

THE BLIND KING

There was once a king who became blind, and none of the doctors in his kingdom could help him regain his sight. But, one day an old soothsayer came to him, and told him that only the song of a phoenix could cure him. Somebody had to go out into the world, find the fabled bird, and bring it back to sing to him. The eldest of the king's three sons was the first to go, but he didn't get very far. Within a few days, he came to a great city in which there was a magnificent palace. Beautifully dressed young women waved at him from its open windows, through which he heard loud music and other sounds of enjoyment. He didn't stop long to think before, forgetting about his quest, he went inside.

The same happened to the king's second son, and so the quest for the fabled phoenix fell to the third, and youngest prince. At first, not knowing what had happened to his two eldest sons, the king would not allow him to leave. But, finally the youngest son was given permission, and he mounted his horse and set off. He too came to the great city with its magnificent palace. The beautifully dressed young women waved from the windows for him to come inside, but the noise was too loud for him. So, he rode on until he found a quiet inn, along the road, where he spent the night.

At midnight he was awoken by a knocking at the door. Rubbing his eyes, he called out "Come in!", and then smiling, because he had locked the door, turned over and closed them again. A few moments later, there was another knock. He called out again, and turned onto his other side. Then, the person outside knocked for a third time. So, he sat up and again called out "Come in!", wanting to watch whoever it was trying to open the door. It opened!

A tall pale figure glided through the open door and approached the young prince in his bed. "Don't be afraid," it said, "if you help me, we will both be the better for it. When I stayed here, I wasn't able to pay my bill. This made the landlord angry, and as we fought he pushed me down the stairs. I broke more than a leg, and ended up dead. But instead of calling a priest, he buried my body in the cellar. I must now remain here until my debt is paid, and my remains are properly laid to rest. If you can do this for me, I will help you in return."

The ghost then vanished, leaving the prince to spend a sleepless night waiting for the morning. At cockcrow, he left his room and sought out the landlord to ask him if there was anything in the inn, which would find a better home in the graveyard. The landlord first turned pale, and then bright red as he angrily cursed the scoundrel who wouldn't pay his bill. But he calmed down when the prince took out his money, and paid what was owing, for both himself and the previous guest. He even helped dig up the corpse and transfer it to the churchyard.

After the deceased had been properly interred, the prince again rode off to find the fabled phoenix. He soon came to a great dark forest, where in the middle he saw a great grey wolf lying in the road. The prince quickly dismounted his horse, and ran it through with his sword, hoping that the beast would go after it and leave him alone. The wolf, however, turned to face him and opened its mouth. "That wasn't a very clever thing to do." it said, "We could have both ridden it to where we need to go, but now you will need to ride on my back. I am here to help you."

Because the wolf was so well-spoken, the young prince decided to trust it. He sat himself on its back, and off it went. It ran like the wind, leaping over hedgerows and fences, until they came to a magnificent castle resting in a beautiful countryside. "Look," said the wolf, "you will find the phoenix inside this enchanted castle. When you go in, there will be a room full of beautiful birds, all in richly decorated cages, but don't take any of them. The bird you want is in a shabby cage in the far corner, next to a little golden figure of a man. If you don't touch the golden man, or any of the other birdcages, you will get away safely."

The young prince listened to these instructions attentively, and made his way inside the castle. He easily found the room with all the birdcages, as the wolf had described it to him. But, he was shocked when he saw the state of the the bird in the cage next to the golden man. It looked like a very old hen, which had lost almost all of its feathers, but he took it anyway. Then, he saw the golden man and, forgetting the wolf's warning, thought to himself that he would take that with him as well. But, as soon as he touched it, all the other birds started crying out "Stop thief!" very loud, and didn't stop shouting until the castle guard came to take him to their master, to explain himself.

After he had listened to the young prince's story, the lord of the castle thought a while, before answering "I will not only let you go, but I will also let you have the phoenix to restore your father's sight — but only in exchange for the charger which is faster than the wind. If you bring me the horse, I will give you the bird."

When he came out of the castle, emptyhanded, and told the wolf what had happened, it told him "If you had only listened to me, it would all be over and you would be on your way home. Now, you have to get on my back again, and we will have to find this fabled horse." The prince, who was happy to get away with only mild scolding, once again sat on the wolf's back, and they were off. They soon came to another castle, where the wolf told the prince "Behind the castle is a large gate leading to the stables, where you will find many magnificent steeds, but don't take any of them. The horse you want is the skinniest of them all, with the poorest coat. If you only take that one, you will get away safely."

Once again, the prince found everything as the wolf had described it. But when he saw the horse, he was supposed to take, it was very different to all the other magnificent white horses. He said to himself "This old nag is all skin and bone. It can barely stand, let alone run", but he took it anyway. Then, when he reached the stable door, he turned back, saying to himself "I can't ride that old

nag, I'll take another one instead." But, no sooner had he laid his hand on the bridle of the other horse, than he was surrounded by a pack of hundreds of baying hounds. He now had no choice, but to explain himself to the lord of this castle.

After hearing his story, the lord told him "Luckily for you, I don't ride much and that horse has little value for me. I would be happy to let you have it — but only for a fair exchange. If you can find the most beautiful woman in the world, and bring her to me, I will give you the horse." With that, he sent the young man out to the wolf.

"Such a wise and obedient Prince as you, would be hard to find" said the wolf, somewhat sarcastically, as the young man walked out of the front gate of the castle, without any horse. "It looks like I will have to carry you on *my* back again." The prince, wisely, held his tongue and silently climbed on the wolf's back. They rode for three days, over mountains and through forests, until they stopped outside a third castle. The wolf told him "Go into the castle and into every room until you find one in which two women are sleeping. One is as fresh as a sunny day, and the other grey, dirty and ugly. The woman you want is the grey ugly one. If you choose wrongly this time, I cannot help you. Nobody can!"

The prince cautiously entered the castle, and quietly crept through all of its rooms, until he came to the chamber where two women were sleeping. As the wolf had described, one was beautiful with a face which shone like a summer afternoon, and the other was grey and miserable like a stormy evening. The prince didn't know what to do, and stood there thinking "Should I really not take the pretty one? If I do, then everything is lost, and my father will never see again. No, I must take the ugly one!" And he did.

He took her by the hand, and, looking straight ahead, led her out of the castle and through the gate. Once they were outside the walls, he turned around and, to his surprise, he saw that her appearance had changed. She was really beautiful, much more so than the girl he had left sleeping inside the castle. With a smile which spread to her sparkling eyes, she thanked him for lifting the enchantment on her, and for freeing her from the castle.

The great grey wolf then trotted up to the pair, and after congratulating the young man for finally doing the right thing, gently told the lady not to be afraid and asked them both to climb onto his back. Then, he carried them both all the way back to the second castle, where they could claim the horse which ran faster than the wind. When they arrived, the young man stood with the lady at his side and called out the lord of the castle "Here is the most beautiful woman in all the world. Now you should keep your promise."

The lord had a horse brought out into the courtyard, and the prince looked it over carefully. Then he said "How can I know if this really is the horse which is faster than the wind? I must try it." He quickly swung himself and the beautiful lady onto its back, and the wolf jumped up. As soon as they did so the horse changed. It grew big and strong, and its coat shone brightly as it sped off.

In a short moment, they found themselves outside the castle with the fabled phoenix. The prince called out to the lord “Here is the horse which is faster than the wind. Now, you must keep your promise and give me the phoenix.”

The lord came out of the castle carrying a shabby cage with a sickly, half-plucked bird inside it. He asked the prince to dismount and hand him the reigns of the horse. The prince refused, saying “How do I know that you don’t want to keep both the horse and the phoenix? Let me first see if that is the real phoenix.” The lord passed the cage up to him, and the prince inspected it carefully. Then he said “Yes, that’s the right one. Thanks” and they were off.

In a few moments, they stopped on the road in the forest where the prince had first met the wolf. “This is where I leave you,” said the wolf, “haven’t you guessed yet who I am?”

“How could I know that?” asked the young man.

“I am the spirit of the dead man which you freed, and whose body you laid to rest” answered the wolf. “Don’t you remember that I said that we could help each other? But, I have one more important piece of advice for when you reach the city. Under no circumstances should you buy meat from the gallows.”

“What do you mean?” asked the prince, “Where, and how, could I even do that?”

“Again, I implore you — do not buy any meat from the gallows!” cried the wolf one last time before it vanished into the woods.

The prince and the beautiful girl rode on until they came to the city gate, where they found a huge crowd. They were there to watch two wicked scoundrels, who couldn’t pay their fines, be executed. But as the cart carrying the criminals rolled by the prince, he recognised his two brothers. He immediately stopped the cart, and paid their fines. Then he bought them new clothes and, together, they all rode home on the back of the horse which was faster than the wind.

On the way, the second brother whispered to the eldest “It won’t look good for us when we meet our father. Our younger brother has found the fabled phoenix, and we have disgraced ourselves. That could cost you your throne.”

“That’s true,” replied the eldest “we can’t allow that baby-faced young boy to become king.”

“So,” continued the other brother, “let’s dispose of him, bring our father the bird, and keep the horse and girl for ourselves.” So they cut the throat of their unsuspecting brother, hid his body under a pile of leaves by the side of the road, and rode on into the royal city. When they presented the fabled phoenix to their blind father he was very happy, but not for long. He was sad that his youngest son had not returned, and that the fabled phoenix refused to sing. It sat silently

in its cage, looking just as sad and sickly as it was in the room in the enchanted castle.

But, the story does not end here. The wolf had continued to follow the progress of the young prince, and had soon found him — still alive — under the leaves by the forest road. As the wolf licked the wounds on his throat, they healed, and soon the young man was on his feet again. The wolf growled at him “Did you have to ignore my good advice and buy meat from the gallows? Now go home quickly, so that your father can see again. Then, this time, make sure that your brothers are sent to the gallows, where they belong!”

The prince thanked the wolf heartily, and walked on into the city and to his father’s palace. When he entered the king’s chamber, the phoenix started to sing the most beautiful song, and at the same time its eyes became bright and its shining feathers grew back. As the phoenix sang, the clouds fell from the old king’s eyes, and they too became bright. Hearing the song, the two older brothers ran into the room, but they froze in terror when they saw their younger brother standing before them. Indeed, they had reason to be afraid, because after the young prince had recounted everything that had happened, he married the most beautiful maiden, and they were sentenced to the gallows.

Afterwards there was a great celebration, for the wedding, if not for the execution.