ he called cheerfully. Then he said to the scowling Keeper, ‘Look – *I* don’t know, do I? Am I supposed to bow or something?’

‘Yes: *bow!*’ ordered the Keeper.

The boy made a stiff, clumsy bow that made Pinetta laugh and Miss Strictly sneer.

‘Now apologise,’ said the Keeper.

‘I apologise,’ said the boy, ‘for – for –’

‘Everything!’ insisted Pinetta gaily.

‘For *everything*, then. I haven’t actually *done* everything, but I’ll apologise for it anyway.’

‘And now bow again!’ ordered the princess.

He did, very low. The unicorn was watching him and took the chance to swing a firm rear hoof to the boy’s backside, knocking him face-first into the mud, taking the bucket with him.

The unicorn gave a happy snort – almost a laugh – while the others laughed, giggled or guffawed.

The boy looked up from the ground, at first quite annoyed; then he laughed as well. He sat up, collected the bucket and poured what was left of it over his muddy face, which he then wiped on a sleeve that wasn’t much cleaner.

‘Boy!’ commanded the princess. ‘I order you to have a good bath after you’ve cleaned the unicorn!’

The boy gave her an angry look and said, ‘You’re making fun of me now.’

‘You’re *dirty*,’ Pinetta said, rather primly.

‘And smelly,’ murmured the tutor, making the governess laugh.

The boy glared at them. ‘How am I to get a bath? Do they grow on trees around here?’

Miss Strictly said to the princess, ‘That’s just an excuse. With a little planning and a little work, personal cleanliness is easy to attain.’

The boy fetched another steaming bucket and returned to washing the unicorn, singing softly:

‘Them as thinks they are better

Are clean on the outer

But not on the inner

And has one foot stuck in the gutter.’

The governess gasped. She said sharply, ‘Princess! We are going now!’

Princess Pinetta had to be pulled away. ‘He was rude to me!’ she shouted.