



Ridley and the Three Magic

Birds

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Retold Fairy Tales

It was a gloomy night when Ridley made his way home, tired and more dead than alive. Hunting had not been a success that day and to top it all off; his bow had broken in his hand, leaving him to pick out the splinters. Hopefully, the others had had more luck, but he doubted it. He had almost reached the city limits when he heard the sounds of something very big and very heavy moving about. He stopped in his tracks and reached for his dagger.

The fight was over surprisingly quickly. The immense boar was too blinded with rage to pay Ridley's slight form much heed and the young man used it to his advantage; combined with his hunting skills, the beast had no chance whatsoever. Ridley's mood improved considerably, for the meat would last them a good while, and he would have some time to make himself a new bow before the need to hunt again would arise. Whistling all the way, he pulled the carcass behind him and resumed his walk to the cemetery.

His friends were waiting for him in front of the tomb he had made his home when he first came to the city. Without even a penny to his name, he had made do with whatever shelter he could find. By now, it had become home. He greeted the foxes in their tongue, bragging about his catch. They looked at him funny and started whispering to each other.

"Ridley, you did hear the king's proclamation, did you not?" asked Gille.

"What proclamation?" he answered.

"The one about a giant beast and the promise of the prince in marriage to the one to slay it," answered Nuzza.

"Tell me you at least were aware of a beast terrorising the kingdom." Ridley stared at them. In hindsight, he

might have kept himself a bit too separate from other human beings. Then he remembered there had been some rumours about unrest.

“Ah, you mean the plague of swallows, for which the king promised his second daughter?” he guessed. Gille and Nuzza looked at each other and then back at him, giving him wolfish smiles.

“Guess again, why don’t you?” Nuzza said. “The one you are talking about was several years ago. Apparently, the swallows did not like it when the king ordered the destruction of the orchard: they nested there.”

“I remember! I had never met another who could talk to the birds, although his accent was a bit odd. Wasn’t there something about a big cat terrorising the palace staff?” That had to be it.

“Wrong again, dear boy.” He glowered at Gille for calling him that. “For that, the king promised his first daughter. Too bad she and the cat were one and the same. She lost a certain magic ring, and a fisher found it in the belly of a salmon. I believe they are quite happily living at the coast.” His stomach chose that moment to make itself heard.

“Never mind all that,” said Ridley. “Let me skin this pig so we can eat. It’s been too long.”

“About that pig, Ridley,” interrupted Nuzza, more serious this time. “We believe that is the same as the beast rampaging through the countryside.” He stared at her, not sure about the implications. “You know, the one for which the king promised his only unattached child, the prince.” He went from staring to gaping.

“You are joking right?” They shook their heads and grinned at him some more. He sank to the ground and thought he would have been happier without food for another day.

In the end, they did eat some of the meat and cured the rest for later use. Three days later, Ridley sat in an antechamber waiting for an audience with the king. He had brought the head of the boar with him as proof, but only so the king would retract his proclamation. Let him save the prince as a bargaining chip for the next disaster; Ridley was not interested. That was, until the king decided Ridley was not good enough.

The king set his jaw in dismay as soon as Ridley entered the throne room with the beast’s head. He was not at all pleased with this sudden candidate who had not even deigned to introduce himself at court before hunting the beast down. And killing it, it would seem. Before the lout could open his mouth, king Vilppu stood from his throne and made a grand gesture to the space around him.

“Welcome, ye brave slayer of the mighty boar!” he said in a booming voice. “We are grateful for your courage in confronting this evil beast. As a gesture of our appreciation, we will allow you to prove yourself worthy as a candidate for marriage to our prince Everett.” That should deter him, Vilppu thought. Ridley just looked at him, his face a stony mask. “We have a pavilion in which we gather the most luscious of birds. It has come to

our attention, however, that there are some we do not yet have in our collection. A good friend of ours has gifted us with three feathers, each belonging to a bird we greatly desire. If you wish to become a worthy match for our son, you will have to find these birds and capture them for us.” Ridley barely constrained himself from rolling his eyes at that announcement. The king annoyed him; if he had wanted a suitable match for his son, he should not have promised him in return for ridding the land of an easily killed beast. Ridley in no way desired to be married to anyone, let alone a spoiled princeling, but he would go on these quests to see the king splutter. He accepted the feathers and marched out of the palace, leaving the head behind him on the throne room floor.

Back at the graveyard, he showed the feathers to the foxes and told them what he knew about them, which wasn't much at all. The fiery golden feather belonged to the Golden Firebird, the gleaming blue feather to the Blue Falcon, and the shimmering white feather to the Bird of Truth. He hoped Gille and Nuzza would know more.

“The king is an ass. I am still not marrying anyone, but I could not just walk out of there and let that man think he had bullied me away.” He said in explanation when they asked him why he would need to collect these birds. “If I bring him the birds for his precious collection, it will shock him all the more when I refuse his son.” His friends looked at him sceptically, but he ignored them. They got the hint and focussed back on the feathers. “I believe the Firebird belongs to a Tsar some kingdoms over,” said Nuzza. “He keeps it in a cage in his garden, poor bird.”

“The witch Shi has the best hunting-birds in the world, or so they say, and the Blue Falcon is one of them. You might be able to steal it from her if she accepts you as a servant to take care of her animals. If you do well, she might allow you the care of her hunting-birds.” Gille said.

“That sounds easy enough. They are already caged, and the only thing I have to do is steal them. How about the Bird of Truth?”

“I know nothing of it,” said Nuzza.

“I think I heard of it once, but other than that, nothing,” said Gille. “I can find out more if I stay here. You and Nuzza should go after the other birds first. I will find you when I have more information” They agreed and went their separate ways.

Nuzza led Ridley to the witch Shi first because she lived along the route they would take to the Tsar. Gille had told them everything they needed to know about her to get their hands on the Falcon and escape with their skins intact. Nuzza would accompany him to the witch's garden, but no further. He would ask for a position taking care of the animals. Rumour had it; Shi was always looking for new servants for her beasties because the

animals were nowhere near tame. Ridley had the advantage of speaking their language, so he was less likely to be eaten. When the opportunity came, he would steal the Blue Falcon and run as fast as he could, all the while protecting his face with his dagger. None of them knew for certain if this would actually protect him from Shi's evil magic, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

If it was a long way or a short way, a long time or a short time, Ridley made it to the witch's house. He was in luck; just a day earlier, a servant had left with his life, but without one of his hands. Shi ordered Ridley to feed the animals and muck out their cages, starting with the lions. If, after a week, everything was to her satisfaction and he had not run off screaming or been eaten, she would allow him to care for some of her other animals. Ridley did not run screaming, nor did he get eaten by the lions, and Shi was reasonably content with his work. This went on for some weeks; Shi ordering him to tend an animal for a week, and if he did well he was to take care of the next one. Eventually, she allowed him to watch over her prized hunting-birds.

"You must feed them one by one," she told him. "And you must make sure they do not come near each other, or they will fight till one of them is among the living no longer. I will be especially enraged if any harm comes to my darling Blue Falcon." Ridley assured her he would look after them with great care and she left him to it. He fed and groomed the birds for three days before Shi finally went out for a while, giving him the opportunity he had been waiting for. He gathered his belongings and took the Blue Falcon on his arm. At the last moment, he remembered his dagger and held it in front of his face. He was halfway through the garden when the witch suddenly came back.

"I thought you would sneak off one of these days!" she yelled at him. "You will not get away so easily!" Ridley almost dropped everything in fright, but then he stiffened his spine and turned to face her. He really, really hoped the trick with the dagger would work. Shi stretched out her arms toward him and started muttering something. Ridley braced himself for whatever might be coming his way.

It was a bit anticlimactic when it did come. There was a bright flash of light, a tug on his dagger and then a high-pitched scream from Shi. Ridley had closed his eyes for the flash, and when he opened them again, the witch was nowhere to be seen. All that was left of her was a pile of dry twigs at the end of the garden. He slowly made his way over to it and prodded at it. It did not move of its own. Nuzza came running to him while he stood there, the falcon still on his arm.

"What happened?" asked Nuzza as soon as she reached them.

"Well, the dagger worked, I guess," replied Ridley. He stared at the twigs some more. "Should we burn those, just in case?"

"I don't know what case that might be, but it will not hurt anyone." They burned the twigs that had once been

the witch Shi and stayed until the fire had burned itself out. Ridley suggested they free the other animals and Nuzza added they should search the house for useful magic items. They did both, and within a couple of hours, they were ready to continue their journey to the Tsar.

If it was a long way or a short way, a long time or a short time, they made it to the kingdom of the Tsar. While they travelled through the country, it became clear that this was a very rich Tsar and that he was not a good man, which made Ridley feel a little better about stealing from him. On their way to the Tsar's garden, they discussed what was needed to steal the Golden Firebird. It should be quite easy; climb over the wall, take the iron cage in which the bird was kept, and climb back out over the wall again. As long as Ridley did not take the golden cage instead of the iron one, and as long as he stayed off the garden path, he should be fine.

Ridley left the falcon with Nuzza and went bird hunting. He made it over the wall without a hitch, and he could clearly see the Firebird from where he had climbed down. He also saw a lot of guards. They, however, did not notice him, and when he came closer, he could see that all of them were sleeping where they stood. Satisfied that he had not entered into a trap, he went over to the bird and took the iron cage down. The golden one hanging next to it was exquisite, and he imagined anyone who would care for the opinion of a king would have taken the beautiful cage with them instead. Ridley did not care for the opinion of the king, though, and had no trouble leaving the precious cage behind. What he did do was stumble at the weight of the iron cage which held the Firebird and put a single foot on the path leading through the gardens.

This misstep triggered one hell of a noise to sound all around them, and to Ridley's horror, the guards jumped into action, wide awake. He dropped his guise of stealth and ran towards the gates, dodging grasping hands. Somehow, he made it to the gates before the guards did and, fumbling in his pockets for one of the items Nuzza had pushed at him, gave a shout of triumph. He clanged the gates shut and threw the twig he had been searching for at the bars. At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, after a few moments, the twig began to grow rapidly. It creaked, and twisted, and twined itself through the filigree of the gate, wrapping tightly around the handles and hinges before sprouting some impressive thorns. Ridley ran on before he could see the beautiful red and pink flowers that completed the transformation of the magical twig.

After a while, when no one came after him, he stopped running. He made his way to where he had left Nuzza and the falcon, and when he reached them, he was not really surprised to see Gille there as well. They all greeted each other, and Ridley told them what had happened at the Tsar's gardens.

"I told you you'd be glad we took the time to search Shi's house for such items," Nuzza told him smugly.

"I never said I wouldn't be," he objected. Gille cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Now, if you two could stop bickering for a moment, you might find it of interest that I found out a bit more on the Bird of Truth.” Gille had their full attention at that. “What makes this bird special is not its appearance but its ability. Apparently, it speaks in the human tongue and knows a great deal. This is the reason behind its name.” Gille paused for a moment and looked sheepish. “I do not know where to find it. I do, however, know of one who does. In a great tree near the marshes of our homeland, there lives an ancient owl. He is the one that knows more about the Bird of Truth.”

“I cannot imagine it took you this long to find that out,” Nuzza said to Gille with a sly look in her eye. “Why Gille, did you not have the time to look for this bird yourself?” He glowered.

“As a matter of fact, I did go looking for the old bird, but he seems to be afraid of the trickery inherent in our kind – his words, not mine – and refused to have a civilised conversation with me.” Nuzza laughed at that. Ridley gathered his gear and took the birds. He heaved a sigh as he lifted the heavy iron cage and frowned at it. “It might be a good thing that the owl you speak of lives near home. I think I would like to drop off this bird instead of taking it with us to the next one. I am convinced this cage only looks like iron but is in reality solid lead.”

They brought the birds to a trusted friend – a rare commodity – and whether it took them a long time or a short time to get there is of no consequence. Freed of their heavy burden, they moved at a faster pace to their next destination. Whether it was a short way or a long way, they reached the old owl near the marshes. The ancient bird was very hesitant at first, but after Ridley had explained the situation, he admitted he could at least talk to them a bit.

“It might do that sweet fellow of truth some good to undergo a change of scenery,” the owl said thoughtfully. He hopped down to one of the lower branches to make their conversation more comfortable on them all, with only a single wary glance at the foxes.

“As much as I dislike the king’s attitude, I am able to guarantee he will treat the Bird of Truth with great care. He is known for his extravagance in these matters,” Ridley assured the owl.

“Tell me, have you been able to secure these other birds for the king?” Ridley told him about the other two birds and what he had done to steal them away. Gille and Nuzza added some details he had deemed unimportant, and the owl seemed impressed with him. “You might be one who could be able to free the Bird of Truth then, if all you have told me is not a lie. Very well, I will help you along on your quest.” He settled down and made himself comfortable on his branch. “There is, some ways from here, a castle that belongs to the giant Kalju. He is a brute of a giant and so old that he only needs a few minutes of sleep a day. In one of the chambers of this

castle, he keeps a flock of exquisite looking birds, but they are foul of temper and evil of mind. Among them is one that stands out due to its plain looks and lack of speech, for all the other birds never quit their spreading of lies, and this one does not lie and so has nothing to say. This one plain bird is the one you seek.” The owl gave them directions to the castle and told them about the most likely time the giant would be asleep. They thanked him for his information, and Nuzza even caught a hare for the old bird.

Again, they set off on the road, and they found the castle exactly where the owl had told them it would be. They had to wait for half a day before the giant would likely be asleep and spent their time napping after their long journey. When the time came, Ridley carefully made his way to the servant entrance and sneaked inside. The giant did not have servants, so discovery by them was impossible. A thick layer of dust covered everything in sight. Ridley soon found the chamber he was looking for; all of the noise coming from inside made it easy to find. He picked the lock and went in.

Beautiful peacocks and breath-taking birds of paradise were among the many brightly plumaged birds. There were so many of them that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other, and all of them screeched and squabbled without pause for breath. He wandered through the vast room until he made it to the back corner and found what he had been looking for. A dull and rather small bird was driven into that corner, and the other birds pecked and scratched at him. Ridley stooped and picked up the poor thing, putting it safely under his vest.

He soon found himself outside the palace again, but his time was running out. As soon as Kalju woke, he would inspect his birds and see his most precious one missing. To buy them some time in their escape, Ridley dropped a curious black stone from Shi at the gate and made a run for it. He had only taken half a dozen steps when the small stone exploded into a wall of fire, separating Ridley and his friends from the giant’s castle. He imagined he could hear a loud roar from inside the castle above the roar of the fire and decided it would be best to be far away before the blaze died down.

Gille and Nuzza waited patiently for him as he reached them and together they left for their homeland once more.

They picked up the other birds before heading to the palace. Ridley looked even more ragged than the first time he had sought an audience, and it took even longer for the guards to let him through. They made him wait in the antechamber again, and he dozed while he waited there. Seeds of doubt had crept into his mind during his travels, and the encouragements of the Bird of Truth had not helped the matter; it kept saying Ridley would make an excellent consort one day. He had also seen things in this and other kingdoms which made him pause; the roads could use some tender touches here and there, and he had seen impressive ways to make better use

of farmland in one of the kingdoms he had been. There were more of these improvements he had in mind, but he doubted that anyone would listen to a poor hunter who spend more time with the animals than with his own kind.

After some time, he was informed of the kings wish to see him in the throne room. He dismissed his own doubts and stood, suddenly somewhat nervous to enter. He shook himself, picked up the birds, and walked into the massive expanse of a chamber.

The king did not look pleased, again. The dismay on his face was apparent, and he did not try to hide it. "So, you have returned at last," king Vilppu said sourly. "We had almost given up hope." Ridley waited. "Bring us the birds we asked for, and we will see whether you in fact succeeded." Before Ridley could move, an armoured guard had come to his side to take the birds from him and show them to the king. Despite himself, the pompous man looked impressed. "We thank you for bringing these precious creatures to us in good health. You have proven yourself a worthy candidate indeed, but a candidate nonetheless. We shall think of a way to measure candidates against each other one of these days, but in the meantime, we would like to give you something as a gesture of our appreciation. Might there be something that would delight you?" The king looked smug, like he had personally solved some significant problem. Ridley was about to make a rude remark when he was saved by the raucous entry of a young man.

"Father! Stop your we-ing and whining at once! If you had not intended to keep your promise, you should not have made it in the first place!" Prince Everett was a tall man with delicate features and very long, dark hair. Despite himself, Ridley looked at him appreciatively. The king looked startled at his son, and then he frowned. "What made you come down from your tower?" he asked tersely.

"Your own foolishness, father. It is as I said; if you had not wanted to marry me off to a random saviour, you should not have promised it. It would damage the reputation of our kingdom beyond repair if you did break that promise now, and I would have to spend half of my reign fixing it. I have better things to do with my time, as you well know." The prince dismissed his father for the moment and stepped toward Ridley. "You seem like an honest man who probably deserves a good wife and a horde of children, but it would be my greatest honour if you would consider an allegiance with myself instead." The king spluttered, but he was ignored by all. Ridley looked at the man in front of him, not at all like the spoiled princeling he had imagined, and bowed.

"Your Highness, it would be an honour to consider thus, but I would not like to inconvenience one such as thyself by being tied to one such as me." The prince smiled brightly at him.

"I think we will become the best of friends. Although I did miss your name." Ridley told him. "Well, Ridley, please follow me, we have a lot to talk about. And please call me Everett, we will be equals in the end, and I

would not like to stand on formalities with my husband to be.” Everett took him by the arm and Ridley never stood a chance against his charms. It seemed there was no decision for him to make after all.

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