



*The Nightingale in the
Mosque - The Story of the
Sultan's Youngest Son and the
Princess Flower o' the World*

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Slavic

*Intermediate
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There was once a Sultan who was so pious and devout that he spent many hours every day in prayer.

“For the glory of Allah,” he thought to himself, “I ought to build the most beautiful mosque in the world.”

So he called together the finest artisans in the country and told them what he wanted. He spent a third of his riches on the undertaking, and when the mosque was finished everybody said:

“See now, our Sultan has built the most beautiful mosque in the world for the greater glory of Allah!”

On the first day when the Sultan went to pray in the new mosque, a Dervish who was sitting cross-legged at the

entrance spoke to him in a droning sing-song voice and said:

“Nay, but your mosque is not yet beautiful enough! There is something it lacks and your prayers will be unavailing!”

The words of the holy man grieved the Sultan and he had the mosque torn down and another built in its place even more beautiful.

“This is certainly the most beautiful mosque in the world!” the people said, and the Sultan’s heart was very happy on the first day as he went in to pray.

But again the Dervish, seated at the entrance, said to him in his droning, sing-song voice:

“Nay, but your mosque is not yet beautiful enough! There is something it lacks and your prayers will be unavailing!”

At the holy man’s words the Sultan had the second mosque torn down and a third one built, the most beautiful of them all. But when it was finished for a third time the Dervish droned out:

“Nay, but your mosque is not yet beautiful enough! There is something it lacks and your prayers will be unavailing!”

“What can I do?” the Sultan cried. “I have spent all my riches and now I have no means wherewith to build another mosque!”

He fell to grieving and nothing any one could say would comfort him.

His three sons came to him and said:

“Father, is there not something we can do for you?”

The Sultan sighed and shook his head.

“Nothing, my sons, unless indeed you were to find out for me why my third mosque is not the most beautiful in the world.”

“Brothers,” the youngest suggested, “let us go to the Dervish and ask him why it is that the third mosque is not yet beautiful enough. Perhaps he will tell us what is lacking.”

So they went to the Dervish and asked him what he meant by saying to the Sultan that the third mosque was not yet beautiful enough and they begged him to tell them what it was that was lacking.

The Dervish fixed his eyes in the distance and slightly swaying his body back and forth answered them in his sing-song tone.

“The mosque is beautiful,” he said, “and the fountain in its midst is beautiful, but where is the glorious Nightingale Gisar? With the Nightingale Gisar singing beside the fountain, then indeed would the Sultan’s third mosque be the most beautiful mosque in the world!”

“Only tell us where this glorious Nightingale is,” the brothers begged, “and we will get him if it costs us our lives!”

“I cannot tell you that,” the Dervish droned. “You will have to go out into the world and find him for yourselves.”

So the three brothers returned to the Sultan and told him what the Dervish had said.

“All your third mosque lacks to be the most beautiful mosque in the world,” they told him, “is the Nightingale Gisar singing beside the fountain. So grieve no more, father. We, your three sons, will go out into the world in quest of this glorious bird and within a year’s time we will return with the bird in our hands if so be that it is anywhere to be found in all the wide world.”

The Sultan blessed them and they set forth the three of them, side by side. They traveled together until they reached a place where three roads branched. Upon the stone of the left-hand road nothing was written. Upon the stone of the middle road was the inscription: Who goes this way returns. The inscription on the third stone read: Who goes this way shall meet many dangers and may never return.

“Let us part here,” the oldest brother said, “and each take a separate road. Then if all goes well, let us meet here again on this same spot one year hence. As our father’s oldest son it would be wrong for me to run unnecessary risks, so I will take the left-hand road.”

“And I will take the middle road,” the second brother cried.

The Youngest Brother laughed and said:

“That leaves the dangerous road for me! Very well, brothers, that’s the very road I wish to take for why should I leave home if it were not to have adventures! Farewell then until we meet again in one year’s time.”

The oldest traveled his safe road until he reached a city where he became a barber. He asked every man whose head he shaved:

“Do you know anything of the Nightingale Gisar?”

He never found any one who had even heard of the bird, so after a time he stopped asking.

The second brother followed the middle road to a city where he settled down and opened a coffee-house.

“Have you ever heard of a glorious Nightingale known as Gisar?” he asked at first of every traveler who came in and sipped his coffee. Not one of them ever had and as time went by the second brother gradually stopped even making inquiries.

The Youngest Brother who took the dangerous road came to no city at all but to a far-off desolate place without houses or highways or farms. Wild creatures hid in the brush and snakes glided in and out among the rocks. One day he came upon a wild woman who was combing her hair with a branch of juniper.

“That isn’t the way to comb your hair,” the Youngest Brother said. “Here, let me show you.”

He took his own comb and smoothed out all the tangles in the wild woman’s hair until she was comfortable and happy.

“You have been very kind to me,” she said. “Now isn’t there something I can do for you in return?”

"I am looking for the Nightingale Gisar. If you know where that glorious bird is, tell me and that will more than repay me."

But the wild woman had never heard of the Nightingale Gisar.

"Only wild animals inhabit this desolate place," she said, "and a few wild people like me. The Nightingale Gisar is not here."

"Then I must go farther," the Youngest Brother said.

This the wild woman begged him not to do.

"Beyond these mountains," she said, "is a wilder desert with fiercer animals. Turn back while you can."

"No," the Youngest Brother insisted, "I'm going as God leads me."

So he left the wild woman and crossed the mountains. He went on and on until he was footsore and weary. Then at last he came to the Tiger's house.

The Tiger's wife met him.

"Be off, young man!" she warned him, "or the Tiger when he comes home will eat you!"

"No!" said the Youngest Brother, "now I'm here I'm going to stay for I have a question to ask the Tiger."

The Tiger's wife was making bread. When the dough was ready to go into the oven, she leaned over the glowing embers of the fire and began to brush them aside with her body.

"Stop!" the Youngest Brother cried. "You will burn yourself!"

"But how else can I brush aside the glowing embers?" the Tiger's wife asked.

"I'll show you."

The Youngest Brother cut a branch from a tree outside and fashioned it into a rough broom. Then he showed the Tiger's wife how to use it.

"Ah!" she said gratefully, "before this always when I've baked bread I've been sick for ten days afterwards. Now I shall be sick no more for you have taught me how to use a broom. In return let me hide you in a dark corner and when the Tiger comes home I'll tell him how kind you have been and perhaps he will not eat you."

So she hid the Youngest Brother in a dark corner and when the Tiger came home she met him and said:

"See, I have baked bread to-day but I am not sick, for a youth has shown me how I can brush aside the embers without burning myself."

The Tiger was overjoyed to hear that his wife had been able to bake bread without being made sick and he swore to be a brother to him who had taught her the use of a broom. So the Youngest Brother came out from the dark corner where he was hiding and the Tiger made him welcome.

"What are you doing wandering about in this wild country?" the Tiger asked.

"I am searching for the Nightingale Gisar and I have come to you to ask you if you can tell me where I can find that glorious bird."

The Tiger had never heard of the Nightingale Gisar but he thought that his oldest brother the Lion might know.

"Go straight on from here," he said, "until you come to the Lion's house. His old wife stands outside facing the house with her long thin old dugs thrown over her shoulders. Go up to her from behind and take her dugs and put them in your mouth and suck them and when she asks you who you are, say: 'Don't you know me, old mother? I'm your oldest cub.' Then she will lead you in to the Lion who is so old that his eyelids droop. Prop them open and when he sees you he will tell you what he knows."

So the Youngest Brother went on to the Lion's house and he found the Lion's old wife standing outside as the Tiger said he would. He did all the Tiger had told him to do and when the Lion's wife asked him who he was, he said: 'Don't you know me, old mother? I'm your oldest cub.' Then the Lion's old wife led him in to the Lion and he propped open the Lion's drooping eyelids and asked about the Nightingale Gisar.

The old Lion shook his head.

"I have never heard of the Nightingale Gisar. He has never sung in this wild place. Turn back, young man, and seek him elsewhere. Beyond this is a country of wilder creatures where you will only lose your life."

"That is as God wills," the Youngest Brother said.

With that he bade the old Lion and his old wife farewell and pushed on into the farther wilds. The mountains grew more and more rugged, the plains more parched and barren, and the Youngest Son was hard put to it to find food from day to day.

Once when he was crossing a desert three eagles swooped down upon him and it was all he could do to fight them off. He slashed at them with his sword and succeeded in cutting off the beak of one, a wing of another, and a leg of the third. He put these three things in his bag as trophies.

He came at last to a hut where an old woman was baking cakes on the hearth.

"God bless you, granny!" he said. "Can you give me a bite of supper and shelter for the night?"

The old woman shook her head.

"My boy, you had better not stop here. I have three daughters and if they were to come home and find you here, they'd kill you."

But the Youngest Brother insisted that he was not afraid and at last the old woman let him stay. She hid him in the corner behind the firewood and warned him to keep still.

Presently the three eagles whom he had maimed came flying into the hut. The old woman put a bowl of milk on the table, the birds dipped in the milk, and lo! their feather shirts opened and they stepped out three maidens.

One of them had lost her lips, one an arm, and the third a leg.

“Ah!” they cried to their mother, “see what has befallen us! If only the youth who maimed us would return the beak and the wing and the leg that he hacked off, we would tell him anything he wants to know.”

At that the Youngest Brother stepped out from behind the firewood and said:

“Tell me then where I can find the Nightingale Gisar and you shall have back your beak and your wing and your leg.”

He opened his bag and the maidens were overjoyed to see their beak and their wing and their leg. Then they told the Youngest Brother all they knew about the Nightingale Gisar.

“Far from here,” they said, “there is a Warrior Princess, so beautiful that men call her Flower o’ the World. She has the Nightingale Gisar in a golden cage hanging in her own chamber. The chamber door is guarded by a lion and a wolf and a tiger for the Flower o’ the World knows that she will have to marry the man who steals from her the Nightingale Gisar.”

“How can a man enter the chamber of the Flower o’ the World?” the Youngest Brother asked.

“For a few moments at midnight,” the sisters told him, “the three animals sleep. During those few moments a man could enter the chamber, get the Nightingale Gisar, and escape. But even then he might not be safe for the Flower o’ the World might gather her army together and pursue him.”

“Now tell me how to reach the palace of that Warrior Princess, Flower o’ the World.”

“You could never get there alone,” they told him, “the way is too long and the dangers are too many. Stay here with us for three months and at the end of three months we will carry you thither on our wings.”

So for three months the Youngest Brother stayed on in the hut with the old woman and her three daughters. The three daughters flew in their eagle shirts to the spring of the Water of Life and bathing in that magic pool they made grow on again the beak and the wing and the leg which the Youngest Brother had hacked off.

At the end of three months they carried the Youngest Brother on their wings to the distant kingdom where the Warrior Princess, Flower o' the World, lived.

At midnight they set him down in front of the palace and he slipped unseen through the guards at the gate and through the halls of the palace to the Princess's own chamber. The lion, the wolf, and the tiger were asleep and he was able to push back the curtain before which they were lying and creep up to the Princess's very bedside without being discovered.

He looked once at the sleeping Flower o' the World and she was so beautiful that he dared not look again for fear he should forget the Nightingale Gisar and betray himself by crying out.

At the head of the bed were four lighted candles and at the foot four unlighted ones. He blew out the lighted ones and lit the others. Then quickly he took the golden cage in which the Nightingale Gisar was perched asleep, unfastened it from the golden chain on which it was hanging, and hurried out. The eagles were waiting for him and at once they spread their wings and carried him away.

They put him down at the crossroads where he had parted from his brothers just one year before. Then they bade him farewell and flew off to their home in the desert.

"My brothers will probably be here in an hour or so," the Youngest Son thought. "I had better wait for them."

He felt sleepy, so he lay down by the roadside and closed his eyes.

While he slept his brothers arrived and of course the first thing they saw was the golden cage and the Nightingale Gisar.

Then envy and hatred filled their hearts and they began cursing and complaining to think that he who was the Youngest had succeeded where they had failed.

"We'll be the laughing-stock of the whole country!" they said, "if we let him come home carrying the Nightingale Gisar! Let us take the bird while he sleeps and hurry home with it. Then if he comes home later and says it was he who really found the bird no one will believe him."

So they beat their brother into insensibility and tore his clothes to rags to make him think that he had been set

upon by robbers, and then taking the golden cage and the Nightingale Gisar they hurried home and presented themselves to their father, the Sultan.

“Here, O father,” they said, “is the Nightingale Gisar! To get this glorious bird for you we have endured all the perils in the world!”

“And your Youngest Brother,” the Sultan asked, “where is he?”

“The Youngest? Think no more of him, father, for he is unworthy to be your son. Instead of searching the wide world for the Nightingale Gisar, he settled down in the first city he reached and lived a life of idleness and ease. Some say he became a barber and some say he opened a coffee-house and spent his days chatting with passing travelers. He has not come home with us for no doubt it shames him to know that we have succeeded where he has failed.”

The Sultan was grieved to hear this evil report of his Youngest Son, but he was overjoyed to have the Nightingale Gisar. He had the golden cage carried to the mosque and hung beside the fountain in the court.

But imagine his disappointment when the bird refused to sing!

“Let him who found the Nightingale come to the mosque,” the Dervish said in his droning sing-song voice, “and then the Nightingale will sing.”

The Sultan immediately sent for his two sons. They came but still the bird was silent.

“See now,” the Sultan said, “my two sons are here and yet the bird is silent.”

But the Dervish would only repeat:

“Let him who found the Nightingale come to the mosque and then the Nightingale will sing.”

The next day a youth in rags whom nobody knew entered the mosque to pray and instantly the Nightingale began to sing.

A messenger was sent running to the Sultan with the news that the Nightingale was singing. The Sultan hurried to the mosque but by the time he got there the beggar youth was gone and the Nightingale had stopped

singing.

“Now that I’m here,” cried the Sultan, “why does the bird not sing?”

The Dervish, swaying his body gently back and forth, made answer as before:

“Let him who found the Nightingale come to the mosque and then the Nightingale will sing.”

Thereafter every day when the beggar youth came to the mosque to pray the Nightingale sang, and always when the Sultan approached the beggar walked away and the bird stopped singing. At last people began whispering:

“Strange that the Nightingale should sing only when that beggar youth is near! And yet the Dervish says it will not sing unless he who found it comes to the mosque! What can he mean?”

Report of the beggar youth reached the ears of the Sultan and he went to the Dervish and questioned him.

“Why do you say that the Nightingale Gisar will not sing unless he who found him comes to the mosque? Lo, here are my two sons who found him and the bird remains silent, yet people tell me that when a certain beggar comes to the mosque he sings. Why does he not sing when I and my two sons come to pray?”

And always the Dervish made the same answer in the same sing-song voice:

“Let him who found the Nightingale come to the mosque and then the Nightingale will sing.”

Soon a terrifying rumor spread through the land that a great Warrior Princess called Flower o’ the World was coming with a mighty army to make war on the Sultan and to destroy his city. Her army far outnumbered the Sultan’s and when she encamped in a broad valley over against the city the Sultan’s people, seeing her mighty hosts, were filled with dread and besought their ruler to make peace with the Princess at any cost. So the Sultan called his heralds and sent them to her and through them he said:

“Demand of me what you will even to my life but spare my city.”

The Warrior Princess returned this answer:

“I will spare you and your city provided you deliver me your son who stole from me the Nightingale Gisar. Him

I shall have executed or let live as it pleases me.”

Now the Sultan’s two sons knew that the Flower o’ the World was fated to marry the man who had stolen from her the Nightingale Gisar, so when they heard the Princess’s demand they were overjoyed thinking that she would have to fall in love with one of them. So they disputed at great length as to which of them had done the actual deed of taking the bird, each insisting that it was he and not his brother. The Sultan himself had finally to decide between them.

“You have told me,” he said, “that you captured the bird together. As that is the case and as I can’t send you both to the Warrior Princess it is only right that the older should go.”

So under a splendid escort the oldest son rode to the tent of the Warrior Princess. She bade him enter alone and when he appeared before her she looked at him long and steadily. Then she said:

“Nay, but you are never the man who stole from me the Nightingale Gisar! You would lack the courage to face the perils of the way!”

The oldest prince answered the Flower o’ the World craftily:

“But how, Princess, if I did not steal from you the Nightingale Gisar was I then able to bring back that glorious bird and hang his cage beside the fountain in the mosque?”

But Flower o’ the World was not to be deceived by such specious words.

“Tell me then,” she said, “if it was you who stole my glorious Nightingale, where did you find him hanging in his golden cage?”

The oldest prince could not answer this, so he said at random:

“I found his golden cage hanging in the cypress tree that grows in the garden of your palace.”

“Enough!” cried the Princess.

She clapped her hands and when her guards appeared she said to them:

“Have this man executed at once and let his head be sent to the Sultan with the message: This is the head of a

liar and a coward! Send me at once your son who stole my glorious Nightingale Gisar or I will march against your city!”

The Sultan was greatly shocked to receive this message together with the head of his oldest son.

“Alas!” he cried, calling his second son, “would that I had listened to you when you insisted that it was you and not your brother who actually did the deed! Unhappily I listened to your brother! See now the awful result of this mistake! Go you now to this heartless Princess whom men call Flower o’ the World or else our poor defenseless city will have to pay the penalty.”

So the second prince was taken to the tent of the Warrior Maiden and she put to him the same questions and he fared even worse than his brother had fared. So his head, too, was sent to the Sultan with this message:

“Send me no more liars and cowards but the son who actually did steal from me my glorious Nightingale Gisar.”

In despair the Sultan went to the mosque to pray. As he bowed his head he heard the Nightingale burst forth in song. Then when he looked up he saw a beggar youth standing near the fountain.

When his prayers were finished the Sultan went outside to the Dervish and said to him:

“The Warrior Princess, Flower o’ the World, demands that I send her another son. I know not where my Third Son is. What shall I do?”

Without looking at the Sultan the Dervish answered in his sing-song voice:

“Send her the son for whom the Nightingale sings.”

The Sultan turned away in disappointment, not understanding what the Dervish meant, but one of his attendants plucked his sleeve and whispered:

“The Nightingale sings for yonder beggar youth. Perhaps it is he the Dervish means. Why not ask him if he will go to Flower o’ the World in place of your Youngest Son?”

The Sultan nodded, so the attendant called the beggar youth and the Sultan asked him would he go to the Warrior Princess as the Youngest Prince.

“Allah alone knows where my Youngest Son is,” the Sultan said, “but he is just about your age and if you were washed and anointed and dressed in fitting garments you would not be unlike him.”

The beggar youth said he would go but he insisted on going just as he was. The Sultan begged him to go dressed as a prince or the Flower o’ the World might not receive him.

“No,” said the youth, “I shall go as a beggar or not at all. It is for the Flower o’ the World to know me whether or not I am the Sultan’s Youngest Son and the man who stole from her the Nightingale Gisar.”

So he went as he was to the tent of the Flower o’ the World and her warriors when they saw him coming said to the Princess:

“This Sultan mocks you and sends you a beggar when you demand his Third Son.”

But the Flower o’ the World ordered them all out and bade the beggar enter alone. She looked at him long and steadily and she saw through his rags that he was indeed a noble youth with a body made strong and beautiful through exercise and toil and she thought to herself:

“It were not a hard fate to marry this youth!”

Then she questioned him:

“Are you the Sultan’s Third Son?”

“I am.”

“Then why are you dressed as a beggar?”

“Because I was set upon at the crossroads and beaten insensible and my clothes torn to rags. I was coming home with the Nightingale Gisar in my hands and I lay down at the roadside to rest while I awaited the coming of my brothers. When I awoke to consciousness the Nightingale and its golden cage were gone. I came home to my father’s city as a beggar and there they told me that my brothers had come just before me bringing with

them the Nightingale and boasting of the perils they had been through and the dangers they had faced. But the Nightingale, they told me, hanging in its golden cage beside the fountain, was silent. Yet when I went to the mosque it always sang.”

The Warrior Princess looked deep into his eyes and knew that he was speaking truth. Her heart was touched with compassion at the wrong he had suffered from his brothers, but she hid her feelings and questioned him further.

“Then it was you,” she said, “who really took from me my glorious Nightingale Gisar?”

“Yes, Princess, it was. I crept past the lion and the wolf and the tiger just after midnight while they slept. I blew out the four candles at the head of your bed and lighted those at the foot. The golden cage of the Nightingale was hanging from a golden chain. Before I unfastened it I looked at you once, as you lay sleeping, and dared not look a second time.”

“Why not?” the Princess asked.

“Because, O Flower o’ the World, you were so beautiful that I feared, were I to look again, I should forget the Nightingale Gisar and cry out in ecstasy.”

Then the compassion in the Princess’s heart changed to love and she knew for a certainty that this was the man she was fated to wed.

She clapped her hands and when the guards came in she said to them:

“Call my warriors together that I may show them the Sultan’s Youngest Son and the man who stole from me my glorious Nightingale Gisar and whom I am fated to wed.”

So the warriors came in until they crowded the tent to its utmost. Then the Princess stood up and took the Sultan’s Youngest Son by the hand and presented him to the warriors and told them of his great bravery and courage and of all the perils he had endured in order to get the Nightingale Gisar for his father’s mosque.

“He came to me now as a beggar,” she said, “but I knew him at once for truth was in his mouth and courage in his eye. Behold, O warriors, your future lord!”

Then the warriors waved their swords and cried:

“Long live the Flower o’ the World! Long live the Sultan’s Youngest Son!”

All the Princess’s army when they heard the news raised such a mighty shout that the people in the Sultan’s city heard and were filled with dread not knowing what it meant. But soon they knew and then they, too, went mad with joy that what had threatened to be a war was turning to a wedding!

The Flower o’ the World and her chief warriors and with them the Youngest Prince rode slowly to the city. The Prince was now dressed as befitted his rank and the Sultan when he saw him recognized him at once.

“Allah be praised!” he cried, “my Youngest Son lives!”

Then they told him all—how it was this Prince and not the older brothers who had found the Nightingale Gisar and how the older brothers had robbed him of his prize and beaten him insensible.

When the Sultan heard how wicked his older sons had been his grief for their death was assuaged.

“Allah be praised,” he said, “that I have at least one son who is worthy!”

After the betrothal ceremony the Sultan and the Youngest Prince went to the mosque to pray. While they prayed the Nightingale sang so gloriously that it seemed to them they were no longer on earth but in Paradise.

When their prayers were finished and they were passing out, the Dervish raised his sing-song voice and said:

“Now indeed is the Sultan’s Mosque the most beautiful Mosque in the World for the Nightingale Gisar sings beside the Fountain!”

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