

Unlooked-For Prince

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Slavic

Intermediate

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A long time ago there lived a king and queen who had no children, although they both wished very much for a little son. They tried not to let each other see how unhappy they were, and pretended to take pleasure in hunting and hawking and all sorts of other sports; but at length the king could bear it no longer, and declared that he must go and visit the furthest corners of his kingdom, and that it would be many months before he should return to his capital.

By that time he hoped he would have so many things to think about that he would have forgotten to trouble about the little son who never came.

The country the king reigned over was very large, and full of high, stony mountains and sandy deserts, so that it was not at all easy to go from one place to another. One day the king had wandered out alone, meaning to go only a little distance, but everything looked so alike he could not make out the path by which he had come. He walked on and on for hours, the sun beating hotly on his head, and his legs trembling under him, and he might have died of thirst if he had not suddenly stumbled on a little well, which looked as if it had been newly dug. On the surface floated a silver cup with a golden handle, but as it bobbed about whenever the king tried to seize it, he was too thirsty to wait any longer and knelt down and drank his fill.

When he had finished he began to rise from his knees, but somehow his beard seemed to have stuck fast in the water, and with all his efforts he could not pull it out. After two or three jerks to his head, which only hurt him

without doing any good, he called out angrily, 'Let go at once! Who is holding me?'

'It is I, the King Kostiei,' said a voice from the well, and looking up through the water was a little man with green eyes and a big head. 'You have drunk from my spring, and I shall not let you go until you promise to give me the most precious thing your palace contains, which was not there when you left it.'

Now the only thing that the king much cared for in his palace was the queen herself, and as she was weeping bitterly on a pile of cushions in the great hall when he had ridden away, he knew that Kostiei's words could not apply to her. So he cheerfully gave the promise asked for by the ugly little man, and in the twinkling of an eye, man, spring, and cup had disappeared, and the king was left kneeling on the dry sand, wondering if it was all a dream. But as he felt much stronger and better he made up his mind that this strange adventure must really have happened, and he sprang on his horse and rode off with a light heart to look for his companions.

In a few weeks they began to set out on their return home, which they reached one hot day, eight months after they had all left. The king was greatly beloved by his people, and crowds lined the roads, shouting and waving their hats as the procession passed along. On the steps of the palace stood the queen, with a splendid golden cushion in her arms, and on the cushion the most beautiful boy that ever was seen, wrapped about in a cloud of lace. In a moment Kostiei's words rushed into the king's mind, and he began to weep bitterly, to the surprise of everybody, who had expected him nearly to die of joy at the sight of his son. But try as he would and work as hard as he might he could never forget his promise, and every time he let the baby out of his sight he thought that he had seen it for the last time.

However, years passed on and the prince grew first into a big boy, and then into a fine young man. Kostiei made no sign, and gradually even the anxious king thought less and less about him, and in the end forgot him altogether.

There was no family in the whole kingdom happier than the king and queen and prince, until one day when the youth met a little old man as he was hunting in a lonely part of the woods. 'How are you my unlooked-for Prince?' he said. 'You kept them waiting a good long time!'

'And who are you?' asked the prince.

'You will know soon enough. When you go home give my compliments to your father and tell him that I wish he would square accounts with me. If he neglects to pay his debts he will bitterly repent it.'

So saying the old man disappeared, and the prince returned to the palace and told his father what had happened.

The king turned pale and explained to his son the terrible story.

'Do not grieve over it, father,' answered the prince. 'It is nothing so dreadful after all! I will find some way to force Kostiei to give up his rights over me. But if I do not come back in a year's time, you must give up all hopes of ever seeing me.'

Then the prince began to prepare for his journey. His father gave him a complete suit of steel armour, a sword, and a horse, while his mother hung round his neck a cross of gold. So, kissing him tenderly, with many tears they let him go.

He rode steadily on for three days, and at sunset on the fourth day he found himself on the seashore. On the sand before him lay twelve white dresses, dazzling as the snow, yet as far as his eyes could reach there was no one in sight to whom they could belong. Curious to see what would happen, he took up one of the garments, and leaving his horse loose, to wander about the adjoining fields, he hid himself among some willows and waited. In a few minutes a flock of geese which had been paddling about in the sea approached the shore, and put on the dresses, struck the sand with their feet and were transformed in the twinkling of an eye into eleven beautiful young girls, who flew away as fast as they could. The twelfth and youngest remained in the water, stretching out her long white neck and looking about her anxiously. Suddenly, among the willows, she perceived the king's son, and called out to him with a human voice:

'Oh Prince, give me back my dress, and I shall be for ever grateful to you.'

The prince hastened to lay the dress on the sand, and walked away. When the maiden had thrown off the goose-skin and quickly put on her proper clothes, she came towards him and he saw that none had ever seen or told of such beauty as hers. She blushed and held out her hand, saying to him in a soft voice:

'I thank you, noble Prince, for having granted my request. I am the youngest daughter of Kostiei the immortal, who has twelve daughters and rules over the kingdoms under the earth. Long time my father has waited for

you, and great is his anger. But trouble not yourself and fear nothing, only do as I bid you. When you see the King Kostiei, fall straightway upon your knees and heed neither his threats nor his cry, but draw near to him boldly. That which will happen after, you will know in time. Now let us go.'

At these words she struck the ground with her foot and a gulf opened, down which they went right into the heart of the earth. In a short time they reached Kostiei's palace, which gives light, with a light brighter than the sun, to the dark kingdoms below. And the prince, as he had been bidden, entered boldly into the hall.

Kostiei, with a shining crown upon his head, sat in the centre upon a golden throne. His green eyes glittered like glass, his hands were as the claws of a crab. When he caught sight of the prince he uttered piercing yells, which shook the walls of the palace. The prince took no notice, but continued his advance on his knees towards the throne. When he had almost reached it, the king broke out into a laugh and said:

'It has been very lucky for you that you have been able to make me laugh. Stay with us in our underground empire, only first you will have to do three things. To-night it is late. Go to sleep; to-morrow I will tell you.'

Early the following morning the prince received a message that Kostiei was ready to see him. He got up and dressed, and hastened to the presence chamber, where the little king was seated on his throne. When the prince appeared, bowing low before him, Kostiei began:

'Now, Prince, this is what you have to do. By to-night you must build me a marble palace, with windows of crystal and a roof of gold. It is to stand in the middle of a great park, full of streams and lakes. If you are able to build it you shall be my friend. If not, off with your head.'

The prince listened in silence to this startling speech, and then returning to his room set himself to think about the certain death that awaited him. He was quite absorbed in these thoughts, when suddenly a bee flew against the window and tapped, saying, 'Let me come in.' He rose and opened the window, and there stood before him the youngest princess.

'What are you dreaming about, Prince?'

'I was dreaming of your father, who has planned my death.'

‘Fear nothing. You may sleep in peace, and to-morrow morning when you awake you will find the palace all ready.’

What she said, she did. The next morning when the prince left his room he saw before him a palace more beautiful than his fancy had ever pictured. Kostiei for his part could hardly believe his eyes, and pondered deeply how it had got there.

‘Well, this time you have certainly won; but you are not going to be let off so easily. To-morrow all my twelve daughters shall stand in a row before you, and if you cannot tell me which of them is the youngest, off goes your head.’

‘What! Not recognise the youngest princess!’ said the Prince to himself, as he entered his room, ‘a likely story!’

‘It is such a difficult matter that you will never be able to do it without my help,’ replied the bee, who was buzzing about the ceiling. ‘We are all so exactly alike, that even our father scarcely knows the difference between us.’

‘Then what must I do?’

‘This. The youngest is she who will have a ladybird on her eyelid. Be very careful. Now good-bye.’

Next morning King Kostiei again sent for the prince. The young princesses were all drawn up in a row, dressed precisely in the same manner, and with their eyes all cast down. As the prince looked at them, he was amazed at their likeness. Twice he walked along the line, without being able to detect the sign agreed upon. The third time his heart beat fast at the sight of a tiny speck upon the eyelid of one of the girls.

‘This one is the youngest,’ he said.

‘How in the world did you guess?’ cried Kostiei in a fury. ‘There is some jugglery about it! But you are not going to escape me so easily. In three hours you shall come here and give me another proof of your cleverness. I shall set alight a handful of straw, and before it is burnt up you will have turned it into a pair of boots. If not, off goes your head.’

So the prince returned sadly into his room, but the bee was there before him.

‘Why do you look so melancholy, my handsome Prince?’

‘How can I help looking melancholy when your father has ordered me to make him a pair of boots? Does he take me for a shoemaker?’

‘What do you think of doing?’

‘Not of making boots, at any rate! I am not afraid of death. One can only die once after all.’

‘No, Prince, you shall not die. I will try to save you. And we will fly together or die together.’

As she spoke she spat upon the ground, and then drawing the prince after her out of the room, she locked the door behind her and threw away the key. Holding each other tight by the hand, they made their way up into the sunlight, and found themselves by the side of the same sea, while the prince’s horse was still quietly feeding in the neighbouring meadow. The moment he saw his master, the horse whinnied and galloped towards him. Without losing an instant the prince sprang into the saddle, swung the princess behind him, and away they went like an arrow from a bow.

When the hour arrived which Kostiei had fixed for the prince’s last trial, and there were no signs of him, the king sent to his room to ask why he delayed so long. The servants, finding the door locked, knocked loudly and received for answer, ‘In one moment.’ It was the spittle, which was imitating the voice of the prince.

The answer was taken back to Kostiei. He waited; still no prince. He sent the servants back again, and the same voice replied, ‘Immediately.’

‘He is making fun of me!’ shrieked Kostiei in a rage. ‘Break in the door, and bring him to me!’

The servants hurried to do his bidding. The door was broken open. Nobody inside; but just the spittle in fits of laughter! Kostiei was beside himself with rage, and commanded his guards to ride after the fugitives. If the guards returned without the fugitives, their heads should pay for it.

By this time the prince and princess had got a good start, and were feeling quite happy, when suddenly they heard the sound of a gallop far behind them. The prince sprang from the saddle, and laid his ear to the ground.

‘They are pursuing us,’ he said.

'Then there is no time to be lost,' answered the princess; and as she spoke she changed herself into a river, the prince into a bridge, the horse into a crow, and divided the wide road beyond the bridge into three little ones. When the soldiers came up to the bridge, they paused uncertainly. How were they to know which of the three roads the fugitives had taken? They gave it up in despair and returned in trembling to Kostiei.

'Idiots!' he exclaimed, in a passion. 'They were the bridge and the river, of course! Do you mean to say you never thought of that? Go back at once!' and off they galloped like lightning.

But time had been lost, and the prince and princess were far on their way.

'I hear a horse,' cried the princess.

The prince jumped down and laid his ear to the ground.

'Yes,' he said, 'they are not far off now.'

In an instant prince, princess, and horse had all disappeared, and instead was a dense forest, crossed and recrossed by countless paths. Kostiei's soldiers dashed hastily into the forest, believing they saw before them the flying horse with its double burden. They seemed close upon them, when suddenly horse, wood, everything disappeared, and they found themselves at the place where they started. There was nothing for it but to return to Kostiei, and tell him of this fresh disaster.

'A horse! a horse!' cried the king. 'I will go after them myself. This time they shall not escape.' And he galloped off, foaming with anger.

'I think I hear someone pursuing us,' said the princess

'Yes, so do I.'

'And this time it is Kostiei himself. But his power only reaches as far as the first church, and he can go no farther. Give me your golden cross.' So the prince unfastened the cross which was his mother's gift, and the princess hastily changed herself into a church, the prince into a priest, and the horse into a belfry.

It was hardly done when Kostiei came up.

'Greeting, monk. Have you seen some travellers on horseback pass this way?'

'Yes, the prince and Kostiei's daughter have just gone by. They have entered the church, and told me to give you their greetings if I met you.'

Then Kostiei knew that he had been hopelessly beaten, and the prince and princess continued their journey without any more adventures.

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