

EDMUND DVLAC'S FAIRY-BOOK

FAIRY TALES OF THE ALLIED NATIONS



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THE FIRE BIRD

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 courtiers, though they hardly dared dance a Trepâk in the palace, could not keep their heels still; while the guards, the attendants, the little pages and pretty kitchen maids, drank tea and coffee, glass after glass, till the following morning, when they all had supper, and then crept off on tip-toe to bed. The people clapped their hands and sang and danced in the squares and streets, till those who danced the longest got sore throats, and those who sang the loudest got footsore. The whole city could not sleep for joy. The young Prince was the first-born, and would one day sit upon the throne: was this a thing to put under the pillow? 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 would live; and besides, they all agreed upon the point that he was a Prince, and had his father's nose. But alas! doctors are not everybody. After the revel a wise man from Persia, who was staying in the city at the time, awoke from his slumbers and dressed himself, and went to see the King. Sunk in a deep sleep, he had missed the celebrations, but he had found a vision of the future; and he was now hastening to see the King about it, for, as you must understand, when a wise man knows the worst he can never keep it to himself.

When he came before the King, he had scarcely the heart to

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tell him what would befall his first-born ; but the King bade him speak out, and he obeyed.

‘Sire,’ he said humbly, ‘I come not to tell thee bad news, but rather to warn thee in time, lest a vision that came to me in the night should perchance come true.’

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

‘Speak on, Ferdâsan,’ he said.

‘Sire,’ replied the seer, ‘the dream that came to me was a deep-sleep vision. Doubt not that it is a warning entrusted to me to lay before you. O King, this is the substance of it. Fifteen years came and went before my inner eyes, and the son that has been born to you from heaven grew more beautiful year by year. But at the close of the fifteenth year he—flew away!’

‘Flew away!’ cried the King, startled. ‘And what was the manner of his flight, O Ferdâsan?’

‘Sire, in the midst of the palace gardens, Hausa, the Bird of the Sun, came to seek him or to be sought by him. He mounted on the back of this bird ; and then, as the twilight fell, it carried him away westward.’

‘With what purpose, Ferdâsan?’

‘That, sire, I can reveal to you only in words that hide my thoughts, and——’

‘Nay, nay ; tell me all, I command you.’

‘His fate stands thus. He is destined to marry the Maiden of the Dawn, and, in quest of her, he will fly westward in his fifteenth year, unless——’

‘Yes, unless what, man?’

‘Unless you yourself, sire, keep watch and ward and so prevent him.’

The King stared at the seer. How could he believe this thing?

‘It seems that you have come to disturb my peace,’ he said angrily. ‘What proof have I that you speak truly? If your wisdom has brought me this warning, then your wisdom can avert



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There he found the Princess asleep and saw that her face
was the face he had seen in the portrait.

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the evil fate. You will remain in this palace until the die is cast. That is my command.'

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

'What!' cried the King in a rage, 'you defy me? I will compel you.'

'You cannot,' replied Ferdâsan. 'Seers stand before kings—and that is true in two ways.'

'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 Ferdâsan, who stood calm and unmoved, looking at the King. Then, as they were about to seize him, a strange thing happened. They clutched at the empty air and staggered against one another, amazed. For a moment the Throne-room seemed to echo a sweet music from far away; for a moment it was filled with the faint fragrance of mountain lilies; then the King saw a thin grey mist slowly issuing through one of the windows, to dissolve in the sunlight.

And then he knew.

From that time forward, the King regarded the seer's prediction with great anxiety. He watched the young Prince continually in his first years, and, when, as was often the case, he saw him gazing wistfully towards the west when the sun had set, he felt sure that the coming event had cast its shadow before.

Accordingly, as soon as the young Prince entered his fifteenth year, the King had him imprisoned in a lofty tower situated in the palace gardens, and placed a guard about it, for he was determined to take no risk whatever.

But, while he kept the Prince a close prisoner, he surrounded him with every luxury, for he loved him dearly. He even promised him that, on his fifteenth birthday, a great festival would be held in his honour, though he himself would only be allowed to watch the festivities from the high window of the tower.

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The Prince implored his father to let him wander in the gardens on his birthday; but the King was so afraid that, by some means or other, he would be spirited away, that he refused. In addition to this, he double-locked and barred the topmost room of the tower in which the Prince was imprisoned.

On the day of the festival, the sun rose bright. As the Prince watched it from his high window, his heart rose with it. At noon he had fully decided to disobey his father and escape from his prison. He brooded till sunset; then, as the twilight gathered, 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. Was not this his birthday, and was not the city holding high festival 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 merry throng. The city without was a blaze of light and a chorus of revel, but the gardens below seemed to be deserted: now was his opportunity.

Turning back into the apartment, he swept his eyes round for anything that would serve as a rope. There were heavy hangings falling from the high ceiling: he could not pull these down. There was the carpet; yes, he could make a rope of that.

He quickly secured a knife, and ripped from the edge of the carpet many long threads. When he had a sufficient number, he set to work to plait a rope, splicing fresh threads in at intervals until it was nearly a hundred feet long. Then he tied one end of 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 took

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no thought as to how he might get back again ; it was quite enough to get away from the lonely, stifling place of his imprisonment.

At last his feet touched the topmost bough of the tree, but there was rope to spare ; and he went on until, at the end of it, he was able to grasp a bough thick enough to bear his weight ; and by this means he climbed along to the trunk, and so to the ground.

There was no one about. The guards were all away merry-making 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.

He took his way along pathways where the moonbeams strayed. He drank in the cool night air, and paused ever and again to pluck a sweet-smelling night-flower. Wandering on, 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 overarching trees. But it soon grew so dense and dark, that he was about to turn back, when suddenly he espied 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 hastened on, and soon arrived at the mouth of a large cave, which, inside, was as bright as day. He ventured farther forward and peered round a buttress of 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 farther 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, illuminating 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 cascade almost like a flowing veil, and the strong light shed by the giant bird shone through

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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, and hanging behind the transparent cascade—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 original of this portrait, 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 much as to say, 'Don't you want to ride in the air?'

The Prince saw the bird's meaning, but, to signify that he wanted to find the Princess, he pointed to the picture. At this the bird spread its wings right out until the tips brushed against each side of the cave, the feathers quivering intensely and throwing out a bright light which almost blinded the Prince.

Then the bird drew in its wings and made a sign to him to mount between them. At this the Prince, feeling 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 farther opening of the cave, and they were soon sailing high over the valley. Some revellers in the city looked up and saw what they took to be a meteor flashing across the sky; but 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

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descend in a slanting direction, 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; and, 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 her sleep was sound: 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 to return to the prison tower, spent the hours of daylight in his warm nest between the Fire Bird's wings.

The following night, as the hours were drawing on towards dawn, the Bird set forth again. But again the Prince was unable to wake the sleeping Princess, so they returned once more. But, 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 placed it in her bosom. Then she looked at the Prince.

There is love, and there is love; but such love as sprang up at the same moment in two hearts can never be described. It was as if she had been dreaming about him all her life, and now she had

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awakened to find him. It was as if his journey had been to Paradise. She raised her arms to him, and he enfolded her and kissed her. Then they wandered among the flowers and trees, and all the birds understood: they sang so divinely.

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, so that his life went out of his body, and he remained in the Princess's arms like one dead.

Terrified and distracted with grief, the Princess carried the lifeless body of her lover into the palace and laid it on a couch in her own apartment. There, exhausted with the effort, she fell upon it, 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, by means of his image, had torn his heart from his breast and had taken it far away. Yet, all the time, that heart was still beating with life, and with love for the Princess.

Forlorn and sorrowful the Princess sat by the couch, when suddenly she started up with clenched hands.

'I know! I know!' she cried. Then she bent down and kissed the Prince's lips. She felt them tremble against hers, and, though she could not call him back, 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 about the palace, in search of her sister, her hands clenched, her eyes blazing, her teeth set. But she could not find her. At last a page, terrified to death at her aspect, confessed that her sister had fled from the palace alone, mounted on the fleetest steed of the stables.

The Princess at once resolved to follow her and force her to

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restore the Prince to life and health. But, at the very outset, there was a terrible difficulty to be surmounted. The Princess herself had never been beyond the walls that encircled the vast grounds 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 none 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 ran with all haste to her apartment, 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 advise her what to do.

Scarcely had she conceived the wish, when a faint sound from far away struck upon her ears. 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 alighted 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

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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, with a long, jubilant cry the Bird rose in the air, and, craning its neck westward, flashed through space at a terrific rate.

Very soon they overtook the setting sun, passed it, and left it sinking on the horizon as they went on into the purlieu of the Land of Night and Silence, which lies beyond the great round shoulder of the world. And here the Fire Bird blazed along, leaving a trail of light in its wake and throwing a radiance on the hills and forests over which it passed ; until it came, by way of the Valley-which-has-no-Borders, to the Forest-without-an-End.

Here the Bird swooped downwards and alighted before 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 espied her sister seated beside a cauldron, beneath which was a freezing fire fed with blocks of frozen brine.

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

*' Seethe ! Seethe ! Heart of her lover,
Beating in tune with mine.
Never the two their love can recover,
Never their arms entwine.
Freeze ! Freeze ! Heart in this cauldron,
Seared by the frozen brine ! '*

With a scream the Princess rushed forward, and, before her



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With a scream the Princess rushed forward, and before her wicked sister could prevent her, she had upset her cauldron with a crash.

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wicked sister could prevent her, she had upset the cauldron with a crash. Some of the icy fire of brine splashed up in the face of the Sorceress, and with a loud, grating shriek, she fell to the ground senseless—dead!

The Princess snatched up her lover's heart, and placed it in her bosom against her own, where she could feel it still beating. Then, 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 in her bosom to see if the heart of her lover was safe; but lo, it was gone! It seemed to have grown warm and melted right away.

Distressed at this, she urged the Fire Bird to still greater speed, 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. The roaring of the Fire Bird's wings was stilled, but the hum of its feathers continued—a throbbing pulsation of musical sound.

As the Princess alighted, the Prince himself came running to her. Then, with a mingled cry of delight, the lovers leapt to greet each other, and, when they were enfolded in each other's arms, the Fire Bird discreetly turned his head away and preened his tail feathers.

The Princess did not trouble about her lover's heart which she had taken from the Sorceress and missed on the way. She now felt it beating against her own, and knew that it was in its right place. 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 lost to sight. And the lovers did not hear him go, for, by some mysterious power, he hushed his wings and went secretly, for, as you must have seen, he was really a very old bird.

The Prince and the Princess were married very soon, and, during

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the celebrations, the Fire Bird was seen to circle thrice 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.