

## **THE ENCHANTED PEAFOWL**

**From Yugoslav Folk and Fairy Tales retold by Parker Fillmore**

There was a flutter of wings and a raven's hoarse voice said:

"Caw! Caw! What is it, brother? Can I help you?"

"Can you tell me what has become of the Old Woman's mare and foal?"

"Aye, brother, that I can! She and the foal are turned into ravens and are perched in yonder tall fir tree hiding among my folk. Strike the trunk of the tree three times with your bridle and say: 'Mare of the Old Woman, come down!' That will bring her!"

The Prince went over to the fir tree, struck it three times with the bridle and said:

"Mare of the Old Woman, come down!"

Instantly two ravens, a big one and a fledgling, fluttered to earth and changed to mare and foal. So when morning came the Prince was able to drive them back to the Old Woman and claim his reward.

The Old Woman was angry enough to kill him but she pretended to be pleased and she smiled and grinned and she patted the Prince on the arm and said:

"Aye, my son, but you are a hero! You have won the reward and you are worthy of it. Choose now the finest horse in my stable. It is yours."

She drove the twelve handsome stallions out into the courtyard and urged them on the Prince one after the other. But at each the Prince shook his head.

"I am only a poor adventurer," he said. "Such horses as these are too fine for me. Give me rather that poor mangy creature that lies over yonder on the dung heap. That is the one I choose."

Then the Old Woman fell into an awful rage and shook and chattered and begged the Prince not to take that horse.

"It would shame me," she said, "to have you ride off on that poor beast which is half dead already! No, no, my son, you mustn't take him!"

"But that's the one I'm going to take," the Prince said firmly, "that and none other!" He drew his sword and lifted it threateningly. "I have won whatever horse I choose and now, Old Woman, if you do not keep your bargain I shall strike you dead with this sword and stick up your grinning skull on that empty picket!"

At that the empty picket began to shout:

"I want my skull! I want my skull!"

When the Old Woman of the Mountain saw that the Prince knew what he was about, she gave up trying to deceive him and let him lead off the horse he wanted. So the Prince walked away dragging the poor mangy creature after him. When he was out of sight of the Old Woman's house, he turned to the horse and began rubbing down his rough coat and patting his wobbly legs.

"Now, my beauty," he said, "we'll see what you're made of!"

Under his hand the mangy beast changed to a glorious animal--one of those wonder horses of the olden days that rise on the wind and gallop with the clouds. Soon his coat shone like burnished gold and his tail and mane streamed out like flames of fire.

"Ah, my master," the horse said, "I have been waiting for you this many a day! We shall have glorious adventures together!"

Then the Prince mounted him and he rose on the wind and went so swiftly that he covered in three minutes all the distance that it had taken the Prince three days to go on an ordinary horse. Whiff! and there they were at the dragon's castle and there was the Princess running out to welcome them.

"Now, my dear one," the Prince said, lifting the Princess up in front of him, "this time the dragon will not overtake us!"

The wonder horse rose on the wind and off they went.

When the dragon got home and found that the Princess had fled again, he said to his horse:

"Shall we follow her at once or shall we eat supper first?"

"It's all one what we do," the horse said, "for we shall never overtake her."

At that the dragon leaped upon his horse and, mounting on the wind, started off in hot pursuit. Presently they caught sight of the other horse carrying the Prince and the Princess but, try as he would, the dragon's horse could not overtake the other. The dragon beat his horse unmercifully and dug his sharp claws into the horse's tender flanks until the horse in agony called out to the Prince's horse:

"Hold, brother, hold! Let me overtake you or this monster will kill me with his cruelty!"

"Why do you carry such a monster?" the Prince's horse called back. "Throw him from you and be rid of him forever!"

At that the dragon's horse reared suddenly and the dragon, losing his balance, fell and was dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

And that was the end of that dragon!

Then the Princess wept but her tears were tears of joy for she knew now that the enchantment that had bound her was broken forever. Never again would she be changed into a peafowl at the whim of a wicked dragon, never again be separated from her loved one. Presently she mounted the dragon's horse and together she and the Prince returned to the beautiful city. The people came out to meet them and when they heard of the dragon's death a holiday was proclaimed and amidst music and dancing and merrymaking the Princess married the Prince. Then she was made Queen of that beautiful city and the Prince was made King. They ruled long and wisely and better than that they lived happily for they loved each other.

So now you know the story of the Peafowl who became a Queen and of the Tsar's Youngest Son who married her.