

## The Princess And The Pani Folk

“I know you didn’t really want to come today, but it’s for your little sister and it’s free. It’ll take your mind off things. There’s a storyteller,” the little girl’s mum said as they headed to the local boat museum’s open day. Cody doubted that this visit to a lame museum would take her mind off her problem. She was starting a new secondary school in less than two weeks’ time – a new school where she wouldn’t know anyone. At least there was a storyteller: they had better be good!

By the time they got into the museum, the storytelling was finished. Cody went to see what time the next session was. As she got close enough to read the times, she noticed the artwork on the nearest boat; a painting of a castle, and a lake, in particular, caught her eye.

“You like the artwork eh?” said the storyteller.

“The castle...it’s beautiful,” said Cody.

“Yes, it is but, it’s not just pretty. All the art work on this boat means something if you know how to listen to it,” the storyteller replied.

Cody must have looked as confused as she felt because the storyteller smiled and said, “Not everyone knows what it means. You have to have had family on the canals or worked alongside it for a good while. Even then, you might not know what some things mean. For example, the castle. Any idea why that is on here? I’ll tell you if you have time.”

Cody looked across at her mum and sister who were happily cutting out boat shapes in paper and sticking them onto a display. “Okay,” she said.

The storyteller began his tale. Cody settled back and listened to his voice.

‘Sonaki’s family were known as the animal healers, junk fishers, precious divers and River Gypsies – or “Pani Folki” as they called themselves in their own language. They travelled the rivers large and small, and along the edge of the sea coast. They called into towns and villages along the way.

They fished junk out of the rivers and recycled and sold it. They would dive and retrieve jewellery that

bathers had lost. They would be called upon to tame dangerous animals and remove them from villages. They were referred to as “River Gypsies” because they lived on boats and travelled around for most of the year. Because of the things they were able to do with animals, some people believed they had magical powers too.

Sonaki was a good diver, and a good junk fisher and an amazing animal tamer. She often removed unwanted, wild or troublesome animals from towns, villages and houses. She would put them in a bag and carry or lead them into the forest, or back into the sea, where they could carry on with their life in safety. The people could then carry on with theirs. She would often attract large crowds who watched her as she talked to a wild animal, or even a swarm of bees, and encouraged them to slither or fly into a net or a large bag or allow themselves to be led away. It’s no wonder that some people thought the Pani Folki had magic.

Despite the whole family working hard, they never earned much money. Things always seemed to be getting more expensive – rice, bread, and even timber to fix the boats. People in the villages were having the same problem, it was getting harder for everyone.

“Why is there less food?” asked one of Sonaki’s brothers one evening. Mother explained that a powerful prince who was in charge of most of the area where they travelled was being harsh on the people, asking them to give him more of their crops and animals.

“The people will soon have nothing left,” added grandmother.

“We’ll just have to work harder and travel even more,” the mother said with a smile as she carried on making more of her potions to sell.

Grandfather told the children a bed-time story as the boat gently rocked on the water.

As they sailed down the river to the next village, they were all prepared to work hard, but there wasn’t much work to do. Grandmother sold a few jars of her special medicine cream for bites and stings, made from honey and river plants. Grandad sold a couple of the hand-carved wooden tools he’d made. Sonaki helped catch a couple of animals for free and they moved on.

At the next village, the people had no money at all: they all told the same story. “It’s the prince. It’s the prince!”

Having put another patch on the boat, the River Gypsies were starting to get worried that their boat might sink before they had enough money to pay the boat repairers to fix it properly.

When they got to the next village, a similar thing happened. No one had any money to buy Grandma’s healing cream so she gave it away free. Sonaki helped with a few animals and the people paid her with some fruit and rice. Sonaki asked them about the prince. “He’s got bigger problems than us,” said one of

the men. The others immediately shushed him.

“You’re not supposed to say anything!” said the leader of the village.

Realising it was too late to keep the secret, the man told them about the prince’s problem. He was battling daily with a very large pani engro, a fish beast that had come out of the sea and taken up residence in the lake next to the prince’s castle. The pani engro kept demanding more food from the prince and he was trying his hardest to keep up with its demands. Whatever he gave it never seemed enough.

“We must go to and tell the prince that Sonaki can solve his problem by taming the beast,” said Sonaki’s father. The villagers knew of Sonaki’s gift, but they also knew the prince.

“He would not deal with lowly River Gypsies like you,” they said. Whilst Sonaki and her family knew it was true, it was still hurtful to hear.

However, Sonaki was not the kind of girl to let things stop her from doing what she thought was right. She soon came up with a plan which she shared with her family. “Let’s go to the prince and offer to help.”

“The villagers said he would not take help from a River Gypsy!” said uncle quite annoyed.

“Yes, but I have a plan. I need your best clothes and shoes, mother and grandmother,” said Sonaki.

To put Sonaki’s plan into action, they slowly sailed their boat towards the prince’s castle, hoping that the patch would hold up. With the boat moored, the family of Pani Folki watched Sonaki in her fine clothes walk through the forest and up to the edge of lake.

The prince soon arrived on a fine kalo gry (black horse).

Getting off his horse and bowing, the prince said, “Princess, why do you stay out here by yourself? It is not safe. Have you not heard of the fearful beast of the lake?”

“I have no fear of animals,” said Sonaki. “I would like to speak with the animal that fills you with fear.”

“A fine lady like yourself should not be engaging with such a ferocious beast. I need to protect you,” the prince replied.

Just then, there was a loud gurgling and splashing noise as the pani engro’s gigantic head broke through the water, rising higher and baring its huge teeth as it towered over the Prince and fixed its gaze on him. He stepped back and drew his sword.

Sonaki stepped towards the beast, moving her hands in a kind of dance as she softly introduced herself. The prince and people from the castle looked on in amazement as the beast slowly became calm and lowered itself down to the ground. It lay half in and half out of the lake.

The girl and the animal were now so close that she was able to hold out her hand and gently stroke under its gigantic chin. It opened its huge mouth, and the people watching were convinced it was going to swallow her alive. Sonaki knew better.

She understood at that moment that the animal was trying to tell her something. Using its bottom teeth as a step, she was soon sat on the top of its head, close to its ears. The beast started to move towards the prince and he immediately summoned his army from the castle. They started to fire their arrows and load their cannons. The beast quickly turned and plunged into the lake with arrows flying all around it. Although they knew she was a fabulously strong swimmer, the River Gypsies were still worried about Sonaki as she disappeared under the water with the beast.

The Prince now had his army assembled at the edge of the lake waiting for the beast to come back out of the water. Word had spread quickly and a huge crowd had gathered.

A deep splashing noise was heard followed by a huge ripple in the middle of the lake. First, the beast's tail poked up through the water then splashed down again, creating a larger ripple that turned into a wave as it headed towards the shore. As the pani engro's head rose up, the huge wave moved out towards the prince's men. They dropped their weapons and ran away in fear. The crowd moved up to higher ground near the castle. The beast moved slowly out of the lake and rested on the sandy edge. As it lowered its head, Sonaki stepped out from one of its ears and jumped down onto the sand.

The prince was waving his sword and shouting for his soldiers to come back. Sonaki stood in front of the prince and chanted the words, "Jall pani chovano, jall!" (Go water-witch, go!).

The crowd saw a huge puff of smoke. The prince dropped his sword and the sea beast was replaced by a tall, strong, warrior-woman.

As Sonaki stood beside her, the warrior woman spoke to the prince and the crowd. "I am your true leader, princess and keeper of the castle. This prince, my brother, had me bewitched by a sorceress so he could take my place. This girl, Sonaki, has freed me, and she will be given any reward she desires."

There was a huge celebration that night at the castle with Sonaki and her family as guests of honour. Whilst Sonaki could have had any reward she asked for, she simply asked for enough money to repair their boat properly so they could continue to travel.

The prince disappeared into the forest never to be seen again. The real princess was a good and caring leader who ruled fairly and wisely and never forgot it was a River Gypsy who saved her. To this day, we still see castles painted on boats around the world.'

**A story by Richard O'Neill**

## SUMMARY FOCUS

1. Why did Cody's mum want Cody to attend?
2. Why couldn't Cody listen to the storytelling session?
3. What were Cody's mother and sister doing whilst she listened to the story?
4. What would Sonaki do once she had caught unwanted animals?
5. Why did Sonaki need her mother and grandmother's clothes?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**I**

What problem did Cody need to take her mind off?

**R**

What else were River Gypsies known as?

**V**

Find a word that tells you the boat was tied to the shore.

**I**

Where did Sonaki hide when the fish swam underwater?

**I**

Why do River Gypsies paint castles on their boats to this day?