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Folks and Fairy Tales
of the World

ONCE UPON A TIME

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CZECH TALE

LONG, BROAD & SHARPSIGHT

I realize that it is rather old hat to begin a fairy tale with a king who has a son he wants to marry off. But in this tale, you will also encounter heroes of a kind you have never known before.

Anyway, one day the old king summoned his son and told him, "A ripe fruit falls from the tree to make room for another. And as the sun will not shine on



me much longer, I wish for you to marry, for I would very much like to meet your future wife."

"I would like to marry," said the prince. "But whom should I take as my wife? I know of no girl – let alone princess – who would have me."

His father reached into a deep pocket of his royal robe and pulled out a gold key. "Take this key and go to the top floor of the tower," he instructed. "There in the ceiling you will find a small iron door, which the key will open. Look around the room and tell me which of the brides you find there you would like for yourself."

The son went to the top floor of the tower, opened the hatch with the gold key and found himself in a large circular hall. The ceiling was the blue of the



night sky, with what looked like real stars sparkling there. The floor was covered with a deep silk carpet. Around the sides of the hall, in twelve high windows, were twelve portraits, each subject a young woman. All were extremely beautiful and wore a royal crown, but each was very different. Although he could have looked at each of them for hours, the prince had no idea which he should marry. The one with hair like copper? The one with the fiery gaze? The one in a pink dress who looked like an angel? After the prince had stared enraptured at all twelve, the girls began to move, smile and wave at him sweetly, encouraging him to speak out. Then the prince realized that one of the twelve windows was part-covered by an opaque white curtain.

On pulling back the curtain, the prince saw a girl dressed all in white but for the silver belt around her waist and the crown of pearls on her head. Although she was the most beautiful of all, her sorrowful expression would have brought any suitor to tears. So our prince's heart was heavy as he stood in awe before her picture and cried, "This is the only bride I wish for!" At these words, the young woman flushed as red as a rose and looked down. All other pictures in the hall vanished at once.

When the prince told his father of his decision, the old man shuddered with foreboding. "You have made a bad choice, son," he said. "That young woman is the prisoner of an evil sorcerer at his iron castle. Not only has no one been able to free her





from his power, no one who has tried has ever returned. But what has been done cannot be undone. Go to your bride. I shall pray for your safe return..."

Having parted from his father, the prince mounted his horse and set out on his mission.

First, he had to pass through a forest so vast that it appeared endless. What at first was a road soon became a path and then a narrow track, until finally the way was quite unmarked.

The young man turned his horse this way and that to avoid bogs and rocks. Then he heard a voice calling to him from a distance – "Hey! Wait! Take me with you!"

The prince turned to see a man so tall that his head sat above the tops of the highest firs.

"Do you know what kind of man I am?" called the stranger. "Well, they call me Long. I can reach

so far that I could hand you a bird's nest from the edge of the forest. And I can get you out of here, so that you don't lose your way." Having said this, the beanpole grabbed the prince's horse by its bridle and seconds later they were beyond the forest.

It goes without saying that the prince wanted such a splendid helper to keep him company. And it soon turned out that Long had a friend who was as strange as he. This was a podgy fellow with a belly like a wine barrel, and this fellow claimed that he could spread himself so wide that he could drink the largest pond.

So the prince took Broad – for that was the tubby fellow's name – along too.

On Long's back, they crossed the valley in a single stride! They came to a large rock, next to which a man with a bandage around his eyes was stan-



ding. "This is the third of us, sir," said Long. "You should take him into your service too, for he is just as useful as the two of us."

"But why are his eyes bound? He will not be able to see his way," said the surprised prince.

"With my eyes bound, I see as you see," said the man. "But without the bandage, I see much, much further. And if I fix my gaze on something, it catches fire. Look!" He took the bandage from his eyes, fixed his gaze on the rock in front of them, and within moments it was burning. Before long, all that was left of the rock was a small pile of golden sand.

Long reached for the sand and showed it to the prince. "This is why they call him Sharsight, sir," he explained. "He can see everything for hundreds of miles."

The prince did not need to be convinced. "That will be most useful to us!" he said. "Sharsight, see how far it is to the iron castle and what is going on there."

Sharsight turned around on the spot for a while, rather like a pigeon on a domed roof. Then he caught sight of their destination. "If you were to travel to the iron castle alone, sir, it would take you at least a year to reach it," explained Sharsight. "But with us, you will reach it today."

"And what is going on there? What about my princess?" the prince wanted to know.

"I believe that preparations for a dinner are under way. The princess is still kept prisoner by the evil sorcerer in the high tower. But do not worry, dear prince – when the moment arrives, we will help her, and put an end to his spell over her!"



Long and Broad, too, promised the prince their help against the evil wizard. Long carried them all, including the prince's horse, through breaches in the rock and dense forests, up many a hill and down many a dale. Before nightfall, as the hills became fewer and the rock became covered in heather, the iron castle came into view. It stood tall against the setting sun like a menacing iron hand, with pointed fingers in place of towers and battlements like a skeleton's teeth. An iron bridge spanned a deep castle moat from which green vapour was rising.

They approached the bridge with trepidation. There was no choice but to cross it. The gates beyond the bridge were open wide. The bold prince and his horse were the first to enter, followed by Long, with Broad on his heels. Sharpsight came last, trying to spy what awaited them beyond the gates. He saw that the courtyard was empty. They had only just made it inside when the iron bridge lifted of its own accord and the gates rattled shut

behind them. The prince and his friends were trapped in the courtyard.

This did not worry them much, however. The prince dismounted and led his horse to a stable, where he found a trough of clear water and some fragrant hay. The others looked about. Although there was little to see in the courtyard, in the halls, chambers and corridors there were many people of many kinds, lords, ladies and servants – but, horror of horrors, all had been turned to stone!

They inspected the entire castle. Everywhere was as silent as the grave. At last they reached the banquetting hall. Here the crystal chandeliers were aglow and the table was set for four people. And what fine food was on it! Hors d'oeuvres, soups of many kinds, roast, fried and boiled poultry and pork, and a variety of game, including boar and venison to say nothing of all kinds of fish, cheese, cakes and tarts. Naturally, Broad was more attracted by this extraordinary spread than any of them.



They waited for a long time for someone to enter the hall and invite them to eat. As no one came, they tucked in without invitation.

Barely had they started on the soup, however, than the doors to the hall opened to admit the evil sorcerer and the prince's bride. The skeletal fingers of the wizard clutched the young woman as though he were a hawk and she his prey. He was truly terrifying to look at – his beak-like nose reached down to his chin, the hump on his back was like a camel's, and the fiery eyes below his wizard's hat were filled with hate. But the strangest thing about him were the three iron hoops around his waist.

The prince had eyes only for his beautiful bride, whose expression was so sorrowful, she might have been about to depart this life. So he paid no attention to the wizard's rasping voice as he said in mocking tones, "I see that the gentlemen are enjoying the feast, although no one invited them to. But very well – I know why you are here. The prince may

take the princess away if he can keep her from escaping for three nights." Having spoken, the sorcerer vanished from the banquetting hall with a rasping laugh.

Although the princess was yet to utter a word, in the hope that she would at least smile, the prince sat down next to her and held her hand.

To prevent her from disappearing, he resolved not to get a wink of sleep that night. Broad squeezed himself into the doorway so that not even a mouse could slip through it, Long extended himself along every wall of the hall, and Sharpsight kept watch. Their efforts were in vain, however. All fell asleep before dawn, and when they awoke, the princess was gone.

"Hey, Sharpsight!" cried the prince. "Can you look for my bride, please?"

"Do not worry, sir," said Sharpsight. "I see her already... a good hundred miles from here is a wood, and in the middle of that wood is an old oak, and



at the top of that oak is an acorn. And she is that acorn. If Long takes me there on his back, we will return with the princess in no time."

In the time it would take you or I to run around a single cottage, they were indeed back. The prince released the acorn. The moment it hit the ground, he found the princess standing next to him, smiling at him for the first time.

But she didn't hold the smile for long, as the door flew open to reveal the wizard. Seeing the girl there, he thrashed about in such a rage that one of the iron hoops broke with a crack and crashed to the ground. Then, without another word, the wizard seized the princess by the hand and led her away.

Though the four men then searched the castle high and low, stumbling over petrified people and animals every way they turned, they didn't find the princess; not even Sharpshot knew where to look. Their only comfort was the food in the banqueting hall, which was even more splendid than on the

previous day. As he finished up some fish, Broad said appreciatively, "I have never before eaten such fine salmon, even at a royal feast. And I've been to several." But these words of praise were cut off as the door flew open, to reveal the evil sorcerer and the princess. "Let us see, prince, if you can keep your bride safe till morning this time," he said in mocking tones. And before you could say Jack Robinson, he released the girl and vanished.

Again, the prince and his helpers did everything they could to stay awake – they paced the floor of the banqueting hall and talked together till the small hours. But once again they all fell asleep before dawn, and the princess was gone. Again Sharpshot managed to find her, although this time it took him longer. Two hundred miles from the castle was a mountain, and in this mountain was a rock. In this rock was a gemstone. And this gemstone was the princess. It was enough for Sharpshot to fix his fiery gaze on the rock for it to crumble to pieces.



Long was on the spot to pick up the gem and bring it back to the castle.

In the banqueting hall, barely had it hit the ground than to the delight of all the princess appeared in its place. The smile she turned on the prince was more brilliant than before. But it was a wonder the wizard did not explode with rage as a second iron hoop broke and fell from his body. Again he led the princess away, before returning her to the hall that evening, this time with a threat. "If you do not prevent your bride from leaving for a third time," he told the prince, "you and she will be turned to stone. As will your friends."

And that third time, too, they failed to keep the princess at the castle. Now Sharpshot had to work very hard to find her: the sorcerer had turned her into a gold ring, which he had hidden in a shell in the Black Sea, far, far away. Broad drank up the sea and Long reached for the ring and brought it back. As soon as the ring fell to the floor of the banque-

ting hall, the princess was standing there. She took the prince's hand and refused to let it go, even though the wizard roared so loud with rage that the castle shook. Then the third iron hoop around the wizard's body cracked and fell, before crashing through a window and flying away.

The wizard turned himself into a crow and with a malevolent squawk took to the air, never to be seen again. And then something else happened. As an evil spell had been broken, the whole castle came back to life. The horses in the stables neighed merrily. Lords, ladies and servants crowded into the banqueting hall and thanked the prince for setting them free. Long, Broad and Sharpshot stood to the side, waiting for the thanks to be over. Then Sharpshot said to the prince, "We have set the princess free and are glad that you will marry her. We wish you much happiness for the future. But now we must be on our way, so that we may again help others who need us..." And so it came to pass.

SEDNA AND THE UNKNOWN HUNTER

At the very end of the world, where sea and sky meet, a home to snow and ice for most of the year, live the Eskimos – or the Inuit, as they call themselves. Many years ago, they made their livelihood by hunting seals and fish, sometimes even polar bears.

Anguta, the father of an Eskimo girl called Sedna, was a hunter, too. In the short summers, Angu-

ta would put to sea in his kayak and stay away for many days, catching enough food to take him and his daughter through the long winter nights, when the cruel north wind blew above their igloo and no living soul was about.

As time passed, Sedna grew to be a beauty. Young men came from all over the North to ask for her hand in marriage. But not only did the girl refuse every one of them, she took pleasure in their fighting over her. Nor did it bother her if one of them lost his life in the struggle. Her father reproached and rebuked her for this, but she did not change.

As stories of the girl's cruelty spread, her suitors became ever fewer. The summer arrived when she received not a single suitor for many days. By the time Sedna began to regret her behaviour, it was too late. She would sit alone in front of her home – her father being at sea, looking out for any possible new suitor as he went about his hunting. Then,



one morning, an unknown hunter in a kayak rode in on the waves. The hunter was handsome and dressed in beautiful furs. The moment he reached the shore, he called to the girl from the water: "Come with me Sedna! I wish to marry you. In my house I will lay you in warmed bearskins. I will give you a beautiful necklace of walrus tusks and Kodiak teeth. Come, my dear! Sit down in my boat and I will take you to my Bird Kingdom, where you will know neither hunger nor cold!"

Enchanted by these words, the girl entered the sea and walked towards him, feeling no cold in the water. Once she was seated in the kayak, the unknown hunter took her away.

How great her disillusion when she discovered how far away his home was from her own and whom she had taken as a husband! The Land of Spirits is beyond the last sea. Its only inhabitants are great birds; there is not a single human.

Before he turned into a fulmar, the laughing hunter told her, "I am Kokksaut, and this is my home, which you will share with me till death us do part, as you have chosen me." After this, Sedna saw Kokksaut in his human form only on the rare occasions he returned from his wanderings in the clouds at the head of the flock of giant birds of Adlivun, the last land beyond the last sea – a land of the spirits of the dead, as Sedna's husband described it to her.

As she wept bitter tears, Sedna thought of her father. And of the young men she had formerly known and refused, with whom she had been able

to talk and laugh, while now all she ever heard was the screeching of birds.

Nor did Anguta forget his daughter. When summer came and the ice thawed, he climbed into his kayak and went off in search of her. For many days and nights he paddled, until he reached Adlivun, the last land beyond the last sea. And there he found Sedna. "Come, daughter," he called to her. "I am here to take you home. I have missed you very much!"

The girl didn't hesitate. As luck would have it, her husband was away. Still they fled as quickly as they could, for fear that he would catch them.

They had not gone far when Kokksaut knew all. Having changed back into the giant fulmar, he led his faithful flock in a search for the fugitives. As the birds closed in, Anguta hid his daughter under the furs in the boat. But the birds were not fooled. "Give me back my wife! Give me back my wife!" they screeched across the sky.

But Anguta paddled on. So the birds used their wings to whip up such a gale that wave after wave washed over the kayak and the Eskimo tried and failed to keep it from capsizing. Although Anguta straightened the boat up, his daughter disappeared beneath the surface for good.

Suddenly the sea was calm. All that was heard now were Sedna's wails from somewhere in the clouds and the flapping of wings. Anguta never saw his daughter again, for she remained forever with her husband Kokksaut, chief of the Land of Spirits, a land called Adlivun...

HOW THE VIXEN FINALLY ATE HER FILL

For this story we must go far, far away – to the Animal Forest, where long, long ago no human was ever seen, although there were animals galore, plus birds and fishes in the river that flowed that way.

One day, a shark from the nearby sea appeared in the forest. It happened like this: the shark had been chasing a salmon towards the river and the salmon had jumped over the rapids and rocks and fled upstream. The ruthless shark tried to follow, but instead of catching the salmon, it ended up spreadeagled on the riverbank, where a bear happened to be fishing. What an unexpected catch for the bear! With a single blow from his mighty paw, he sent the shark from this world to the next and began to eat his fill.

Before long, however, he was not alone with his catch. A wolf, a vixen and a marten shared the meal, for at that time every creature in the Animal Forest was hungry. A hare and a squirrel watched the feasting from a distance.

When nothing remained of the foolish shark, the bear looked about and said: “You should know that I have saved you all from hunger. But soon our bellies will be empty again. What will we do then?”

The others looked at the bear in surprise, and the wolf spoke up. “We will do as we did before,” he said. “Each of us will get his own food.”

The bear shook his head. “You would like that, wouldn’t you?” he said. “The thing is, you all benefited from my catch, so I would like you to pay me back...” “But you would eat all I have for the whole day!” protested the marten.

But the bear soon put her in her place. “Why should I care?” he replied. “If you do not wish to share with me, however, I have another suggestion. Let us share our food thus. We shall start by eating the smallest of us, then move on to the next smallest, and so on...”

“Look here!” squealed the hare, who was grazing, having had no part in the feasting. “You would have to catch me first, Brother Bear!” And with that the hare ran away as fast as his legs would carry him. Figuring that after the hare’s turn it would soon be hers, the marten sloped off into the undergrowth.

Now but three animals – the bear, the wolf and the vixen – remained. The bear made a grab for the vixen. “I see that you, Sister Vixen, are now the smallest of us,” he said. “Next time we are hungry, the wolf and I shall eat you.”

“I see that you waste no time, Brother Bear, even though your belly is now bursting,” observed the vixen. Then she turned to the wolf. “Yes, Brother Wolf, you and the bear may eat me. But what then? You will be the smallest, and the bear will eat you!”

“Oh dear,” said the wolf. “Then it would be far better for us each to hunt our own food, as I proposed. That is surely the fairest way.”

Naturally the fox agreed with this, so it was two against one. The bear had to give up on his idea. The animals each went their own way. The bear headed back to the river and the wolf went into the forest to hunt. Oddly enough, try as she might, the vixen couldn’t get anything to eat. When she tried to catch a fish in the river, like the bear, it’s a wonder the current didn’t carry her away. And when she tried hunting in the shallows, a large crayfish grabbed her in its claws and she only just managed to shake it off.

She was no more successful in the forest. By now, Sister Vixen’s hunger was so great it’s a wonder she didn’t dig for grubs and earthworms. But then she noticed a tree in which a magpie was sitting in her nest, surrounded by her chicks and a few unhatched eggs. As the vixen stood looking up the tree, wondering how her hunger might benefit from the contents of the nest, the magpie asked, “Why are you so interested in this tree?”



"Well," replied Sister Vixen. "I'm in need of new snowshoes for winter, and it occurred to me that I might make them from this tree and a couple of leather straps. I shall cut it down, I think..."

"Don't even think of it!" squawked the bird in panic. "Don't you see that I live here with my young and my eggs?"

"Of course I do," continued the vixen. "But I'm sure as every magpie's nest, yours is filled with so many shining trinkets that your eggs can barely fit in it. Give me an egg or two and you'll have more room in your nest and I shall leave you in peace and find another tree for my snowshoes." In this way and others, the vixen coaxed and persuaded the poor magpie to give up one of her eggs. The happy vixen gobbled up the egg. The magpie took comfort in the fact that the other little birds had been spared.

When the magpie's friend the crow came to visit, the magpie told her what had happened.

"Oh you poor unhappy soul!" commiserated the old squawker. "Didn't it occur to you to wonder how the vixen would have felled such a big, strong tree without so much as an axe, or for what she might need snowshoes? You fell right into her trap, as if all good sense had deserted you!"

The poor magpie! Ashamed of her own stupidity, she spent the rest of the day with her head under her wing. But when the vixen returned to sniff around her nest again, she wasted no time in driving the cunning creature away.

On discovering who had returned the magpie's good sense to her, Sister Vixen began immediately to plot her revenge. She lay on the path as if dead and waited for what would happen. Before long, the crow hopped to her side, inspected her from all sides and said, "Well I never! A dead fox! What a stroke of luck!" Barely had she uttered these words than the vixen snatched at her, caught her by the wing and wouldn't let go.

Now it was the crow's turn to be afraid, although she knew how to outwit the vixen. "Surely you won't bite off my wing!" she said. "It's nothing but feathers, with not a scrap of tasty meat on it. Why not put me down and take the breast instead?"



She's right, thought the vixen, and she released her grip – which, of course, she shouldn't have done. The crow flew off before she could stop her and was heard laughing in the sky.

Later, however, good fortune would smile on the vixen and she would eat her fill and then some. For now, though, she wandered on hungry through the forest. She spotted Brother Bear in the distance. She was planning to keep well away from him when she noticed how he was walking – as if the spirit had left him – and she heard his moans. Gathering all her courage, the vixen approached the bear.

"What has happened to you, Brother Bear?" she asked.

"My wife has died! Ooh ahh! Oooh ahh! What am I going to do?" replied the bear, wiping tears as big as beans from his eyes.

"My condolences, Brother," said the cunning vixen. "She was the kindest she-bear in the whole forest, and she had the roundest, loveliest ears. Is there anything I can do to help? You are surely very busy with the funeral arrangements..."

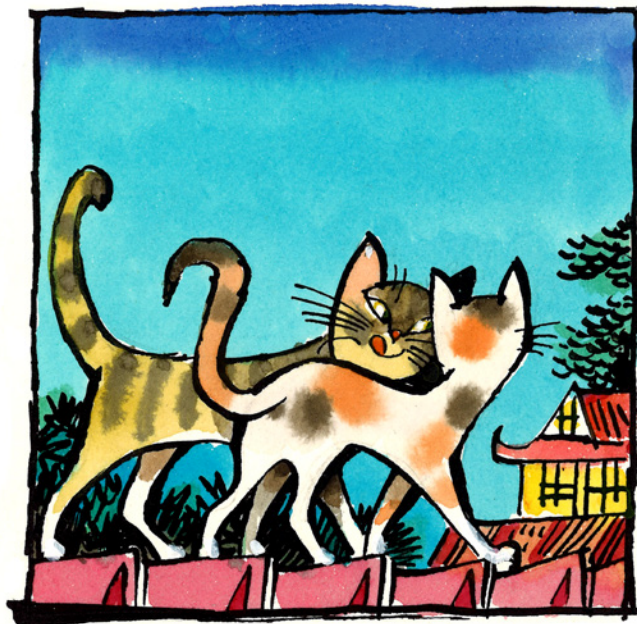
The bear stopped moaning, took a long, hard look at the vixen and said: "Well, I don't see why not. You could sing a nice hymn at the graveside. I tried to get the wolf to do it, but all he does is howl. The hare whistles, and the song of the magpie is like the scraping of a pot against a rock."

"I shall be glad to," replied the vixen. "In fact, I'm an accomplished graveside singer. Listen to this: *Shine thy light, golden sun, on the sad, dark grave...* And this: *Before my sad song is sung, soil to the grave be brung...*"

"Indeed you are very good!" said the bear, before adding: "Go to my home to practise there some more. No one will disturb you. You will find everything prepared for the funeral feast. I still have many matters to attend to..."

"Don't let me hold you up," said the vixen sympathetically, before disappearing into Brother Bear's dwelling – where, instead of working on her graveside song, she ate with such appetite, it's a wonder her belly didn't burst.





JAPAN TALE

CAT SWEETHEARTS CALLED YOKO AND HAMA

Puss in Boots became so noble that he no longer caught mice, and maybe his genius went to his head a little. But in some fairy-tale lands cats live as they do in our own.

On the other side of the world, in imperial Japan, there lived a rather special tomcat called Yoko. Yoko was strong and muscular, and so handsome that every pussycat had her eye on him. He was such a great catcher of mice that none were ever seen anywhere near his master's house, nor in nearby meadows and gardens.

Yoko's master was a musician who played a variety of instruments. Instead of thanking Yoko for his work, every evening the musician would play Yoko's favourite song: *In the port of Yokohama / In*

the darkness of the night / A sailor bids his girl adieu... and so on, and so on. Simply delighted to hear his own name, the tom would purr like a spinning wheel.

Not far from the house of the musician was a house whose mistress had a pussycat. This pussycat went by the exotic name of Hama. Hama's mistress, a pianist, would play her the very same song the musician played for Yoko, only stressing the second half of the name, like so: YokoHAAma.

Yoko and Hama first met one moonlit night, when they were each roaming the neighbourhood – and it was love at first sight! Indeed, they knew immediately that they wouldn't be able to live without each other. So Yoko went to Hama's mistress and pleaded with her to sell Hama to the musician, so that the cats could live together as a happy couple. But the mistress said she would sell her cat to no one. And the musician refused to sell Yoko to her.

"What are we going to do?" the tom asked Hama sadly.

Hama had her answer ready. "We'll run away, that's what we'll do," she said. "Let our ungrateful masters come looking for us..." And believe it or not, one night that's exactly what they did.

The moon lit their way like the eye of a fish, all the way to a park or lovely garden (at night, it wasn't easy to tell what it was.) Here, a strange, four-legged giant emerged out of the shadows in front of Yoko and straight away started barking. As luck would have it, a servant of some sort drove the giant back into the darkness. Yoko stayed where he was, frozen with fear. Gently, the man picked up the tom and took him to his mistress and commander. And – just imagine! – this mistress was a true princess!

The princess took an immediate liking to the tabby tom. She fed and pampered him as befits a royal pet, and she gave him a hammock all to himself, where he would nap undisturbed after lunch. He started to forget about Hama, and soon he might have forgotten her altogether. But then something happened.

The princess caught the eye of an evil sorcerer (for some reason, evil sorcerers tend to pick on king's

daughters), and before long he decided he wished to marry her.

One day, having entered the garden and turned himself into a small, venomous snake, the sorcerer fell from the tree under which the princess was sitting. Used to acting quickly, without a second thought Yoko bit into the snake. And that was the end of the evil sorcerer.

This was not the last time the bold tom went into battle, however. A few days later, he was basking in the warmth of the greenhouse when a huge, ugly tomcat stranger, most likely a stray, appeared. The stranger was pulling a lovely little pussycat by the tail. And this cat was his Hama! Yoko flew at the tom with sharp claws drawn and teeth bared, driving him away.

Yoko and Hama went to the princess paw in paw. When they found her, they sang the first verse of their favourite song to her. *In the port of Yokohama /*

In the darkness of the night / A sailor bids his girl adieu / And as his red lips speak words of love / The tears flow down her face...

The princess was so moved by the feline duet, it's a wonder she didn't burst into tears. From that day on, Hama, too, was part of her household, and the love of Yoko and Hama gifted her many lovely kittens.



THE WITCH AND THE ANIMALS

In a big, big land far to the east of us, there are a great many forests with a great many witches in them who would like nothing better than to feed on little children.

Once upon a time a widowed woodcutter with two children, little Ivan and little Marya, married

again. His new wife promised to take good care of the children, not least as they were so well-behaved and obedient, as she soon had cause to know.

The poor woodcutter had no idea that the woman he had recently married was a daughter of a witch. Although this witch did not live in a gingerbread cottage, she was much uglier and more terrible than the one that did. One day, when the witch's daughter was properly settled with the woodcutter and the two children had learned to obey her every word, she said to her husband: "I shall bake a few pirogi for my mother, who lives in the woods, and I would like to send Ivan and Marya to her with them. I'm sure she would like to see them and will give them something nice to eat."

"I don't see why not," said the woodcutter. "The walk will be good for them..."



First thing the next morning, the children set out. But they did not go directly to the dreadful witch, for first they called at the home of their natural grandmother, a kind old woman who lived just beyond the village in a birch grove.

And how glad the woodcutter's mother was to see them! Having commended them for how much they had grown, she made them tea sweetened with honey. As they were giving her a few pirogi, she saw that there were more pirogi in their bundle. "Are you going on somewhere else?" the old woman asked.

"To our other grandmother," replied Ivan truthfully.

"The mother of our stepmother," added Marya.

"The good lord preserve us!" exclaimed the old woman, crossing herself. "She is a dreadful witch! But what can I do about it? If you are well-behaved and god-fearing, everything will turn out fine... Let me give you something, in case you get thirsty or hungry on your way." The children received a loaf of bread, some meat and a bottle of milk, and Marya was given a new ribbon for her hair.

Before long, they were walking through the deep woods. Although the sun was shining, the woods were so dark that they could hardly see. How glad they were to spot their new grandmother's house!

It was built all of stone, with straw and all kinds of junk strewn all over the place, as only a witch would have it. And this witch was so big, she could hardly fit into her house! Her head poked through the door and her feet through the window at the other end.

She seemed glad to see the children. "It is good that you are here," she said. "You will help me. But first give me those pirogi." And before the little girl knew it, the old woman had the pies in her mouth and was gulping them down, although she had but one tooth.

Then she handed Marya a skein and some flax fibre and commanded her, "Make thread from these before I return." She turned to Ivan and handed him a sieve. "And you bring water from the well for the vat." Finally, she said to them both in a threatening tone: "If it is not all done by my return, you will never make it home alive!" Then she sat on her broomstick and flew away.

Having never had a skein in her hand before, the little girl was soon in tears. Then, quite out of the blue, a mouse spoke up. "Give us a little of your bread and we will be glad to help you," it said. Marya made crumbs from a whole slice for them. Before she knew it, the thread was spun.



Only the little girl slept that night, I think; Ivan kept watch. Hardly had the sun popped up than he woke Marya and whispered in her ear: "Get up, Marya, we must get out of here. Who knows what else the witch might do to us?!"

They crept from the house as quietly as they could. But oh dear! – Fido, who kept watch from the kennel, started barking. "Give me the rest of the meat and bread you got from your grandmother," he demanded of the little girl. As soon as she did so, the barking ceased.

Little Ivan gave a few crumbs to the sparrows, who then carried the water to the vat in their beaks. How would he have managed it with a sieve?

Then the children went into the kitchen, where they found a tomcat called Tabby lying on the oven. "The witch intends to kill you in this oven," he said. "But give me a little milk and a bit of meat and I'll tell you what to do about it..." Marya did as the cat asked. "Well then," he said. "When the witch is sleeping, take her handkerchief and her comb. When you are running from here, drop them behind you to slow the old woman down." Tabby was about to say more, but at that moment the witch returned.

Having laid down her broomstick, she inspected the vat and examined the flaxen thread, but she could find nothing wrong with them. She mumbled something to herself, then barked at the children: "I can't punish you today, but tomorrow I shall give you more chores, and then we'll see!" Then she got into her bed and pulled her tattered, dirty eiderdown over her. Before long, she was snoring loud enough to make the walls of the cottage shake.

This was what the children were waiting for. They had no trouble finding her grimy handkerchief and her comb, which was filled with wiry hair, and they hid them away.



But the witch was now awake. Having seen that the children were gone, she snapped at the cat, "Why did you let them escape, Tabby?"

"Because they gave me good meat and milk, whereas you have never given me anything!" spat the tom, bristling and baring his teeth, so that the witch ran from the house.

But she couldn't prevent herself from accusing Fido of the same thing.

"You have never given me so much as a bone, so why should I serve you?" he growled at the witch, and it's a wonder he didn't bite her.

The witch grabbed her broomstick and flew off in pursuit of the children. She could see them before her and was about to swoop on them when little Ivan dropped her comb behind him. On hitting the ground, the comb sprouted trees so tall and dense that the witch's axe struggled to chop a way through them. But then she was after the children again. So the children dropped the handkerchief behind them. Straight away it became a wide river, and before the witch knew what was happening, she had fallen into it. She never came up again.

At last the children were free to make their way home in safety. They were joined by Tabby and Fido. It was easy for the four of them to convince the woodcutter of the stepmother's wickedness in sending the children to the witch. Although the stepmother denied the accusation and pleaded with her husband, the woodcutter chased her from the house, and she made off into the woods. What became of her, no one knows. Maybe she became the witch in the gingerbread cottage, with plans to replace Ivan and Marya in her oven with Hansel and Gretel...



GREEK TALE

PRINCESS ATALANTA

At last the queen of Calydon gave birth to an heir to the throne, and how happy she was with the lovely, healthy child!

But on the night she first laid her son in his cradle, a very strange thing happened. At midnight, the queen awoke suddenly to see three limpid female figures next to the cradle. They appeared to be spinning there. One was at the wheel, the second was holding the skein, the third was in charge of a large pair of scissors for the cutting of the yarn. Their soft voices could just be heard over the whirring of the spinning wheel.

"We won't have to do this work much longer, dear sisters," one was saying. "As we know, the prince is not long for this world. He will never rejoice in a love fulfilled. He will never find fulfilment in heroic deeds..."

"But how much longer must we do this work?" the second spinner asked.

"Let us leave it as it is, dear sisters," replied the first. "We will not wait for the cutting of the thread of life. When the fire consumes the wood in the fire-place, turning it to ash, the prince's end will come. Let us go..."

The three mysterious spinners vanished from the chamber like steam from over a cooking pot. The horrified queen realized they were three Fates, whose prophecy would determine the prince's destiny.

She leapt from her bed and reached into the fire for the largest piece of wood, ignoring the burn she suffered thereby. Having put out the fire, she hid the wood at the bottom of the casket in which she kept her gold and jewels. Now my little boy's life is safe, she said to herself. She locked this story of the night away in her heart, never mentioning it to anyone.

At first, it seemed that her decision was the right one. The prince grew into a strong if stubborn young man, who often tried for something difficult to obtain.

At this time, the kingdom was terrorized by a wild boar that attacked everyone it met and killed several hunters with its dagger-sharp tusks and mighty trotters. It was beginning to seem that no one would get near the boar when at last the celebrated, beautiful huntress Princess Atalanta arrived in Calydon from the neighbouring kingdom. And it was indeed she who succeeded in tracking the boar down and hitting it with a well-aimed arrow from her bow. Even so, the creature did not die straight away. It continued to run for as long as it was able, so that other hunters, too, had their day.

The arrow of the Calydonian prince finally took the boar down. Everyone clapped, and he was declared the best hunter of them all. But when he was presented with the boar's tusks, he refused to accept the trophy. Instead, he gave it to Princess Atalanta: as the first to hit the boar, she was the trophy's true winner, he said. But the prince forsook the tusks mainly because he had fallen in love with Atalanta at first sight. Although the princess was glad to accept the tusks (this was her first such trophy), she was less interested in the prince's admiration and love: it was nothing new for a man to offer her his heart.

There were two hunters present who disagreed with the prince's decision to get rid of the trophy.





Both were brothers of the queen, and as such his uncles. Their arrows, too, had hit the boar, more than once, and any of those hits could have been the fatal one! So implacable was their anger that they ambushed Atalanta as she was returning to her palace and seized the trophy from her, her shouts and curses notwithstanding. The uncles were still arguing about which tusk was whose when the prince appeared and drew his sword against them. He refused to listen to their apologies or the cries of the princess. After a short scuffle, the two uncles lay dead by the prince's hand.

The procession whose arrival the prince's mother saw from her window was a solemn one indeed. When she learned what her son had done to her brothers, her own flesh and blood, rage and grief took hold of her mind. She ran to her chamber, took the long-extinguished piece of firewood from her jewellery box and threw it onto the fire.

The prince was holding a goblet of wine, with which he was about to toast Atalanta's beauty. Suddenly the goblet fell from his hand and he screamed, "Help! Help me! I'm burning up!" Before anyone could go to him, he fell breathless to the floor. The Fates' prophecy had at last been realized.

Princess Atalanta returned to her own palace in mourning, for she knew that her success as a huntress had robbed her of happiness in love with a young man who valued her higher than anything else in the world. She stayed alone in her palace, as she had no further interest in the hunt or racing with young men. Before, she had always been the winner of such races, so that her pledge to marry her vanquisher was never realized.

One day, however, a certain Prince Melanion issued her with a challenge. Atalanta tried to talk him out of it. "As you well know, prince, I always win, and the loser must leave the realm in shame," she said. "And those who wagered their heads on being faster than I ended far worse..."

But the prince was insistent. "It is time for you to put aside your grief," he told the princess, "and resume your position as the most celebrated huntress and runner this realm has ever known. But not before I take your victory from you!"

These words angered the girl greatly. "You defeat me? That is quite unheard-of! Let us prove my point by racing straight away!"

But the princess did not know that concealed in Melanion's clothing were three lovely apples from the tree of the three Fates in a certain magic garden. At first, Melanion was faster than Atalanta, but soon she was hot on his heels. Just before she caught up with him, he dropped one of the apples and she bent to pick it up, so taken was she by its loveliness. I'll soon catch Melanion up, she said to herself, and so she did. But the prince rid himself of the second and then the third apple in the same way, so that in the end he won the race...

Atalanta would never know of the work of the three Fates. She married Melanion, for this was a condition of his victory, and, as we know, spent many happy years with him. Like the Queen of Calydon before her, she was powerless to resist the prophecy...



MAJOUN

There have been many mothers with but a single son. Few of those sons grow up to be like this one, however. From morning till evening, he would sit staring into space. And he never put his hands to work, not even to comb his hair. That would not have been necessary in any case, for not a single hair grew on his head. The other children called him Baldy, Egghead and other such names.

His worried mother was forever wringing her hands and saying: "What will become of the useless lad when I close my eyes for good and all? Where you leave him in the morning, you find him in the evening, and he's twenty years old! Who would marry such an ugly, bald chap, I'd like to know?"

But it was on this very matter that the young man one day surprised her. "Mother, go to the sultan and tell him that I wish to marry his daughter," he said.

"You?" said the poor woman in disbelief. "Are you crazy? As soon as the princess sees your bald head, she will run from you, and the sultan will have you executed!"

"That's my concern," said the son calmly. "Just go to him and tell him what I want." What else could the long-suffering woman do? She put on her best clothes and set out for the sultan's palace.

As it happened, she was granted an audience with the sultan straight away. And as he was a merciful ruler, he heard her out. Then he told her: "Very well. But you must tell your son that he must make such a request himself, not through his mother!"

The mother was more than glad to have the task behind her. She hurried home to give her son the sultan's message.

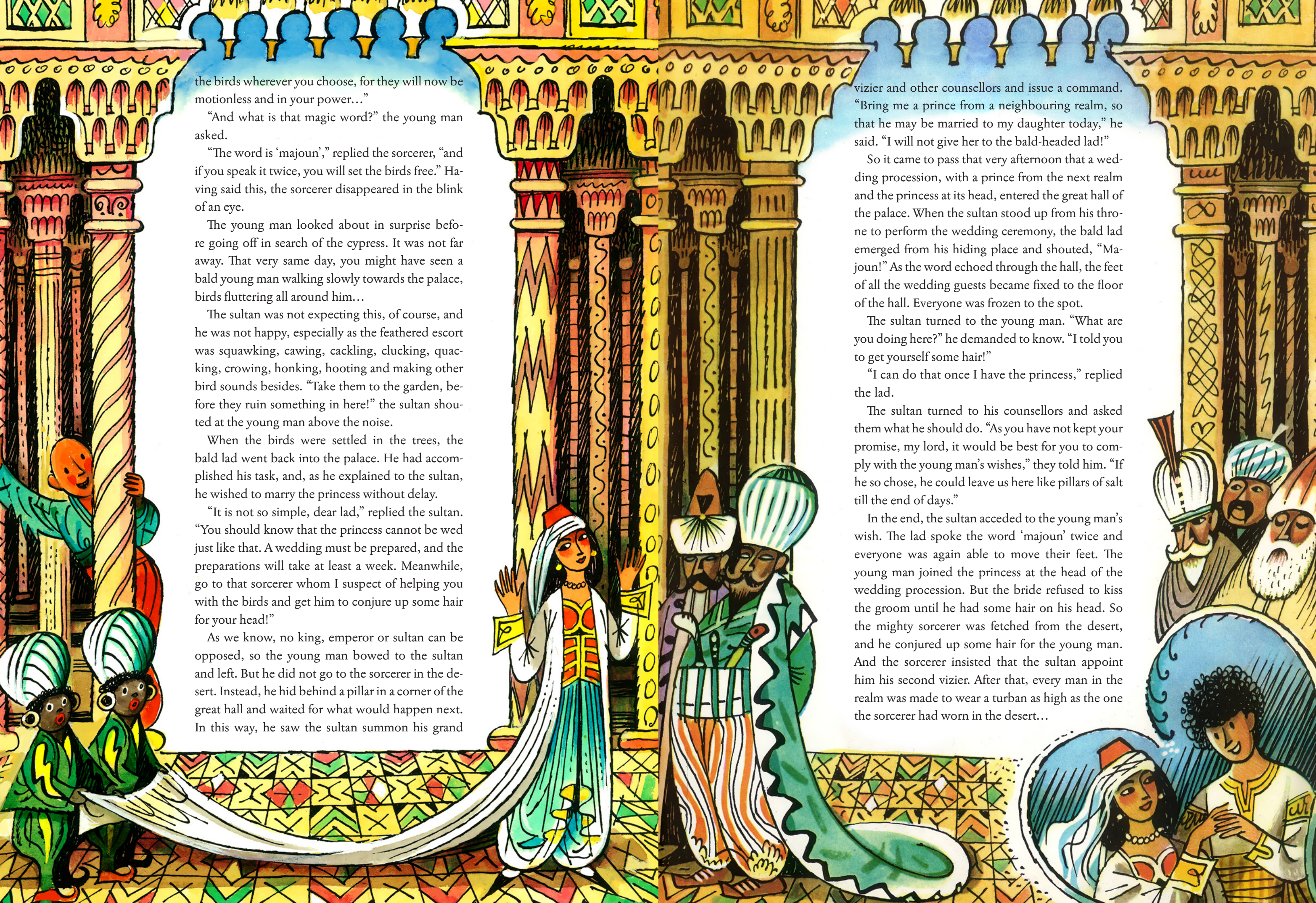
On hearing it, Baldy nodded, picked himself up from the grass on which it was his habit to lie as he watched the sky, and set out for the palace.

The sultan heard the lad out and said not a single word about his hairless head. Fixing him with a stern look, he said: "My daughter may marry any man, be he master or slave. But first he must bring all the songbirds in my realm to my large, beautiful garden. Now there are hardly any such birds in it, and I wish them to make their nests there, so that I may hear their song all day long. If you accomplish this task, you will get the princess. Otherwise you will not."

The young man left the palace knowing very well that such a thing was beyond the powers of an ordinary mortal. Then I must find a sorcerer whose magic could help me, thought the lad. And he went off immediately in search of one. At last he reached a desert, where he wandered the dunes for a week until he found the sorcerer he was looking for.

With his searching eyes and extremely high turban, the omniscient sorcerer was a fearsome sight. Naturally he knew what the young man wanted from him. "To find all the songbirds in the sultan's realm, you must first find a tall cypress here in the desert. Under this tree you will hide. When the songbirds arrive at the tree towards evening, you will say one magic word. Then you will be able to take





the birds wherever you choose, for they will now be motionless and in your power..."

"And what is that magic word?" the young man asked.

"The word is 'majoun'," replied the sorcerer, "and if you speak it twice, you will set the birds free." Having said this, the sorcerer disappeared in the blink of an eye.

The young man looked about in surprise before going off in search of the cypress. It was not far away. That very same day, you might have seen a bald young man walking slowly towards the palace, birds fluttering all around him...

The sultan was not expecting this, of course, and he was not happy, especially as the feathered escort was squawking, cawing, cackling, clucking, quacking, crowing, honking, hooting and making other bird sounds besides. "Take them to the garden, before they ruin something in here!" the sultan shouted at the young man above the noise.

When the birds were settled in the trees, the bald lad went back into the palace. He had accomplished his task, and, as he explained to the sultan, he wished to marry the princess without delay.

"It is not so simple, dear lad," replied the sultan. "You should know that the princess cannot be wed just like that. A wedding must be prepared, and the preparations will take at least a week. Meanwhile, go to that sorcerer whom I suspect of helping you with the birds and get him to conjure up some hair for your head!"

As we know, no king, emperor or sultan can be opposed, so the young man bowed to the sultan and left. But he did not go to the sorcerer in the desert. Instead, he hid behind a pillar in a corner of the great hall and waited for what would happen next. In this way, he saw the sultan summon his grand

vizier and other counsellors and issue a command.

"Bring me a prince from a neighbouring realm, so that he may be married to my daughter today," he said. "I will not give her to the bald-headed lad!"

So it came to pass that very afternoon that a wedding procession, with a prince from the next realm and the princess at its head, entered the great hall of the palace. When the sultan stood up from his throne to perform the wedding ceremony, the bald lad emerged from his hiding place and shouted, "Majoun!" As the word echoed through the hall, the feet of all the wedding guests became fixed to the floor of the hall. Everyone was frozen to the spot.

The sultan turned to the young man. "What are you doing here?" he demanded to know. "I told you to get yourself some hair!"

"I can do that once I have the princess," replied the lad.

The sultan turned to his counsellors and asked them what he should do. "As you have not kept your promise, my lord, it would be best for you to comply with the young man's wishes," they told him. "If he so chose, he could leave us here like pillars of salt till the end of days."

In the end, the sultan acceded to the young man's wish. The lad spoke the word 'majoun' twice and everyone was again able to move their feet. The young man joined the princess at the head of the wedding procession. But the bride refused to kiss the groom until he had some hair on his head. So the mighty sorcerer was fetched from the desert, and he conjured up some hair for the young man. And the sorcerer insisted that the sultan appoint him his second vizier. After that, every man in the realm was made to wear a turban as high as the one the sorcerer had worn in the desert...

THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES

When a king has no son and many daughters, perhaps even a round dozen, it is to be expected that the king has much to worry about. But our twelve-time father seemed to be free of cares about his children. The princesses behaved as other princesses behave. They were beautiful and merry, played ball in the garden, learned various musical instruments, rarely rose from their beds before noon, and so on. But the royal father was mystified by one thing: How could it be that every morning the girls'

sat in satin shoes were scuffed and holey? After all, all twelve of them slept in beds made of gold under the finest eiderdowns, behind barred windows and doors with seven locks, watched over all night by a guard. Whenever their father asked them what they had done in the night, the princesses shrugged and said: "What do you think we did? We slept and slept some more. How well we slept!"

But the king did not believe them, for even at midday, they were tired and wan. So he offered a large reward plus the hand in marriage of one of the girls to whichever prince could solve the mystery. Although the young men who accepted the challenge kept a watchful eye on the golden bedchamber, they noticed nothing out of the ordinary. In the end, eleven of these young men vanished by some strange magic. The fathers of the missing princes immediately threatened war against the realm of the old king, so that he was beside himself with worry. Now even his own subjects felt sorry for him, and none had a good word to say for the princesses.

Before long, word of the old king's mystery had spread far beyond the mountains, where it came to the ears of a gardener's son called Michael. As chance would have it, Michael began to dream about the princesses; dreams of one of them would often wake him at night. As these dreams gave him no rest, he set out for the royal castle, there to take employment as a gardener and see the princesses for himself.

As soon as he arrived at the castle, he prepared a beautiful bouquet for each of the princesses. And – wouldn't you just know it? – Lina, the youngest, was the princess of his dreams, and, unlike her sisters, she thanked him for his bouquet! Naturally enough, from then on Michael had eyes only for Lina. But how was a simple gardener to get near to her?

The fates had not sent Michael to the royal castle for nothing, however. One night, he dreamed of a beautiful lady in an old-fashioned dress, holding a young rosebush in one hand and a young cherry tree in the other. She said to him: "Michael, when

you find these young plants, set them in the ground immediately and give them water. When they have grown enough for the first flowers to appear, say what you wish for. Your wish will come true."

The young man did not forget this dream. The next day, he found the two young plants in a corner of the royal garden and straight away began to care for them. And how quickly they grew! A few days later, a first white flower appeared on the cherry. One evening, Michael put this flower in his buttonhole and said, "Let me be invisible!" It wasn't long before he realized that he truly was invisible.

He passed through the closed door of the princesses' bedchamber. Although the girls were already in their golden beds, all were splendidly dressed. They were wearing beautiful crinolines, gold necklaces and bracelets dotted with gems. Their hair was artfully styled, and each was holding a fan.

Suddenly all the girls stood up as if on command, and the eldest asked the others, "Are you ready?"

"Yes," replied all eleven.





The eldest clapped her hands three times and the floor of the bedchamber opened, to reveal a secret staircase leading downwards. As he hurried to follow the girls down the stairs. Michael stepped on the dress of the youngest by accident, startling her.

The princesses went along an illuminated underground passage lined with bricks of gold and flowers of silver. They arrived at the shore of an underground lake. Here, some canopied boats were waiting for them, each with a young prince at the oars. As the girls took their seats, Michael managed to jump into the last boat, which had Lina in it. The boats pulled away from the shore. The boat of the youngest princess remained at the back, although its prince rowed his hardest.

The crossing was soon over. One after another, the boats landed on the far shore, where the princesses stepped onto a soft carpet with gold embroidery. This carpet led into the ballroom of an underground palace.

The princesses went straight into the dance. The music compelled them to dance, and they did not stop dancing until the first crow of the cock. As the musicians cleared away their instruments, the girls

and their dancing partners sat down at a large table and began to eat.

Of the princesses, only the youngest showed little interest in the dance and the delicacies at the table. And when, after the third crow of the cock, everyone stood up to return to the royal castle, the youngest princess hurried faster than any of them. In the underground passage, Michael struggled to keep up with her. Still he managed to pluck a silver flower from the wall.

Back in their bedchamber at last, the princesses, tired from the all-night spree, slipped out of their spoiled shoes and lay down to sleep. The young gardener went back to work.

His first task that morning was to make a bouquet for each of the royal daughters, as usual. This time, he slipped the flower from the underground passage into the bouquet of the youngest. Lina was so astonished to find it there that she looked for the young gardener to ask him about it, but he made sure she didn't find him.

The next night Michael again stole into the secret underground ball with the princesses. This time, he plucked a gold twig from one of the silver flowers



on the ceiling; this he added to the bouquet of the youngest princess. That day, Lina found him in the garden. She went straight to the point. "Where did you get the gold twig in my bouquet?" she asked him.

"You know the answer, Highness," Michael said with a bow.

"You have been spying on us at night, haven't you? So you know our great secret. If you keep it, I will give you as many ducats as you could wish for."

Michael shook his head at this. "Such a secret is not for sale, Highness..."

"Let him tell his secret to the rats and the frogs," the eldest princess told Lina later. "So long as we are safe."

"I won't have that!" cried Lina. "He has kept our secret so far. If that is your plan, I shall go to father and—"

"Blab to him?" Lina's sister finished the sentence.

"No, I have a better idea," said Lina. "How about we take him to the dance, then have him drink from

the Cup of Forgetting, just as we did with the princes sent to watch us at night?"

As none of the sisters had anything against this idea, the youngest princess invited Michael to the night ball herself.

But how can I go to a ball dressed as an ordinary gardener? Michael asked himself. He went to the two miraculous plants and asked the rose to give him the kind of suit worn by the princes down there...

It must be said that after he removed his gardener's trousers and jacket and put on what appeared under the rose bush, he looked more handsome than any of those princes. The royal daughters were not in the least ashamed to take him along. All smiles, Lina took his arm as if he were her intended.

It was the most wonderful evening of Michael's life! Lina danced mostly with him, and they seemed to glide across the golden floor to the fabulous music. When the cock crowed for the first time, no one wanted to believe it. For Lina, the sound was like

a death knell. When the guests were sitting around the banqueting table as usual, the Cup of Forgetting, filled to the brim with intoxicating wine, was set down in front of Michael. The eldest royal daughter stood up and said: "We all know that this fabulous castle keeps no secrets from you, Michael. Now you must drink deeply from the golden cup. Then you will feel as well here as do the other princes."

Without hesitation, the young man raised the cup, turned to Lina and said: "No one saw me listening as you discussed having me drink from the Cup of Forgetting. If you wish, my love, I shall drink it to the dregs..."

"For God's sake, Michael, don't drink!" cried Lina. "I would rather marry you and work in the garden with you!" She knocked the golden cup from the young man's hand and the wine was spilled.

Michael took Lina in his arms. At that moment, the spell cast by the Cup of Forgetting on the eleven princes was broken. They, too, embraced their princesses. The princes and the princesses left the secret

underground castle for the last time, crossed the lake and returned by the secret staircase to the royal palace. Barely had the last of them stepped through the floor than a tremendous rumbling came from underground, as if an earthquake was set in motion. The noise went on for a long time. When it stopped, the mystery of the twelve dancing princesses was no more.

Imagine the old king's amazement at the discovery of the eleven missing princes – all of whom joined Michael in asking him for the hand of one of his daughters!

"I don't see why not!" replied the jubilant king. "I'll be glad to let someone else look after them. I'll just concentrate on being king and going fishing."




ONCE UPON A TIME



Once upon a time – a short phrase that appears at the beginning of every fairy tale. A mysterious phrase that takes all readers by the hand and leads them gently along paths walked by princes, princesses and dragons, through enchanted forests, and to houses on chicken legs. A phrase that promises a beautiful story high on imagination and with a happy ending. Once Upon a Time is a more than eloquent name for this collection of fairy tales from all over the world. Would you like to meet an Indian princess, take to the skies on a flying carpet, or outwit a horned devil who is as crafty as a fox? Then this wonderful book, with its abundance of illustrations by world-famous artist Vojtěch Kubašta, is the very thing for you! Just tune in to the magical narrative and remember to come back down to earth at the end. Once these stories take hold of you, you won't want them to let you go!

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