



The Wonderful Bird

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Romanian

Intermediate

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Once upon a time, something happened. If it had not happened, it would not be told.

There was a good, pious emperor, who had three sons. Among many other benefits bestowed upon the inhabitants of his empire he built a church, about which marvelous stories were told, for he adorned it with gold, precious stones and every thing the workmen of that country regarded as beautiful and valuable. Within and in front of this church were numbers of marble columns, and it was supplied with the finest paintings, silver chandeliers, huge silver lamps, and the rarest books. The more the emperor rejoiced in its beauty, the more sorrowful he felt that he could not finish it, for the steeple continually fell down.

“How is it that this sacred church can not be completed?” he asked. “I have spent all my property and it is not yet done.” So he ordered a proclamation to be sent throughout the empire, stating that any architect who could finish the church steeple would receive great gifts and honors. Besides this, a second proclamation was issued, commanding prayers to be read and services held in all the churches, that God might take pity on him and send him a good architect. The third night the monarch dreamed that if any one would fetch the wonderful bird from the other shore and put its nest in the steeple, the church could be finished. He told this dream to his sons, and they vied with each other in offering to set out and devote themselves to their imperial father’s service.

The emperor replied: “I see, my sons, that you all desire to fulfill your duty to God, but you can’t all three go at once. My oldest son shall set out first, if he does not succeed, the second one, and so on until the Lord takes pity upon us.”

The younger sons silently submitted; the oldest one made his preparations for the journey. He traveled as best he could, and when he had passed the frontiers of his father’s empire, found himself in a beautiful grove. After lighting a fire he stood waiting until his food was cooked. Suddenly he saw a fox, which begged him to tie up his hound, give it a bit of bread and a glass of wine, and let it rest by his fire. Instead of granting the request the prince released the hound, which instantly pursued the animal, whereupon the fox, by a magic spell, transformed the emperor’s son into a block of stone.

When the sovereign saw that his oldest son did not return, he listened to the entreaties of his second son, and gave him permission to set forth to find the wonderful bird. After making his preparations and taking some provisions with him, this prince also departed. On the spot where his brother had been turned to stone, the same thing happened to him, because he also refused the fox’s entreaties, and tried to catch it, to get its skin.

The emperor grew very thoughtful, when after a long time his sons failed to return, either with or without the wonderful bird.

At last the youngest said: “You see, father, it is now a long time since my brothers set out to find the wonderful bird, and they haven’t come home yet; give me some money and clothes for the journey that I may try my luck also. If I succeed, you will rejoice, because your dream will be fulfilled, and if I do not, you will suffer no

mortification from it.”

“Your older brothers have apparently been unable to get this wonderful bird,” replied the emperor; “nay, perhaps they have even lost their lives, they have been absent so long. I am old; if you go too, who will help me in the cares of government; if I die, who is there to ascend the throne except you, my son? Stay here, my dear child, do not leave me.”

“You know, my royal father, that I have never swerved a hair’s breadth from your commands, and if I now venture to urge my petition it is only because, if possible, I would fain fulfill a wish that gives you no rest, which you have cherished so many years and striven to realize at so great a cost.”

After many entreaties, the emperor yielded. The prince chose from the imperial stables a horse that pleased him, took a dog for a companion, supplied himself with sufficient food and departed.

After some time had passed, the emperor’s two older sons suddenly arrived with the magic bird and a young girl, who was placed in charge of the poultry-yard. Every body wondered at the beauty of the bird, whose plumage glittered with a thousand hues, each feather shining like the sun, and the church-steeple did not fall after the bird and its nest were placed within. One thing, however, was noticed; the bird seemed dumb, it never uttered a note, and all who saw it grieved that so beautiful a creature should have no song; even the emperor, spite of all the pleasure he took in the church and steeple, was sorrowful because the bird did not sing.

People began to forget the youngest son, so great was the rejoicing over the bird that seemed to keep the steeple from falling, and thus enabled the workmen to finish the church; but the emperor grieved because the prince was not there to share his subjects’ pleasure.

One day the poultry-keeper came to him and said: “May thy face shine, mighty emperor, the whole city is marveling at the singing of the magic bird—a shepherd entered the church early this morning, and the bird instantly began to sing as if it would burst its throat, and is so happy that it can hardly keep in its nest. This has happened to-day for the second time. While the shepherd is in the church the bird never stops singing, but as soon as he goes away, it is silent.”

“Let the shepherd be brought before me at once.”

“Your majesty, the shepherd seems to be a stranger; no one here knows him. Your majesty’s sons, I hear, have set guards to arrest him.”

“Silence,” said the emperor; “do not mention my sons; it is not seemly for you to speak against them.”

The sovereign sent some of his most trusty servants to keep watch, seize the shepherd as soon as he entered the church and the bird began to sing, and bring him before him. But, not content with this, he went himself the next holiday to hear the bird’s wonderful singing with his own ears, and see the shepherd. If he had not been present, a violent conflict would have arisen between his own people and the spies sent by his sons, who evidently wished to lay hands on the shepherd. The emperor ordered that he should be brought to the palace, for a strange feeling stirred in his heart when he saw the timid youth with the figure of a hero.

When he came out of church, the monarch went directly home to his palace, for his heart told him that there must be something unusual about this shepherd. On seeing him, he said:—

“Tell me, my son, from what part of the country do you come? Have you any parents, and how did you get here?”

“My story is a long one, most noble emperor. I have parents and brothers. I shall need more time to tell you how I came hither, but if it is your majesty’s will, I am ready. I will come to your majesty early to-morrow morning, it is too late to-day.”

“Very well, my brave fellow, I will expect you at dawn to-morrow.”

Early the next morning the shepherd came to await the emperor’s commands; but as soon as the emperor heard that he had arrived, he summoned him.

“Tell me, my son, what is the reason the magic bird sings as soon as you enter the church, and stops when you go out.”

“To understand that and other things, your majesty, let me tell you my whole story.”

“I will listen; tell me anything you please.”

The shepherd then began:—

“I have a father, and brothers. I left my home to do something to please my father, who was sad because he had a wish that could not be fulfilled. After a journey of several days I reached a beautiful meadow, from which branched several roads. Intending to spend the night there, I lighted a fire, took out some of the provisions I had brought with me, and was just sitting down to eat them, when I suddenly saw a fox beside me. Whence it came I did not know; it seemed as if it had sprung up out of the earth.

“Please let me warm myself by your fire,’ it said. ‘See, I am so cold that my teeth chatter. Give me a bit of bread and a glass of wine, that I may satisfy my hunger and thirst, and tie your dog, so I can eat in peace and rest without fear.’

“Very well,’ I replied, ‘come and warm yourself. Here are my provisions and my flask, eat and drink as much as you choose.’

“I tied my dog, and we sat down by the fire and talked together. Among other things, I told the fox where I was going, and even asked if it could tell me what I should do to accomplish the task I had voluntarily undertaken.

“Have no anxiety about that,’ replied the fox. ‘We’ll set out together early to-morrow morning, and if I don’t help you to the goal, never trust me again.’

“We sat by the fire, feasting like two friends, then the fox bade me good-night, and vanished like a shadow. I wondered how it had been possible that I did not see what direction the animal took, and while racking my brains to find out how it had managed to go and come unperceived, I fell asleep. When the fox came at dawn next morning, it found me gazing in astonishment at several blocks of stone, which resembled two men, two dogs, and two horses. As soon as I saw the animal, we prepared to set out.

“The fox turned three somersaults and suddenly changed into a handsome hero. On the way he told me that the place where I had spent the night was part of his property, that he was married and had several children, but had been condemned to wear the form of a fox until some human being would take pity on him and receive him, let him warm himself by the same fire, give him a bit of bread and glass of wine. As I was this man, he was

now released from the spell, and would go with me and never leave me until I had accomplished my object. This event pleased me, and we journeyed on and on all through the long summer day until late at night when we reached a mountain meadow, where we encamped. My traveling companion told me that the next day we should be obliged to pass through the lands of several dragons, and he thought we should there find what we sought.

“The following morning we entered the dragons’ country, though somewhat timidly, and about noon reached the dragon-palace. It is impossible to describe the magnificent things we saw there. Gardens with all sorts of flowers and fruits, rooms that seemed lined with silver, so that they shone in the sun like mirrors, walls covered with paintings and carved flowers. Every corner of the palace was gilded, and fountains cast jets of water into the air. Luckily for us, the dragons were not at home when we arrived. On the threshold we met a beautiful girl, a girl who looked as sweet as if she were made of sugar, and who advised us not to enter the court-yard in the dragons’ absence, or we should meet with some misfortune. Then she wept for joy at seeing people from the place from whence the dragons had stolen her. When we asked her about the wonderful bird, she said it was in the possession of some other dragons, relatives of those on whose lands we were.

“Go there,’ she added, ‘for with God’s help, I hope you will succeed, and when you return, take me with you.’

“After she had told us how we could enter the dragons’ court-yard and what we must do, I swore by what was dearest to me in the world, my father, that I would not leave her in the dragons’ power, but take her away. Then we continued the journey. To tell the truth, I loved her as soon as I saw her.

“When we reached the borders of the next dragon-kingdom, we stopped to rest, but at dawn the following day we crossed the frontier and by noon reached their palace, which was even more beautiful than the first one. As soon as I had dismounted from my horse, I went to the stable, but my companion turned back, for this was what the girl had advised. The horses were at their cribs. One turned its head and looked at me. I patted its eyes, pulled its ears, threw a bridle over its neck, mounted it, and in riding by, took the cage with the magic bird that hung in the entry.”

“You brought the wonderful bird?” cried the emperor. “Then you are my son, whom all believe dead.”

“Even so, father.” And after kissing the emperor’s hand, he begged him to send for the poultry-keeper. When

she came, the shepherd said, "This is the girl of whom I told you."

"How is that possible!" replied the emperor. "How did she become a poultry maid?"

"She'll tell you that herself. I don't know. So, as I was saying," he continued, "after I had snatched the cage I fled as fast as I could on the horse I had taken from the dragons, but the other horses began to neigh and make such a noise that my hair fairly bristled, yet I held firm. The dragons chased me until I reached my comrade, who was waiting for me on the frontier. If it had not been for him, they would have seized me, and who knows what would have become of me then. But my companion stretched out his hand, shouting, 'Stop!' The dragons seemed to be suddenly turned to stone; not another step forward did they take. After embracing and kissing me he admired the bird's beauty. The dragons did every thing in their power to get it from me, and made all sorts of promises, but when they saw they could not persuade me, begged me at least to give them the horse. I perceived it would not be right to leave them in such a sad state, so I returned the horse and went on with my companion and the bird, but the dragons almost stared their eyes out after it.

"When we reached the other dragon palace, the girl was waiting for us at the gate. Cracking her whip three times the whole building changed into an apple, which she put in her pocket. I passed my arm around her, and we set out. But oh! dear, when the dragons discovered it! How they chased us, roaring so that our blood curdled in our veins. I summoned all my courage, spurred my horse, and fled like the wind with my companion. But the dragons came as fast as thought. When my comrade saw this, and perceived that there was no possibility of escape, he stopped, made a sign and turned them into blocks of stone. Then we continued our journey till we reached the field from which we had started and which was part of the fox's property. After we had rested and I had thanked God that we had accomplished our task, I asked my comrade what those stone pillars meant.

"He answered: 'If you know you will regret it, and if you don't know, you will also regret it.'

"Pray tell me.'

"These are your brothers,' he answered. 'Instead of kindly granting my request, as you did, they set their hounds on me, which condemned me to wear the loathsome fox-skin still longer, so I turned them to stone.'

“For my sake,’ I entreated, ‘for the sake of our friendship, make them men again as they were before.’

“I prize your friendship greatly,’ he replied, ‘so let it be as you wish—but you’ll repent it.’

“In an instant he made a sign with his hand, the stones suddenly shook, and my brothers remained motionless with amazement, when they saw us before them. We took leave of my comrade and set out on our way home. But see what a fine trick my brothers played me.

“Brother,’ they said, after we had ridden about a mile, ‘we are tired by the long distance, and it is very warm. Let us go to a pond we know here and each drink a little to cool ourselves.’ I agreed, and we went there. The oldest drank, so did the second one, but when I was going to drink too, lying face downward at the edge of the pond, so that I could reach the water with my lips, as they had done, I suddenly felt a terrible burning sensation in both feet, and when I turned to see the cause, could not get up; my brothers had cut off both my feet, and then hurried off, without listening to my complaints and entreaties.

“I spent three days and nights beside the pond. When my good horse saw a dragon coming, it lifted me by my clothes with its teeth, ran as far as it could and kicked so violently that no wild beast could approach us.

“At last, on the fourth day, I met a blind man groping his way along. ‘Who are you?’ I asked.

“A poor, maimed fellow,’ said he. Then, after he had told me that his brothers, out of envy, had put out his eyes, I told him that my brothers had cut off my feet.

“I’ll tell you what!’ he exclaimed. ‘We’ll take an oath of brotherhood. I have feet, you have eyes, so I’ll carry you on my back. I’ll walk for you, and you shall see for me. A huge scorpion lives close by, whose blood cures all kinds of diseases.’

“I accepted his offer, and we went to the scorpion’s house. He was not at home, so the blind man put me behind the door, telling me to kill him with my sword as soon as he came in; then he hid himself behind the stove. We did not wait long before the scorpion entered in a great rage, for he had noticed that somebody had broken into his house. When I saw him my heart shrunk till it was no bigger than a flea, but as he came in I waited till he was close by me, then struck one blow that chopped all three of his heads off at once.

“I instantly smeared myself with the hot blood and as soon as it touched my feet they stuck as fast as if they had never been cut off. I also smeared the blind man’s eyes, and his sight returned. After thanking God, each set out on his own way.

“I did not want to go home at once, but thought it best to hire out as a shepherd and leave God to arrange things so that the criminals’ guilt should appear. I was not disappointed in my confidence, for you see His power is great and His judgment just.”

“Now tell me how you became a servant and poultry-maid,” said the emperor to the maiden.

“After your imperial majesty’s oldest sons had cut off their youngest brother’s feet, one of them took me, the other the wonderful bird. I thought my heart would dissolve with grief because I was obliged to part from your majesty’s youngest son, whom I loved because he was such a noble man. They proposed that I should love one of them, and promised that he would marry me as soon as we reached the emperor’s court. After refusing all their offers, I preferred to take service as your majesty’s poultry maid, rather than go anywhere else, for I knew God would not let a man who did right perish, and now I thank Him for having shown me that a good deed is never lost.”

“Can you prove,” asked the emperor, “that you are the girl and no one else?”

“This apple will show every one that I am she,” replied the girl, drawing it from her bosom. “Your older sons knew nothing about it, or they would have taken it from me.”

With these words she went out of doors, cracked a little whip three times over the apple and a magnificent palace, more splendid than any in the kingdom, instantly arose.

The emperor himself was astonished. He wished to celebrate his youngest son’s return, but the latter said, “Father, before we thank God that I have come home alive, let us three brothers submit to His judgment.”

The emperor could make no objection. The brothers were led before him and he ordered the older ones to kneel and ask the youngest son’s forgiveness. But he replied: “If God forgives you, I will also.”

As they could not avoid it, they went in front of the church, and set out three bee-hives at equal distances apart.

Each brother stood with his feet in one, and hurled a stone into the air from a sling. The elder brothers' stones in falling back struck them so hard on the head that they were killed, but the youngest brother's fell in front of him.

Many had assembled to witness this trial. After the wedding was over and the emperor had married his son to the poultry-maid, he came down from the throne and gave it to the prince, who, if alive, reigns there still.

I was present at these events, and now tell them to those who listen.

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