

THE FIRE BIRD

A RUSSIAN FAIRY TALE

It was a great day when the Prince was born. The King was delighted, and the Queen nearly went mad with joy. The people clapped their hands and sang and danced in the squares and streets. The whole city could not sleep for joy. The young Prince was the first-born, and would one day sit upon the throne. On with the dance! Another song! Drink deep to the young Prince!

The doctors smiled, and stroked the smile down to the tips of their grey beards as they nodded to one another amiably. The child was strong and healthy, and had his father's nose. But, alas, doctors are not always right. A wise man from Persia, who was staying in the city at the time, hurried to see the King. While in a deep sleep he had a dream of the future, and he knew that he must tell the King the bad news immediately.

When he came before the King, he had scarcely the heart to tell him what would befall his first-born; but the King insisted that he speak out, and he obeyed.

“Sire,” he said humbly, “I want to warn you about my dream, just in case it should come true.”

The King looked a little anxious, for he had heard tales about this wise man from Persia and his wonderful powers.

“Speak on, Ferdisan,” he said.

“Sire,” replied the wise man, “this dream that came to me was a deep-sleep vision. It is a warning entrusted to me. This, King, is what I dreamed. Fifteen years came and went before my inner eyes, and the son that has been born to you grew more beautiful year by year. But at the close of the fifteenth year he - flew away!”

“Flew away!” cried the King, startled. “And how, exactly, did he fly away, Ferdisan?”

“Sire, in the middle of the palace gardens, Hausa, the Bird of the Sun, came to find him. Your son climbed onto the back of this bird. As night fell, the bird carried him away to the West.”

“But why, Ferdisan?”

“Well, Sire, your son is destined to marry the Maiden of the Dawn. To seek her, he will fly to the West in his fifteenth year, unless – “

“Yes, unless what, man?”

“Unless you yourself, Sire, keep watch and guard him at all times, and prevent him.”

The King stared at the wise man. How could he believe him?

“It seems that you have come to disturb my peace,” he said angrily. “What proof have I that you speak the truth? If you are clever enough to warn me about this, you are also clever enough to stop it. You will remain in this palace forever. That is my command.”

'Sire,' replied Ferdisan humbly, 'my work is done, and I must return to my cave in the mountains.'

'What!' cried the King in a rage, 'you refuse to stay? I will force you.'

'You cannot,' replied Ferdisan. 'Wise men are more powerful than kings.'

'We shall see.' The King clapped his hands fiercely. Then, as two guards came running in answer to the summons, he cried, 'Take that man and place him in a dungeon!'

The guards turned upon Ferdisan, who stood calm and unworried, looking at the King. Then, as the guards were about to seize him, a strange thing happened. They clutched at the empty air and staggered against one another, amazed. There was no-one there. Ferdisan had vanished.

From that time on, the King worried about the wise man's dream. He watched the young Prince continually in his first years, and, whenever he saw him gazing wistfully towards the west as the sun set, he felt sure that there was trouble ahead.

As a result, as soon as the young Prince entered his fifteenth year, the King had him imprisoned in a high tower in the palace gardens, and placed a guard all around it. He was determined to take no risks.

Although the Prince was a prisoner, the King surrounded him with every luxury, for he loved him dearly. He even promised him that, on his fifteenth birthday, a great party would be held in his honour, although the Prince would not be able to go to the party, but only watch it from the high window of the tower.

The Prince begged his father to let him wander in the gardens on his birthday, but the King was so afraid that he refused. In addition, he double-locked and barred the room of the tower in which the Prince was imprisoned.

On the day of the party, the sun rose bright. As the Prince watched it from his high window, his heart rose with it. At noon he had decided to disobey his father and escape from his prison. He brooded till sunset; then he went to the window again and listened to the sounds of festivity in the city all around. Presently, he leaned out over the window-sill and looked down. It was a long way to the ground, but the gardens were beautiful, and he was determined to reach them and roam free among the trees and flowers. After all, it was his birthday! The whole city was attending the party in his honour! It seemed hard that he should be a prisoner, when even the guards of his prison had stolen away to join the singing and dancing. The gardens below him seemed to be deserted. Now was his opportunity.

Quickly he made a rope out of his carpet, tearing it into threads and plaiting it until it was nearly a hundred feet long. Then he tied it securely to one of the pillars supporting the roof, and let the free length of it down from the window. By the light of the full moon sailing overhead, he could see that the end of the rope reached as far as the branches of a tree growing at the foot of the tower.

It was now past midnight, and the garden below was just as silent as the city outside was loud with merriment. As the Prince climbed over the window-sill and let himself down the rope, he didn't worry about how he might climb back up again.

At last his feet touched the highest branch of the tree, and soon he had clambered down the trunk, and dropped to the ground.

There was no one about. The guards were all away merrymaking in the Prince's honour. Although he was still a prisoner within the garden walls, he was enjoying his adventure and the sense of freedom to wander, even in the gardens.

Wandering around the gardens, enjoying his freedom, he came at length to a bank at the end of the garden, beyond which he knew was a steep cliff overlooking a valley. Before his father had shut him up in the tower, he had always been forbidden to approach that end of the garden, and he had never done so; but now his curiosity led him on, and he advanced cautiously along an avenue of trees. But it soon grew so dense and dark, that he was about to turn back, when suddenly he saw a misty light beginning to grow brighter and brighter at the far end of the avenue.

Eager to find out where this light came from, and seeing his way more clearly now, he hurried on, and soon arrived at the mouth of a large cave, which, inside, was as bright as day. He went farther forward and peered round a large rock; and there, in the centre of the cave, a strange sight met his eyes. A gigantic bird was standing there, getting ready to fly through the opening overlooking the valley. It was stretching its neck and flapping its wings; and, from every feather of these, flashed rays and sparkles of light, lighting up the whole place.

In the centre of the cavern floor was a crystal pool into which, from a ledge high up on the wall, fell a broad fountain, and the strong light shed by the giant bird shone through this on to the rock behind it. And there the Prince saw the most beautiful thing he had ever set eyes on.

It was an oval picture, framed in crystal - a picture of a beautiful Princess. And, as he looked, her eyes met his.

Immediately the young Prince was filled with a great longing to find the Princess, but it seemed that his only way of doing so was through the help of the great bird, which was now attracting his attention by strange signs. First it looked at him with a kindly eye; then it craned its neck towards the farther opening of the cave, and, flapping its wings as if about to fly, ran a step or two and then stopped and looked back at him. After doing this two or three times it crouched down and turned its head sideways, looking straight at him, as if to say, 'Don't you want to ride in the air?'

The Prince, sure that the giant bird meant to take him to the Princess, climbed up and seated himself between the great wings.

In another moment the bird had launched itself from the opening of the cave, and they were soon sailing high over the valley. Some party-goers in the city looked up and saw what they thought was a meteor flashing across the sky, but of course it was really the Fire Bird bearing the Prince swiftly to the far-off palace of the Princess.

How many thousands of miles they flew between the darkest hour and dawn, the Prince could not tell. Nestling warm and comfortable among the soft feathers, he heard the roar of the great creature's wings, and knew they were travelling at a tremendous pace. And at last the Fire Bird craned its neck downwards, and, as they began to descend, the Prince could see something sparkling on the horizon in the first rosy light of dawn.

Nearer and nearer they came, and now he could distinguish the great gates and towers of what seemed to be a palace of pure crystal, surrounded by beautiful gardens.

Swiftly they swooped downwards, and the Fire Bird alighted on the edge of a broad balcony, and crouched down for the Prince to dismount.

The journey had not been in vain. There, on a mossy bank among the beautiful flowers in the garden, he found the Princess asleep. As he looked down at her, he saw that her face was the face he had seen in the portrait.



He tried to wake her, but she did not stir. He breathed on her eyelids and whispered in her ear, but still she slept on.

Seeing this, the Bird grew restless, and craning its neck forward, seized the Prince with its beak and placed him again between its wings. Then it sprang upwards and soared swiftly into the sky.

Soon they were back in the cave, and the Prince, dreading a return to his prison tower, spent the hours of daylight in his warm nest between the Fire Bird's wings.

The following night the Bird set off again. But again the Prince was unable to wake the sleeping Princess, so they returned once more. On the third night, when they reached the Princess, the light of dawn was in the sky, and, as it grew every moment rosier and rosier, the Princess awoke of her own accord to find the young Prince sitting among the flowers by her side. She had only just time to see the Fire Bird pluck a feather from its wing with its beak, and let it fall at her feet, before it soared away. She picked up the feather and tucked it into her button-hole. Then she looked at the Prince.

The minute they looked at each other, they fell in love. It was as if she had been dreaming about him all her life, and now she had woken up to find him. She reached up to him, and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Towards evening, as the shadows began to fall, the Princess's sister, who was a wicked Sorceress, came into the garden and stood behind a tree watching the lovers.

'I'll soon put an end to this,' she said, clenching her hands in jealous rage. She went away and performed spells, and, by her wicked arts, she summoned the image of the Prince before her. As she did so, the Prince's life went out of his body, and he drooped in the Princess's arms as if he was dead.

Terrified and distracted with grief, the Princess carried the lifeless body of her lover into the palace and laid it on a couch. There, exhausted with the effort, she fell on her knees, weeping bitterly. She called his name, but he did not answer. His ears were deaf, his eyes were closed, his pale lips did not respond to her kisses.

But the Prince was not dead: he was bewitched. The Sorceress, with her wicked spell, had made him seem dead. Yet, all the time, his heart was still beating with life, and with love for the Princess.

Forlorn and sorrowful the Princess sat by the couch. Suddenly, she realised what had happened. She knew that he was not dead. 'Oh! my wicked sister! This is your work. You have bewitched my love! Never again! This is the end!'

She ran everywhere, in and around the palace, looking for her sister. Her hands were clenched, her eyes were blazing, her teeth were set. But she could not find her. At last she learned that her sister had fled from the palace on horseback a short time ago.

The Princess at once decided to follow her and force her to bring the Prince back to life and health. But, before she could even begin, there was a big problem to be solved. The Princess had never been beyond the walls of the palace. She knew that there were twelve gates, and that only one of these was left unlocked from sunset till sunrise, and that no-one could tell which one it might be. Now the law of the palace permitted her to try one gate each night, and one gate only.

She sat down and thought, and then decided to try the same gate each night until it happened to be the right one. For twelve nights she tried, but each time she found the gate locked and barred.

Then she suddenly remembered that, when the Fire Bird had brought the Prince to her, it had plucked a bright feather from its wing and let it fall at her feet. She had preserved it in a golden casket. Could it be that this feather had magic powers? She hurried to her room and took it from the casket. As she did so, it sparkled and quivered. As she held it up she was more than ever convinced that it held magic powers.

She looked at the feather, and she thought of the Fire Bird itself, and wished that it could only come and tell her what to do.

Even as she wished, she heard a faint sound from far away. As she listened, it grew louder and louder, and nearer and nearer, until at last she knew it was the roar of the Fire Bird's wings. She ran out onto the balcony, and there she saw it, like a meteor in the sky, every moment growing bigger.

At last, with a glad, shrill cry, it swooped down, and its giant wings fluttered and vibrated a moment before it landed on the edge of the balcony, its fiery golden light sparkling on the crystal pillars and shimmering in the air all around.

The Princess held up the feather, and the Fire Bird bowed its head slowly three times. Then it suddenly turned round as if to fly away, but looked back at her, and raised its wings, and fluffed out the soft, glistening feathers in the hollow of its back. Arching its head round, it began to act as if it were preparing a nest for her between its wings, and the Princess saw plainly that it was only waiting for her to seat herself there before flying away. The Bird knew what she wanted; she was sure of that. So she mounted between the wings, and nestled down on a soft feather bed of dazzling golden light, warm and comfortable. Then the Bird rose in the air, and flashed through space at a terrific rate.

Very soon they overtook the setting sun, and passed it, and kept on going until they reached the Forest-without-an-End.

Here the Bird swooped down and landed in front of a black-mouthed cave. He crouched while the Princess dismounted. As she did so, the Bird plucked two fresh feathers from its wing with its beak and held them out to her. They shed a brilliant light, and she, seeing at once that they would serve as lamps, took them, one in each hand, and advanced into the gloomy cave.

She had not gone far when she heard a voice crooning a witch song, and, peering round the edge of a rock, she spied her sister sitting beside a cauldron, beneath which was a roaring fire.

From the witch song her sister was singing, the Princess learned that the Prince's heart was in the cauldron. She listened while the Sorceress sang:

*Burn! Burn! Heart of her lover,
Beating in tune with mine.
Never the two their love can recover,
Never their arms entwine.
Burn! Burn! Heart in this cauldron,
You shall forever be mine!*

With a scream the Princess rushed forward, and, before her wicked sister could prevent her, she pushed the cauldron over with a crash. Some of the fire splashed up in the face of the Sorceress, and with a loud grating shriek, she fell to the ground - dead!

The Princess snatched up the Prince's heart, and, without waiting another moment, she ran back to the Fire Bird, and sprang upon its back with a cry of joy, patting its neck and stroking its feathers.



Up in the sky they soared again, and away over the world towards the palace in the Home of the Dawn. And, as they neared their destination, the Princess suddenly missed something. Quickly she felt to see if the heart of the Prince was safe; but it was gone! It seemed to have grown warm and melted right away.

Distressed at this, she urged the Fire Bird to go faster and faster, until his track through the sky was like that of a shooting star. At length they swooped down and alighted on the balcony of the palace.

As the Princess climbed down, the Prince came running to her. With a cry of delight they ran into each other's arms. The Prince was free from the wicked spell at last.

The Fire Bird's work was done. Without a word he sprang into the air, and was soon gone. The Prince and the Princess were married very soon, and, during the celebrations, the Fire Bird was seen to circle three times every night round the palace, but he never settled.

As King and Queen of the People of the Dawn, they reigned for long years, and the Fire Bird was always their friend. On every anniversary of their wedding day, they awoke to the sound of his roaring wings. He always brought a present; and do you know what it was? Just a single feather of his shining wing, so that they might obtain whatever joy they wished for.