

Story of the Most Noble Self- Playing Harp

The Russian Garland

Russian

*Advanced
17 min read*

In a certain country there lived a king named Filon, whose wife Chaltura had an only son, named Astrach, who from his earliest years had a strong desire to render himself famous by knightly deeds. When he arrived at mature age, Astrach began to think of marrying, and he asked his father in what kingdom lived the most beautiful of all Tsar's or King's daughters. The King replied: "If it is your wish to marry, my dearest son, my noble child, I will show you the portraits of the daughters of the Tsars and Kings of all lands." So saying, he led Prince Astrach to a gallery, and showed him the pictures. After examining them all closely, Astrach fell passionately in love with the Tsarevna Osida, daughter of Afor, the Tsar of Egypt. Then he besought his father's blessing, and asked leave to repair to the Court of the Egyptian Sultan, to sue for the hand of Osida. King Filon rejoiced at the thought of his son's marrying, gave him his blessing, and dismissed him.

Then Prince Astrach went to seek a goodly steed in the royal stables, but could find none there to his mind. So he bade farewell to his father and mother, and started for his journey to Egypt alone on foot; and he wandered long, here and there, far and near, until at length he saw on the plain a palace of white marble, roofed with gold, which emitted beams of light, shining like the sun. Prince Astrach went up to the palace; and, on reaching it, he walked round the building, looking in at every window, to see if any persons were there; but he could discover no one. So he went into the courtyard, and wandered up and down for a long time; but there,

too, he could see no living soul; then he entered the marble palace, and went from room to room, but all was silent and deserted. At length he came to an apartment, in which a table was spread for one person; and being very hungry, Prince Astrach sat down, and ate and drank his fill; after which he laid himself down on a bed and fell fast asleep.

As soon as he awoke, he wandered again through the palace until he came to a room, from the window of which he saw the most beautiful garden he had ever beheld, and it came into his mind to go for a walk in it. Then he went out of the palace and strolled about for a long time; and at length came to a stone wall, in which was an iron door, with a massive lock. As the Prince touched the lock he heard behind the door the neighing of a horse; and, wishing to remove the lock, he took up a huge stone in his arms and fell to hammering the door. At the first blow it burst open, and there behind it was a second iron door, with a lock like the first. This, too, he broke open, and found behind it ten other doors, through all of which he forced his way in like manner; and behind the last he beheld a noble charger, with a complete suit of armour. Then he went up and stroked the horse, which stood still as if rooted to the spot.



“The horse grew restive, reared higher than the waving forests.” Illustration by R. DE Rosciszewski, published in *The Russian Garland of Fairy Tales* by Robert Steele (1916), Robert M. McBride & Company.

Prince Astrach forthwith proceeded to saddle his horse with a Tcherkess saddle, put a silken bridle into his mouth, and leading him out, mounted, and rode into the open fields. But as soon as he applied the spur, the horse grew restive, reared higher than the waving forests, plunged lower than the flying clouds; mountains and rivers he left behind; small streams he covered with his tail and broad rivers he crossed at a bound, until at length Prince Astrach so tired out the brave steed that he was covered with foam.

Then the horse spoke with a man’s voice the following words: “O Prince, thou my noble rider, it is now three-and-thirty years since I served the dead Yaroslav Yaroslavovich—that stout and powerful knight—and I have borne him in many a single combat and battle; yet never have I been so worn out as to-day; now I am ready to serve you faithfully till death.” Then Prince Astrach returned into the courtyard, put his brave steed into the stable, and gave him white corn and spring water; after which he went into the marble palace, ate and drank his fill, and then laid him down to sleep.

The following morning he rose early, saddled his good horse, and rode forth towards Egypt, to Tsar Afor, to sue for the hand of his daughter, the beautiful Tsarevna Osida. When he arrived at the court he announced himself as the son of King Filon, whereupon Tsar Afor received him with all honour, and enquired what purpose had brought him thither, to which Prince Astrach replied: “Great Tsar of all the lands of Egypt, I am not come to your Court to feast and banquet, but to ask for your lovely daughter to wife.”

“Brave Knight, Prince Astrach,” answered the Tsar, “I will gladly bestow my daughter on you; but one service you must render me. The unbelieving Tartar Tsar is drawing near, and threatens to lay waste my kingdom, to carry off my daughter, and slay me and my wife.” Prince Astrach replied: “My gracious lord, Tsar Afor, readily will I go forth to battle for the Faith with this unbelieving Tsar; and to protect your city from untimely destruction.” Whereat Tsar Afor was glad at heart, and ordered a great banquet to be prepared for the bold and fair Prince Astrach; so there was great feasting, and the betrothal took place with all solemnity.

The next day the Busurman army of three hundred thousand men arrived before the city, whereat Tsar Afor was greatly alarmed, and took counsel with Astrach. Then the Prince saddled his steed, went into the royal palace, and offered up his prayers, bowing himself to all four quarters of the globe. After this he took leave of

Tsar Afor and his wife, and his betrothed Tsarevna, the beautiful Osida, and rode straight to the enemy's camp; and when he spurred his charger, the steed bounded from the earth higher than the waving forests, and lower than the drifting clouds; mountains and valleys he left beneath his feet, small streams he covered with his tail, wide rivers he sprang across, and at length arrived at the enemy's camp. Then Prince Astrach fell upon the Busurmen with fearful slaughter, and in a short time cut them to pieces; and wherever he waved his arm, a way was opened, and where he turned his horse there was a clear space for him; so he routed and destroyed the whole army, took the Busurman Tsar himself prisoner, and brought him to Tsar Afor, who threw him into prison.

Then there was great feasting and rejoicing, and the revels lasted for a whole fortnight. At the end of this time, Prince Astrach reminded Tsar Afor of his marriage contract with the Tsarevna Osida; and Tsar Afor ordered a great banquet to be made, and bade his daughter prepare for the wedding. When the Tsarevna heard this, she called Prince Astrach and said: "My beloved friend and bridegroom, you are in too great a haste to marry; only think how dull a wedding feast would be without any music, for my father has no players. Therefore, dear friend, ride off, I entreat you, through thrice nine lands, to the thirtieth kingdom, in the domain of the deathless Kashtshei, and win from him the Self-playing Harp; it plays all tunes so wonderfully that every one is bound to listen to it, and it is beyond price: this will enliven our wedding."

Then Astrach, the King's son, went to the royal stable and saddled his steed; and, after taking leave of Tsar Afor and his betrothed Princess, mounted his good horse and rode off to the kingdom of the deathless Kashtshei, in search of the Self-playing Harp. As he rode along he saw an old hut, standing in a garden facing a wood; and he called out with his knightly voice: "Hut, hut, turn about, with your back to the wood, and your front to me!" And instantly the hut turned itself round. Then Prince Astrach dismounted and entered the hut, and there was an old witch sitting on the floor spinning flax. And the witch screamed with a frightful voice: "Fu! fu! fu! never before has the sound of a Russian spirit been heard here; and now a Russian spirit comes to sight!" Then she asked Prince Astrach: "Wherefore, good youngling, Prince Astrach, art thou come hither—of thine own free will or not? Hither no bird flies, no wild beast wanders, no knight ever passes my hut. And how has God brought you here?"

But Prince Astrach replied: "You silly old wife, first give me food and drink, and then put your questions." Thereupon the old witch instantly set food before Prince Astrach, whipped him into the bath-room, combed his locks, made ready his bed, and then fell again to questioning him. "Tell me, good youth, whither art thou

travelling—to what far country? and dost thou go of thine own free will or no?”

And Prince Astrach answered: “Willingly as I go, yet I go twice as unwillingly through thrice nine lands into the thirtieth kingdom, the domain of the deathless Kashtshei, to fetch the Self-playing Harp.”

“Ho! ho! ho!” cried the old witch. “You’ll find it a hard task to gain the Harp; but say your prayers and lie down to rest; the morning is the time for such exploits, but the night for sleep.” So Astrach, the King’s son, laid himself down to sleep.

The next morning the witch awoke early, got up, and aroused Prince Astrach. “Bestir yourself, Prince Astrach, it is time for you to set out on your travels.” So Astrach arose and speedily dressed himself, pulled on his stockings and boots, washed, and said his prayers, bowing himself north, south, east, and west, and made ready to take leave of the witch. Then she said: “How! will you go away without asking an old woman like me how you can gain the Self-playing Harp?” And when he asked her she said: “Go your way, in God’s name, and when you come to the realm of the deathless Kashtshei, manage to arrive exactly at noon. Near his golden palace is a green garden, and in this garden you will see a fair Princess walking about. Leap over the wall and approach the maiden; she will rejoice to see you, for it is now six years since she was carried off from her father’s court by the deathless Kashtshei. Enquire of this maiden how you can obtain the Self-playing Harp, and she will direct you.”

Thereupon Prince Astrach mounted his good steed and rode far and fast, and came into the kingdom of the deathless Kashtshei. Then he repaired to the golden palace, and heard the sound of the Self-playing Harp: he stood still to listen, and was absorbed by its wonderful music. At last he came to himself, leaped over the wall into the green garden, and beheld there the Princess, who was at first sight terrified; but Prince Astrach went up to her, quieted her fears, and asked her how he could obtain the Self-playing Harp. Then the Tsarevna Darisa answered: “If you will take me with you from this place I will tell you how to obtain the Harp.” So Prince Astrach gave her his promise. Then she told him to wait in the garden, and meanwhile she herself went to the deathless Kashtshei and began to coax him with false and flattering words. “My most beloved friend and intimate, tell me, I pray you, will you never die?”

“Assuredly never,” replied Kashtshei.

“Then,” said the Princess, “where is your death? Is it here?”

“Certainly,” he replied; “it is in the broom under the threshold.”

Thereupon Tsarevna Darisa instantly seized the broom and threw it into the fire; but, although the besom burned, the deathless Kashtshei still remained alive. Then the Tsarevna said to him: “My beloved, you do not love me sincerely, for you have not told me truly where is your death; nevertheless, I am not angry, but love you with my whole heart.”

And with these fawning words, she entreated Kashtshei to tell her in truth where was his death. Then he said with a laugh: “Have you any reason for wishing to know? Well, then, out of love I will tell you where it lies; in a certain field there stand three green oaks, and under the roots of the largest oak is a worm, and if ever this worm is found and crushed, that instant I shall die.”

When the Tsarevna Darisa heard these words, she went straight to Prince Astrach, and told him how he must go to that field, and seek for the three oaks, dig up the worm under the biggest oak and crush it. So the Prince went forth, and rode on from morning to night, until at length he came to the three green oaks. Then he dug up the worm from the roots of the largest, and having killed it, he returned to the Tsarevna Darisa, and said to her: “Does the deathless Kashtshei still live? I have found the worm and destroyed it.” And she replied, “Kashtshei is still alive.”

Then said Prince Astrach, “Go again and ask him right lovingly where is his death.” So the Princess went, and said to him with tears: “You do not love me, and don’t tell me the truth, but treat me as a stupid”; and at last King Kashtshei yielded to her entreaties, and told her the whole truth, saying: “My death is far from hence, and hard to find, on the wide ocean: in that sea is the island of Bujan, and upon this island there grows a green oak, and beneath this oak is an iron chest, and in this chest is a small basket, and in this basket a hare, and in this hare a duck, and in this duck an egg; and he who finds this egg, and breaks it, at that same instant causes my death.”

As soon as the Tsarevna heard these words she hastened back to Prince Astrach and told him all. And thereupon he straightway mounted his good steed, and rode to the seashore. There he saw a fisherman in a boat, and asked him to carry him to the island of Bujan; and, taking a seat in the boat, they speedily reached the island, where he landed. Prince Astrach soon found the green oak, and he dug up the iron chest, and broke it in pieces, and opened the basket, and took out of the basket the hare, and tore in pieces the hare, when out flew a grey duck; and as she flew over the sea, she let fall the egg into the water. Thereat Prince Astrach was very

sorrowful, and ordered the fisherman to cast his nets into the sea, and instantly the man did so, and caught a huge pike. So Prince Astrach drew the pike out of the net, and found in it the egg which the duck had dropped: and, seating himself in the boat, he bade the fisherman make for the shore. Then, after rewarding the man for his trouble, the Prince mounted his steed and returned to the Tsarevna Darisa.

As soon as he arrived and told her that he had found the egg, the Princess said: “Now fear nothing; come with me straight to Kashtshei.” And when they appeared before him, Kashtshei jumped up, and would have killed Prince Astrach; but the Prince instantly took the egg in his hand and fell to crushing it gradually. Then Kashtshei began to cry and roar aloud, and said to the Tsarevna Darisa: “Was it not out of love that I told you where my death was? And is this the return you make?” So saying he seized his sword from the wall to slay the Tsarevna; but at the same moment Astrach, the King’s son, crushed the egg, and Kashtshei fell dead upon the ground like a sheaf of corn.

Then the Tsarevna Darisa led Astrach into the palace, where was the Self-playing Harp, and said to him: “The Harp is now thine—take it; but in return for it, conduct me back to my home.” So Prince Astrach took up the Harp, and it played so gloriously that he was struck dumb with amazement at its sounds, as well as its workmanship of the purest Eastern crystal and gold strings. After gazing at it for a long time, Prince Astrach left the palace, and mounting his gallant steed with Darisa, set out upon his return. First he carried the Tsarevna back to her parents, and afterwards went on his way to Egypt, to Tsar Afor, and gave the Self-playing Harp to his betrothed, the Tsarevna Osida. Then they placed the Harp on the table, and it fell to playing the most beautiful and merry tunes.

The next day Prince Astrach married the fair Tsarevna Osida, and in a short time left Egypt, and returned to his native country. When his father and mother saw their dear son again they rejoiced exceedingly. Not long afterwards King Filon died, and Prince Astrach wore his father’s crown, and lived with his beloved Queen Osida in all joy and happiness until they died.

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