

The Pirates of Penzance

RUTH *rises and comes forward.*

RUTH. Nay, dear master, my mind has long been gnawed by the cankering tooth of mystery. Better have it out at once.

SONG – RUTH.

RUTH. When Frederic was a little lad he proved so brave and daring,
His father thought he'd 'prentice him to some career seafaring.
I was, alas! his nurserymaid, and so it fell to *my* lot
To take and bind the promising boy apprentice to a *pilot* –
A life not bad for a hardy lad, though surely not a high lot,
Though I'm a nurse, you might do worse than make your boy a pilot.

I was a stupid nurserymaid, on breakers always steering,
And I did not catch the word aright, through being hard of hearing;
Mistaking my instructions, which within my brain did gyrate,
I took and bound this promising boy apprentice to a *pirate*.
A sad mistake it was to make and doom him to a vile lot.
I bound him to a pirate – you – instead of to a pilot.

I soon found out, beyond all doubt, the scope of this disaster,
But I hadn't the face to return to my place, and break it to my master.
A nurserymaid is not afraid of what you people *call* work,
So I made up my mind to go as a kind of piratical maid-of-all-work.
And that is how you find me now, a member of your shy lot,
Which you wouldn't have found, had he been bound apprentice to a pilot.

RUTH. Oh, pardon! Frederic, pardon! (*kneels*)

FRED. Rise, sweet one, I have long pardoned you.

RUTH. (*rises*) The two words were so much alike!

FRED. They were. They still are, though years have rolled over their heads. But this afternoon my obligation ceases. Individually, I love you all with affection unspeakable; but, collectively, I look upon you with a disgust that amounts to absolute detestation. Oh! pity me, my beloved friends, for such is my sense of duty that, once out of my indentures, I shall feel myself bound to devote myself heart and soul to your extermination!

ALL. Poor lad – poor lad! (*All weep.*)

KING. Well, Frederic, if you conscientiously feel that it is your duty to destroy us, we cannot blame you for acting on that conviction. Always act in accordance with the dictates of your conscience, my boy, and chance the consequences.

SAM. Besides, we can offer you but little temptation to remain with us. We don't seem to make piracy pay. I'm sure I don't know why, but we don't.

FRED. I know why, but, alas! I mustn't tell you; it wouldn't be right.

KING. Why not, my boy? It's only half-past eleven, and you are one of us until the clock strikes twelve.

SAM. True, and until then you are bound to protect our interests.

ALL. Hear, hear!

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FRED. Well, then, it is my duty, as a pirate, to tell you that you are too tender-hearted. For instance, you make a point of never attacking a weaker party than yourselves, and when you attack a stronger party you invariably get thrashed.

KING. There is some truth in that.

FRED. Then, again, you make a point of never molesting an orphan!

SAM. Of course: we are orphans ourselves, and know what it is.

FRED. Yes, but it has got about, and what is the consequence? Every one we capture says he's an orphan. The last three ships we took proved to be manned entirely by orphans, and so we had to let them go. One would think that Great Britain's mercantile navy was recruited solely from her orphan asylums – which we know is not the case.

SAM. But, hang it all! you wouldn't have us absolutely merciless?

FRED. There's my difficulty; until twelve o'clock I would, after twelve I wouldn't. Was ever a man placed in so delicate a situation?

RUTH. And Ruth, your own Ruth, whom you love so well, and who has won her middle-aged way into your boyish heart, what is to become of *her*?

KING. Oh, he will take you with him. (*Hands RUTH to FREDERIC.*)

FRED. Well, Ruth, I feel some difficulty about you. It is true that I admire you very much, but I have been constantly at sea since I was eight years old, and yours is the only woman's face I have seen during that time. I think it is a sweet face.

RUTH. It is – oh, it is!

FRED. I say I *think* it is; that is my impression. But as I have never had an opportunity of comparing you with other women, it is just possible I may be mistaken.

KING. True.

FRED. What a terrible thing it would be if I were to marry this innocent person, and then find out that she is, on the whole, plain!

KING. Oh, Ruth is very well, very well indeed.

SAM. Yes, there are the remains of a fine woman about Ruth.

FRED. Do you really think so?

SAM. I do.

FRED. Then I will not be so selfish as to take her from you. In justice to her, and in consideration for you, I will leave her behind. (*Hands RUTH to KING.*)

KING. No, Frederic, this must not be. We are rough men, who lead a rough life, but we are not so utterly heartless as to deprive thee of thy love. I think I am right in saying that there is not one here who would rob thee of this inestimable treasure for all the world holds dear.

ALL. (*loudly*) Not one!

KING. No, I thought there wasn't. Keep thy love, Frederic, keep thy love. (*Hands her back to FREDERIC.*)

FRED. You're very good, I'm sure. (*Exit RUTH.*)

KING. Well, it's the top of the tide, and we must be off. Farewell, Frederic. When your process of extermination begins, let our deaths be as swift and painless as you can conveniently make them.

FRED. I will! By the love I have for you, I swear it! Would that you could render this extermination unnecessary by accompanying me back to civilization!

KING. No, Frederic, it cannot be. I don't think much of our profession, but, contrasted with respectability, it is comparatively honest. No, Frederic, I shall live and die a Pirate King.

SONG – PIRATE KING.

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That though you've lived twenty-one years, yet, if we go by birthdays, you're only five and a little bit over!

RUTH. and KING. Ha! ha! ha! ha!

Ho! ho! ho! ho!

FRED. Dear me!

Let's see! (*counting on fingers*)

Yes, yes; with yours my figures do agree!

ALL. Ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho! ho!

FRED. (*more amused than any*) How quaint the ways of Paradox!

At common sense she gaily mocks!

Though counting in the usual way,

Years twenty-one I've been alive,

Yet, reckoning by my natal day,

I am a little boy of five!

RUTH and KING. He is a little boy of five! Ha! ha! ha!

ALL. A paradox, a paradox,

A most ingenious paradox!

Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!, etc.

RUTH and KING throw themselves back on seats, exhausted with laughter.

FRED. Upon my word, this is most curious – most absurdly whimsical. Five-and-a-quarter! No one would think it to look at me!

RUTH. You are glad now, I'll be bound, that you spared us. You would never have forgiven yourself when you discovered that you had killed *two of your comrades*.

FRED. My comrades?

KING. (*rises*) I'm afraid you don't appreciate the delicacy of your position: You were apprenticed to us –

FRED. Until I reached my twenty-first year.

KING. No, until you reached your twenty-first *birthday* (*producing document*), and, going by birthdays, you are as yet only five-and-a-quarter.

FRED. You don't mean to say you are going to hold me to that?

KING. No, we merely remind you of the fact, and leave the rest to your sense of duty.

RUTH. Your sense of duty!

FRED. (*wildly*) Don't put it on that footing! As I was merciful to you just now, be merciful to me! I implore you not to insist on the letter of your bond just as the cup of happiness is at my lips!

RUTH. We insist on nothing; we content ourselves with pointing out to you *your duty*.

KING. Your duty!

FRED. (*after a pause*) Well, you have appealed to my sense of duty, and my duty is only too clear. I abhor your infamous calling; I shudder at the thought that I have ever been mixed up with it; but duty is before all – at any price I will do my duty.

KING. Bravely spoken! Come, you are one of us once more.

FRED. Lead on, I follow. (*suddenly*) Oh, horror!

RUTH and KING. What is the matter?

FRED. Ought I to tell you? No, no, I cannot do it; and yet, as one of your band –

KING. Speak out, I charge you by that sense of conscientiousness to which we have never yet appealed in vain.

FRED. General Stanley, the father of my Mabel –

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RUTH and KING. Yes, yes!

FRED. He escaped from you on the plea that he was an orphan?

KING. He did.

FRED. It breaks my heart to betray the honoured father of the girl I adore, but as your apprentice I have no alternative. It is my duty to tell you that General Stanley is no orphan!

RUTH and KING. What!

FRED. More than that, he never was one!

KING. Am I to understand that, to save his contemptible life, he dared to practise on our credulous simplicity? (*FREDERIC nods as he weeps.*) Our revenge shall be swift and terrible. We will go and collect our band and attack Tremorden Castle this very night.

FRED. But stay –

KING. Not a word! He is doomed!

TRIO.

KING and RUTH.

FREDERIC.

Away, away! my heart's on fire;
I burn, this base deception to repay.
This very night my vengeance dire
Shall glut itself in gore. Away, away!

Away, away! ere I expire –
I find my duty hard to do today!
My heart is filled with anguish dire,
It strikes me to the core. Away, away!

KING. With falsehood foul
He tricked us of our brides.
Let vengeance howl;
The Pirate so decides.
Our nature stern
He softened with his lies,
And, in return,
Tonight the traitor dies.

ALL. Yes, yes! tonight the traitor dies!

RUTH. Tonight he dies!
KING. Yes, or early tomorrow.
FRED. His girls likewise?
RUTH. They will welter in sorrow.
KING. The one soft spot –
RUTH. In their natures they cherish –
FRED. And all who plot –
KING. To abuse it shall perish!
ALL. Tonight he dies, etc.

Exeunt KING and RUTH. Enter MABEL.

RECITATIVE. – MABEL.

All is prepared, your gallant crew await you.
My Frederic in tears? It cannot be