A Tale of Two Princesses (Well, really they're queens, but it's all a caucus race in the end anyway)

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Summary

Curious things happen when one polishes a mirror. Just ask the White Queen.

Notes

With very, very many thanks to Gamlain, as ever. Beta par excellence.

Written for Minerva McTabby

Sara Crewe was a most unusual child, who noticed most unusual things. This might have been a consequence of her indubitably strange fortunes—she had, after all, had a very large one of those ('that' being a fortune, as opposed to a frog or a worm) once upon a time, before the diamond mines her father had been speculating in with his schoolday- and current- partner in The Love Which Dare Not Speak Its Name had fallen into disaster, killing her father and driving his partner in all things into the hills with brain fever (not that she knew about the brain fever part, nor indeed about the romanticism at all; in the interests of Victorian discretion, he had always been A Friend Without A Name). As neither of the partners had been acquainted with the concept of a golden parachute (such
a curious thing, really! One would think it would be too heavy to be of any use), the collapse had taken all the Crewe money with it.

Then again, most observers (assuming there are any after that paragraph) would have pointed out, with varying degrees of affection, that Sara Crewe had always been peculiar, rich or not.

At any rate, Sara noticed things, and always had. She noticed young and old, rich and poor, far and near, and all their varied oscillations between two extremes. The poor people of India, for instance, were not quite the same as the poor of London. Both were desperate, to be sure, and plagued with difficulties, but the difficulties and even the plagues were often different.

When her father died and the borders of her existence were rather dramatically changed (you might call it 'shifting a paradigm,' but only if you wanted everyone to mispronounce it), she noticed that Miss Minchin and Miss Amelia shared a bedroom, though they had different parlors, and that when Miss Minchin was particularly unpleasant Miss Amelia would have a fit of the vapours and they would vanish into that bedroom--to reappear half an hour or an hour later, with Miss Amelia in much better colour and Miss Minchin almost smiling.

She noticed, too, that it did not do to note such observations to others, even when she had been rich and forgiven and praised for every little thing she did. A princess is only a pawn, after all, and must follow her prescribed rules regardless, never speaking out of turn or moving more than a step at a time.

In this new life of hers, her prescribed rules were to do anything Miss Minchin or anyone else save Lottie and her lot demanded.

So when Miss Minchin directed her to the very lowest, deepest, dampest corner of the cellar with the command to clean and organize all she found there (And you are not to come out until you are finished!, of course, never mind that such inconsequential things as meals might be passing), she merely nodded and obeyed. The old student trunks that had not yet been sold off were kept down there, and there was at least the hope of another few books.

When she found the tall looking-glass, she polished it bright, scrubbed its stand, put it on the inventory list, and moved on to the next thing in her path. She heard, in passing, that it had been moved up to the little closet the seamstress used for fittings--but what had a scullery maid to do in such a place? She put it out of her mind, and for some time did not think of it again.

Sara did not immediately associate the appearance of the cat with anything in particular. How could she, when she at first did not even lay eyes upon it? It was the cook who saw it first, actually, and she told everyone in the vicinity by way of a shriek. The cat, it was later related, grinned ('Friendly-like,' said a witness. 'Wickedly!' the cook averred; apparently it was the grin she found so alarming) at her and promptly vanished from the mantelpiece, upon which point, it transpired, she made a comical swoon into the arms of 'her policeman.'

Sara was, as said, not present for this; she had been dusting Miss Minchin's parlour at the time.

The second appearance of the cat served to flesh out its details; the cook and witnesses had been unable to provide more than a brief précis of its size (wide) and its grin (even wider) and only a faint guess at the tail (of great length and strength, if the amount of missing and broken spice-jars attributed to its deprivations was to be believed). The head housemaid was of sterner stuff than the cook, and gave a rousing account of its appearance--such as it was--and its doings--which were distinctive.

'It was a-sittin' upon the towels we'd just set out neat for Miss Minchin's bath,' she said with a
delicious grin, 'an' coo if it weren't clawin' 'em clear to ribbons! Must have powerful claws, it do--'

'Must have?' asked the undercook, pouring her more tea. 'You didn't see 'em?'

'How could I?' the housemaid said with a shrug. 'They weren't there ta be seen! It wasn't only but the top half of the beast! Ears like flags and teeth like knives and a great mess of stripes like you saw on that one's tiger--' --this with a jerk of the chin in the direction of Sara, who was quietly washing dishes in the corner--'--an' a tail like the pull-rope for th' church-bell, but nary a leg at all--an' sheddin' the towels, all th' same.' She displayed the towel in question, and indeed it bore the initials 'M. M.'--and several great rents in a curious pattern, which with a bit of imagination might be discerned as a heart. How the maid had managed to escape the wrath of Miss Minchin, Sara never found out, but the abrupt dismissal of the junior laundress likely had something to do with it.

Sara, for her own part, was quietly delighted by the image of a disappearing tiger, as it reminded her of a few stories her Ayah had told her of the thing called the rakshasha; and Becky found herself the eager audience of a tale of a curiously gentle shape-shifting demon and the princess who charmed it by beating it at chess in installations for the next week. (-the story, that is, not the game; the rakshasha would almost certainly have lost its temper at being so often interrupted.)

The cat, which might have been amused at the stories and still more amused by the names with which it had been labeled (Cat, Tiger, and--the cook's favourite--Ravening Hell-Beast), diverted itself once more by an appearance in the school-room during the free hour during which the teachers took their tea--and, for the first time, when Sara was in the room.

She had still not been immediately present; she had been in the process of tidying the table at which the little ones were accustomed to bedaub themselves and their surroundings with ink, and was sufficiently absorbed in her musings to not immediately notice the hub-bub.

From what she could piece together later, however, the Cat had neatly twined itself about little Lottie (thus reinforcing the image of the Tiger, as he was 'quite three times her size') and was gathering much diversion by purring for any child brave enough to pet it--and as Lottie herself was giggling and making her best efforts to do so, several of her fellow children had gathered to exclaim over the thick soft fur and make much of him.

This in itself would not have been a problem, aside from the minor problem of much giggling--until Lavinia sailed over to see what was making the younger girls so rude as to remind others of their existence.

'The nerve!' she began, still some little distance from them, and, I am sorry to say, her voice was far louder than the children had been. 'All of you know that you're to keep still after lessons--where is your little drudge of a tutor?' she demanded, as the children began to retreat before her. 'Sara! Quiet them this moment or I shall fetch Miss Min--'

At that moment, Sara looked up, the last child stepped aside, and the Cat looked straight at the unlucky Miss Herbert.

It was the first time anyone had seen him fully visible, and truly, Sara found herself thinking, all the stories were correct--the Cat really was the size, breadth, and colour of a tiger, for all he was the shape of a perfectly ordinary housecat, if any housecat can be called ordinary.

This one especially could not be called so, for it vanished--letting Lottie drop softly to the floor atop her cushion--and stepped out of the air again in another moment, bending to grin directly into Lavinia's face.
To her credit, Lavinia did not shriek, swoon, or even flee in terror; she merely stood stock-still, white as milk and trembling, eyes locked upon the beast.

That worthy tilted its head a little, considering her for a moment, and lifted one great paw, which it set atop Lavinia's head--and bore down, gently but inexorably, until Lavinia was on her knees--and thus, Sara realized, of a height with Lottie herself.

The cat then removed its paw, looked at her, and nodded to itself, apparently satisfied--for it turned to Sara and winked, nodding in Lavinia's direction as if to share the joke.

Sara smiled shyly; it grinned back--friendly-like, she remembered suddenly--and was neatly and quietly gone.

She might have sat down right where she was and begun to ponder the new inspirations this had wrought for the rakshasha's tale--but, alas, she was interrupted by Jessie's shriek; Lavinia had neatly and quietly folded over.

The next week was greatly eased by the marked silence and reticence of the understandably-shaken Miss Herbert, which was a blessing of sorts, as Miss Minchin had finally got wind of the strange events that had been disrupting the harmony of her school and was being doubly horrible to everyone, even to the point of losing her temper in Lavinia's sickroom, beyond all Miss Amelia's efforts to relieve it--and so the reduction in aggravation and injustice was of the sort which one's maths tutor measures in those funny little upward numbers with the dashes before them, like this: goodnessx10^2651caterwauls cannot carry my favourite number 42, and in the end did nobody any good, I am sorry to confess.

In Sara's crosser moments--which she did have, I might remind you, lest you mistake her for one of those terribly boring little girls who never have the least bit of temper or a thought in their heads that wasn't made out of dandelion fluff--she was sometimes tempted to wonder if she had yet another role besides her eventual destiny as an unpaid teacher without authority: scapegrace. Certainly Miss Minchin seemed to exercise her vitriol upon her whenever Sara had the effrontery to breathe the same air as her erstwhile Headmistress, and now, when the house was discovered to be in an uproar--!

'Cook tells me she has missed things repeatedly,' Miss Minchin was saying; things had come to such a pass that Sara had actually been called into the sacred sanctum of the private sitting-room, which had not happened since all of her life had fallen to ashes around her. 'Food missing, spices ruined, dishes shattered--cat-shaped prints tracking ink all over my papers! My private rooms invaded, clothing shredded, Amelia's best cor--' here she went red, then white, and leapt forward in the conversation. 'What have you to say for yourself?'

Sara, as ever, bore her scolding gravely, without evident emotion, but this--to be falsely accused of things of which she had had no knowledge--was somehow just that step beyond the pale (and what precisely is a pale, one wonders? Some sort of white-painted fence that it's forbidden to go beyond?). She dared to open her mouth. 'Miss Minchin--'

'Make no excuses,' Miss Minchin snapped immediately, 'and tell no falsehoods! You shall have neither dinner nor supper--'

'Not chopping off heads anymore?' a voice asked interestedly, startling them both, not least because it was apparently sourceless--for while it had a source, directly between them, the only thing visible was the very desk which had been apparently so besmirched earlier in the day.

Miss Minchin went very white, and then faintly red. 'Who is that speaking?' she demanded--which
was odd, considered Sara, as there was an odd certainty in her face. 'Show yourself!'

'If you like,' the voice purred--it was very good at purring, being so deep and resonant already--and out of nowhere, once again, came the Cat, leaping out of the air to land upon the desk with a resonant thud. He was quite the size and mass of the desk this time, and Sara found herself amazed that the desk held his weight. 'Have you learnt to disappear lately?' he enquired lightly of the Headmistress. 'You're not even half the size you were last time I saw you.'

The red began to spread so quickly that it was almost as if Miss Minchin's face was on fire. 'You!' she hissed. 'How did you get here? Who let you in--you!' she shrieked at Sara. 'It was you, wasn't it!' The Cat was suddenly between Sara and the enraged woman, and all Sara could see was a great mass of black and orange fur. 'Do be quiet,' it said. 'I came because I wished to, even if the stories did catch my attention in the first place.'

'Stories!' Miss Minchin said in a voice somewhere between revelation and horror. 'She can't be--not again--!' 'Yes, yes, it's all very horrible for you,' the Cat said, bored. 'You'd think you'd have remembered what happened the last time you tangled with one of the Imaginers--isn't that what you ran off with the governess for?'

Miss Minchin let out a curious noise somewhere between a gurgle and a shriek; the Cat only chuckled. 'You might as well carry on,' it said dismissively, and the fur over its upper shoulders rippled in something very like a shrug. 'She's good for you, in the way humans count these things. Those choleric fits were very tiresome, especially the endless beheadings. You might wish to be a bit quieter, though; these things make ripples, especially with how you've been poking at that one, and I think that King fellow is still looking for you--'

This brought on the most dramatic reaction of all; the squeaking of the chair, rattling of the floor, and the smashing of glass and wood was punctuated with strangled, gasping shrieks, unintelligible words and possibly an oath or two, which Sara could not quite credit even though she heard it with her own ears; whatever was going on, though, it built and built until, with a final thin screech like a kettle which is nearly ready to burn out its bottom, all noise ceased.

The Cat chuckled and turned to Sara, somehow shrinking into a more usual size for a cat even as it moved, until it finally sat with its tail curled neatly round its paws, no bigger than the kitten Gertrude was hiding in her trunk. 'Well, that's settled,' it said with an air of satisfaction. Sara looked over its head and found that Miss Minchin had somehow wrecked the rear half of her sitting room, drapes, portraits, knick-knacks, rug and all, and was now lying half-stunned in her chair, hair falling out of its chignon and her dress in tatters. (Why do women faint so much, I wonder. It doesn't seem as if it has any use, does it? While you're lying there uselessly the trouble only has more time to do whatever it pleases, and how does that do any good? And yet here is another faint, the third one in this story!)

'Miss Minchin--!' she gasped, beginning to rush forward, but the cat held out one paw. 'Let her be,' it grinned. 'She's not had a good fit like that in years. Her mate will see to her soon enough.'

'Her mate?' Sara asked in some confusion. 'But Miss Minchin isn't married--'
'Oh, yes she is,' the cat chuckled. 'But I don't mean him, anyway. It's that person she runs your kitten-box with I'm talking about.'

Sara considered this for a moment. '....it's like Lavinia and Jessie,' she decided at last, and the cat grinned at her.

'Just so. Now, shall we get on?'

'--What do you mean?' Sara asked curiously.

'With the journey--oh, yes, you don't know.' The cat didn't seem to mind Sara's bewilderment in the least. 'I, my dear, am the Cheshire Cat. You are, of course, honoured to make my acquaintance.'

Sara giggled and made him a courtesy. He was a cat, after all, and such superiority was only to be expected. 'I am, indeed, dear Puss. But why are you here?'

'Your fancies were interesting,' it said airily. 'They were very interesting stories, especially about me, and I'm in rather a mood to make someone happy. So, come along, won't you? It's as well you've already cleared the way.'

'Come where?' Sara asked curiously.

'You'll see,' it said, leaping into her arms and making itself comfortable. 'Go to that place the chattering woman uses for fur-fittings.'

After a bit of thought, Sara puzzled this out as the seamstress' work-room, and proceeded there, to find the looking-glass she had polished looking very bright indeed. A sudden revelation came to her.

'Was this what brought you, puss?' she asked the cat, who grinned that everlasting grin.

'O no,' he purred, 'I have my own ways--but you did make it a bit easier to see. Go on, now; it makes an excellent door.'

'A door?' Sara repeated wonderingly, but even as she looked the brightly-polished glass was melting into a soft, gauze-like mist, far clearer and more lovely than any of the low dark fogs she'd fought her way though on countless frozen evenings. '--the veil, of course!' she smiled to herself, and stepped forward. 'It's just like the one the Princess stepped through to her Mer-Prince's caves,' she murmured, touching what had been solid glass. Her hand went through instantly, and she could not stop it any more than you can stop yourself falling if you have mistaken where the foot-stool is as you sat down; in both cases there is nothing more to hold you up but air.

She glanced over her shoulder, at the dark, empty, comfortless room she had spent endless hours scribbling notes and puncturing her fingers in, and beyond it the halls with the carpets that must be constantly beaten, the floors she was endlessly scrubbing, the schoolroom of thoughtless children, the kitchen full of vulgar, spiteful people who hated her for existing.

She looked down at the cat, who purred.

Sara stepped through, and found herself jumping over a little brook.

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'That's four ranks you've moved up,' said the Cat, apropos of nothing. 'They're all very fond of chess here, you know--can you play?'

'Oh yes,' said Sara immediately. 'I often played with--my papa.' She swallowed her tears, or tried to; the more effort she made to stop crying, the faster the tears came, until at last she gave herself up to tears--whereupon they promptly stopped.

A very rough tongue washed her cheek. 'Looking-glass, remember,' the Cat said, and leaped down from her arms; he was the size of a cart-horse when he landed, though much handsomer.

'They're really rather mad about it,' he said suddenly, lying down, and suddenly Sara remembered what they had been talking about. 'Very much about rules here, they are. But a cat can do anything, you know--well, what are you waiting for? Get on.'

Sara blinked at him; he flipped his tail impatiently. 'On,' he repeated. 'I haven't the patience to shepherd you through the whole mess; it's much more fun to pounce about between the pieces. Up you get.'

'I--yes, of course,' Sara said softly, and mounted as gracefully as she could, which somehow confused itself into an awkward landing in which she found herself straddling the Cat's back and facing his tail. A bit more effort at last brought her to a more decorous seat, facing forward and with her skirt wrapped about her as best as she could manage--though she clung very tightly to the Cat's fur, all the same.

'Off we go,' said the Cat abruptly, and made a great bound.

Up, up, up they sailed, through a roof (which was somehow not in the least solid) which turned out to belong to a railway-station, over a great forest which seemed to echo with a great crash and clatter ('they're fighting again, of course,' said the Cat idly, strolling through the body of an enormous Crow, which had got entangled in a shawl that Sara retrieved for it and wrapped around herself; it was a bit cold, so high up), over a shop which seemed suddenly to turn into a pond and then into yet another forest which was bound by a high wall.

Here they alighted for just a moment. There was a great row going on at the gate, as a confused band of cavalry stomped about and shouted and seemed to have no idea what was going on. Their confusion was not greatly aided by the enormous Cat which had landed on one of the poor horses, quite knocking it over.

'The Egg's broken again,' the Cat remarked, gathering itself again and leaping just before someone's flung helmet could catch its tail. The cavalry seemed to have gained reinforcements, or perhaps it was reinforcements; the forest beyond the wall was the host of a pitched battle with many spectators, of which the focus seemed to be a red figure and a white tumbling together.

'The Lion and the Unicorn,' the Cat told her. 'It'd be more interesting if the Dragon got into it, don't you think?'

Sara's answer was drowned out by the enormous pounding of drums, which so startled her that she nearly fell off and was saved only by a quick twist of the Cat's body and a careful shove with his tail.

'You're a little impatient,' said the Cat. 'I was on my way down anyway--' and they landed a moment later, beside yet another little brook on the edge of yet another forest. 'This is as far as I go,' it said after another moment, lying down.

Sara glanced down at the ground, which still seemed very far away even from this position, and
winced, but after a moment the Cat began to shrink away from under her, until at last she was standing on her own two feet with the Cat winding its way between her legs.

'I know you're miserable at parting from me,' he said, and indeed Sara was, 'but there'll be another guide along soon enough. Just hop that. I'll see you later.'

And once again he was gone.

Sara stood for a long moment, watching the empty space in the air.

'And so I really am in a story,' she said to herself. 'It would be a great shame to leave it undone,' Herself replied (and for just a moment Sara saw the Princess Sara before her). 'That it would,' she agreed, and stepped across.

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'Well, hello, dear!' said a kind, motherly voice.

Sara looked around her and found herself standing on a great green lawn, thickly carpeted with grass and with fountains scattered about (rather carelessly, really; you'd think they'd be more deliberate in a castle, wouldn't you?). A woman in white was standing before her, smiling; she had a golden crown on her head.

Sara dipped a courtesy and was greatly startled by an awareness of a heavy weight upon her head.

'You've got one too, love,' the queen said cheerfully. 'We'll consider the examinations written; you've done quite a lot already, haven't you? Come along, now.'

'What is your name, if it please your majesty?' Sara asked curiously, following.

'Oh, I'm the White Queen,' she said cheerfully, putting an arm about Sara's shoulders. 'Come along now, dear, and don't be shy--we're all queens here, and we've all been watching you since the Cat came along. I hope you'll tell us some of those lovely stories.'

'Of course, if you'd like,' said Sara softly.

'Capital!' said the Queen, ignoring a rather confused frog who was trying to blow the wrong end of a trumpet, and sailing too through the great and confused chorus; the only thing Sara could make out was Welcome Queen Sara with thirty-times-three, which did at least sound friendly.

The Queen smiled mildly at her and led her to a great table in a great hall, which was set, rather incongruously, with a sumptuous afternoon tea--delicious, to be certain, but not the sort of thing with which one expects to be welcomed into a castle. To Sara, who had not eaten since Thursday, it was quite a lovely sight--as was the cheerful little girl her own age sitting at the head of the table; she too wore a crown, and beamed at her without thought for the rags Sara still wore.

'Sara!' she called, leaping up. 'I've waited so long to meet you! Do come, sit sit--how much tea would you like? Sugar? Cream? Kitten?'

Sara came up and was promptly kissed by the other girl, who gently ushered her into a chair at her right side and presented her variously with a cup of tea, two lumps of sugar, a dash of cream, and a
small black kitten which purred thunderously when petted.

'Is he any relation to the Cheshire-Puss?' Sara asked curiously in a quiet moment between cucumber sandwiches.

'Actually, he's the Red King,' her new friend laughed. 'Don't mind him; he's much happier as a kitten--oh! Oh dear, you've been sitting here so patiently and I never introduced myself!'

Sara laughed softly. 'You've been busy looking after me,' she pointed out.

'Yes, but we've all been practicing hard at doing six impossible things before tea-time--you'd think I could remember to do one thing at it, wouldn't you?'

Sara's sister-queen took both Sara's hands in hers and smiled at her, bright and warm. 'I'm Alice,' she said softly. 'It's wonderful to meet you.'

Something in Sara's heart curled up contently and began to purr. Her returned smile was deep and secret. 'As it is to meet you,' she murmured.

Somewhere far away and yet very close, a Cat purred smugly and helped himself to the clotted cream.

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