

ACT ONE

On rocky seashore on the coast of Cornwall the pirates of Penzance are holding a sherry party to celebrate the apprentice Frederick's promotion to the status of full-blown pirate on the expiry of his indentures. For today is the 29th of February, 1897, and it is his twenty-first birthday. His health is duly drunk, and in a speech of thanks Frederick startles the pirates by telling them of his intention to leave them for good. It seems that he was apprenticed to them in error. Ruth, the pirates' maid-of-all-work, takes up the tale. She tells how, when she was formerly Frederick's nursery-maid, his parents instructed her to have the boy apprenticed to a pilot. Being hard of hearing she misheard, and in error Frederick was apprenticed to a pirate.

Frederick, the Slave of Duty of the sub-title, now informs the pirates that he will in future feel himself bound to their extermination from conscientious motives. But before leaving he gives them some practical advice on how to improve their business methods. For one thing, they are too tender-hearted. They make a point of never attacking a weaker party than themselves, and consequently they invariably get thrashed; and then again they make a point of never molesting an orphan. "Of course," says one pirate, "we are orphans ourselves and know what it is." "Yes," Frederick tells them, "but it has got about, and the consequence is that everyone who is captured claims to be an orphan." Frederick now bids the pirates good-bye, making a last appeal to the Pirate King to turn respectable and accompany him back to civilization. But the Pirate King refuses. "No, Frederick," he declares, "I shall live and die a Pirate King." The pirates then withdraw and Frederick is left alone with Ruth.

Now Ruth is determined to marry Frederick and does not scruple to take advantage of his youth and inexperience, for Frederick has spent most of his life at sea and Ruth's is the only woman's face with which he is familiar. "Compared with other women are you beautiful?" he asks her, and Ruth has just assured him that she is, when there is a burst of girlish chatter. A bevy of beautiful girls is approaching, and Frederick, smitten with their loveliness, turns on Ruth with "Oh, false one, you have deceived me."

"You told me you were fair as gold

And now I see you're plain and old."

He spurns her and Ruth goes off in despair, while Frederick hides in a cave as on come all General Stanley's daughters, climbing over the rocks. Seeing that they are quite alone and that the sea is as smooth as glass, the hardy maidens decide to take off their shoes and stockings and go wading in the water. They have all taken off one shoe when Frederick emerges from the cave and they exclaim in horror, "A man!" Frederic confesses that he is a pirate about to reform and appeals to any one of them to

"Give up willingly

All matrimonial ambition

To rescue such a one as I

From his unfortunate position."

But no girl volunteers and Frederick cries in despair, "Not one?" In answer a female voice cries: "Yes, one; yes, 'tis Mabel," and Mabel enters and offers Frederick her heart. After this Frederick warns the girls to depart before the pirates return. But before they can make their escape they are seized by the delighted pirates, who see in the presence of these lovelies a splendid opportunity of getting married. Mabel, however, defies them, warning the pirates that their father is a Major General--and over the rocks comes General Stanley himself in search of his daughters, to sing his entrance song:

"I am the very model of a modern Major General,

I've information vegetable, animal and mineral."

When he becomes aware of what's afoot, General Stanley will not hear of his daughters marrying buccaneers. "I object to pirates as sons-in-law," he declares, and the pirates reply that they, for their part, are not keen on Major Generals as fathers-in-law. In this dilemma the General has a bright idea. "Do you mean to say," he demands, "that you would deliberately rob me of these, the sole remaining props of my old age, and leave me to go through the remainder of my life unfriended, unprotected and alone?" "Well, yes," says the Pirate King. "That's the idea." "Tell me," asks the General innocently, "have you ever known what it is to be an orphan?" The pirates exclaim disgustedly: "Oh, dash it all. Here we are again." True to their creed, the pirates permit General Stanley to depart with his daughters, and Frederick accompanies them.

ACT TWO

As Act II begins, the scene is a ruined Gothic chapel. It is night, and the curtain rises to disclose General Stanley seated pensively, surrounded by his daughters. They are vainly attempting to cheer him, but the General refuses to be comforted. He is the victim of remorse, for the story he told the pirates, that he was an orphan--the story which secured the release of himself and his daughters--was a bare-faced lie and he is haunted by the memory of his prevarication. Presently Frederick appears. Pursuing his plan to exterminate the pirates, he has enlisted the aid of the police. The General desires to speed them on their way, and on march the policemen, led by a sergeant, to receive his blessing. Mabel and her sisters cheer them on their dangerous mission with a song:

"Go, ye heroes, go to glory,

Though ye die in combat gory,

Ye shall live in song and story,

Go to immortality!"

But the police, who are already in a highly nervous state, hardly relish such sentiments, though they are polite about it:

"Tho' to us it's evident

These attentions are well meant

Such expressions don't appear

Calculated men to cheer

Who are going to meet their fate

In a highly nervous state."

The policemen keep repeating: "Forward on the foe we go, we go, we go, we go," till the Major General, exasperated, rounds on them with: "But you DON'T go."

Eventually all depart, leaving Frederick alone in the chapel. He is about to leave when the Pirate King and Ruth enter, armed, and they greet Frederick affectionately at pistol point. They have come to tell him that he has been freed from his indentures in error and that he is still legally and morally indentured to the pirates. True, Frederic has lived twenty-one years, but the wording of his indentures reads "that his apprenticeship shall expire on his twenty-first birthday." And counting by birthdays, since Frederick was born in leap year, he is only five and a little bit over. Frederick at first does not appreciate the full significance of all this and roars with laughter at their ridiculous paradox. When, however, he realizes the situation he is shattered, but his sense of duty forces him to accept it. It also forces him to disclose to the Pirate King that General Stanley--the father of his Mabel--is no orphan and escaped from them by telling a lie. The pirate's anger at this news is terrible, and he hurries away to muster his band and punish the General.

Frederick now breaks the news to Mabel that he must return to serve the pirates. His apprenticeship will expire in 1940 and he begs her to wait for him till then. "It seems so long," she sighs and begs him not to leave her. But Frederick insists on acting in accordance with the dictates of his conscience and leaves her. The police now return, having failed to find the pirates, and Mabel breaks the news of Frederick's change of face. All are scandalized at his defection, but Mabel claims that he has done his duty. "Go ye," she tells the police, "and do yours." And the Sergeant replies by singing his famous song: "A policeman's lot is NOT a happy one." Now in the distance the voices of the pirates are heard approaching, thirsting for General Stanley's blood. The police conceal themselves, and as they do so the pirates, with Ruth and Frederic, enter cautiously. Frederick whispers that the General is approaching, and in he comes in his dressing gown, shortly followed by his daughters. The pirates spring up and seize the General, and Mabel cries distractedly: "Frederick, save us!" But poor Frederick can only answer:

"Beautiful Mabel,

I would if I could but I am not able."

Desperately she calls:

"Will no one in his cause a weapon wield?"

And the police, springing up, reply:

"Yes, we are here, though hitherto concealed."

A desperate fight follows. The police are overcome, and the pirates stand over them with drawn swords. But their triumph is short-lived, for the Sergeant, stepping forward, addresses the pirates:

"On your allegiance we've a nobler claim

We charge you yield in Queen Victoria's name."

Without a moment's hesitation the pirates give themselves up, and General Stanley is urging the Sergeant:

"Away with them and place them at the bar."

when Ruth intervenes with

"One moment, let me tell you who they are.

They are no members of the common throng;

They are all noblemen, who have gone wrong."

With traditional reverence all kneel to the pirates, and General Stanley voices their thoughts:

"No Englishmen unmoved that statement hears

Because, with all our faults, we love our house of peers."

And his final bidding to them is to

"Resume your rank and legislative duties

And take my daughters, all of whom are beauties."