



## AXIM'S REWARD OR THE MAGIC BLESSING

FROM THE RUSSIAN.

**M**ANY thousand years ago there lived in the Hundred and First Kingdom a rich merchant who had an only son named Axim. Now, it so happened that in the middle of the kingdom in which they lived were a number of swamps which no one was able to traverse; this was particularly annoying, as it did away with what might have been a very agreeable short cut; as it was, the inhabitants were obliged to travel by a very roundabout way, and no one had sufficient energy to alter this state of affairs, until our friend the merchant determined to set to work with his son to make a road straight across. They mentioned this idea to no one, but took a small house close to the swamps and started working. They worked and worked for days and nights, until in due time all was ready, and the people of the kingdom were very agreeably surprised one fine morning on seeing a lovely straight road where formerly there had been nothing but swamps.

One day as Axim was taking a constitutional along the road, he saw two poor old beggar women sitting on a bench.

"I wonder," he heard one say, "who it was who built this causeway. I should very much like to reward him, whoever he was."

Axim stopped and wondered how a feeble old woman could possibly reward anyone, so, out of pure curiosity, he said:—

"My father and I did the work between us."

"And what do you wish for as a reward?" asked the old woman.

"Nothing. I have all I want," Axim replied. "I only wish to live and have the power to be of use to my country."

"A very sensible wish, indeed," she answered. "And all I can tell you is, that you had better go and live as long as you can, and do all the good in your power while your life lasts."

Axim laughed.

"That is all very fine," he said, "but there are a great many things one would like to do in this world, but which, unfortunately, one can't."

"Nonsense, there is no such thing as *can't*. As a reward for what you have already done I will give you my blessing, which you will find of the greatest possible use. You will henceforth be able to do everything you desire." So saying, the old woman put her hand upon his head, muttering some mysterious words, and then disappeared.

Shortly after this war broke out between the Queen of the Hundred and First Kingdom and the King of the Sea; for the King strongly objected to having his view interfered with by vessels and small craft belonging to the Queen, and had, on several occasions, prevented their progress by seizing them and

taking all those on board prisoners. This naturally annoyed the Queen, and she promptly demanded the return of her subjects; but the King refused to comply with her wishes, except on one condition, namely, that she should consent to become his wife; but this offer she firmly declined, and the result was war.

The kingdom was in a great state of excitement, and all the male population enlisted to fight the King of the Sea; among others was our friend Axim.

When the army had been on the march some weeks, and had almost arrived at the place appointed for the battle, which was by the seashore, the Queen found that she had forgotten her sword.

"What shall I do?" she exclaimed. "How am I to join in the fight without my favourite and most useful weapon?"

Her Generals advised her to relinquish the idea of personally conducting the campaign, but she was obstinate.

"I *will* fight," she said, "and I *must* have my sword. Someone must go to the palace and fetch it at once. I insist upon having it by to-morrow morning."

But this the Generals declared impossible. "Why," they said, "it took us over six weeks to get here."

"I can't help that, but the sword I must have, and whoever brings it to me by to-morrow morning shall have my daughter for his bride."

This was, of course, a great inducement, as the young Princess was famous for her remarkable beauty. Axim immediately stepped forward.

"I will go and fetch the sword, your Majesty," he said, "as I think I can do it in the time."

The Queen at once wrote a note to the Princess telling her to give Axim the sword. This done, the young man departed, greatly to the amusement of the rest, who considered him hopelessly mad to undertake a thing which they knew to be an impossibility.

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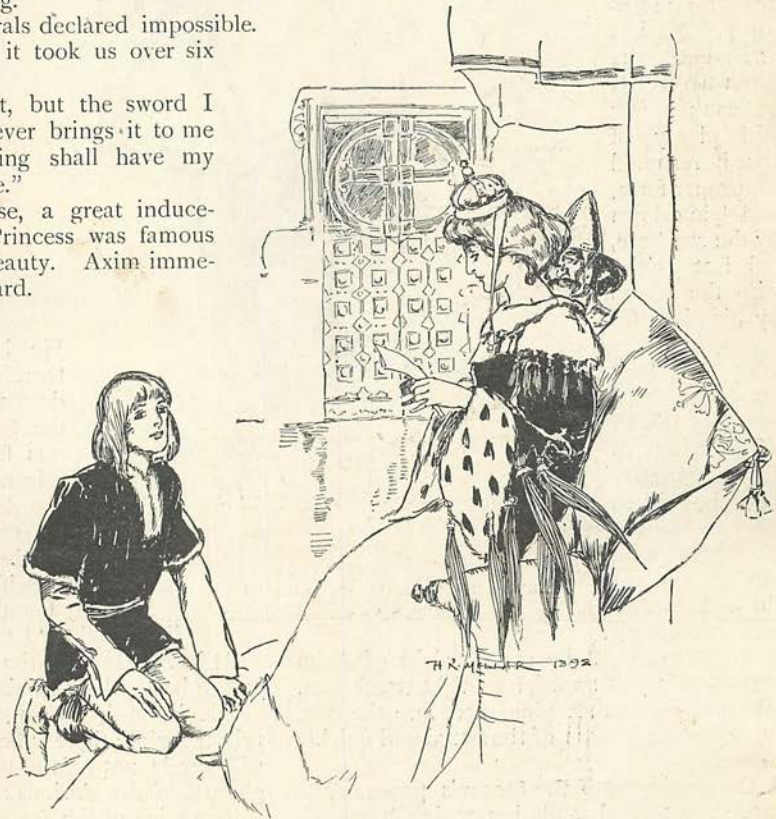
As soon as he was out of sight Axim stopped and laughed.

"Now for the old woman's blessing!" he thought. "I wonder whether it will prove useful or not? I want to be at the palace within six hours."

Hardly had he said these words when he found himself suddenly changed into a small bird, and by his side stood the very same old woman. "When you wish to resume your proper shape," she said, "just rub your beak, and you will find that you are a bird no longer. On the other hand, whenever you want to become a bird again, rub your nose. The only thing you must be careful about is to avoid falling into the hands of the King of the Sea, for then my blessing will lose its force. Now fly away."

On flew Axim, until he alighted in the palace gardens. He hurriedly rubbed his beak, and, resuming his proper shape, walked into the palace and delivered the note to the Princess.

"What a marvellous man you must be!" she exclaimed, on reading the letter. "How



"HE DELIVERED THE NOTE TO THE PRINCESS."

did you manage to get here in such a short time?"

"It was entirely due to the blessing of an old woman," he replied; and he told the Princess how he had been suddenly changed into a bird, and for fear of her not believing him, he rubbed his nose, and was instantly changed into the little bird. After flying round the room several times, he perched himself on the Princess's arm. Just when he was about to resume his proper form, the Princess managed to cut off some of the feathers without his knowing it, and hid them carefully away. After that they sat down to dinner and talked, until it dawned upon them that they had fallen very desperately in love with one another.

Axim at last was obliged to tear himself away, so he bade the Princess a tender farewell, and, changing himself once more into a bird, flew off with the sword in his beak.

Early on the following morning, Axim arrived at the encampment, but as there was still plenty of time he resumed his proper form, and lying down by the seashore, fell fast asleep with the sword by his side, for he was weary after his long journey, and out of breath with flying so fast. Hardly had he fallen asleep when the Colonel came out of one of the tents to take his morning tub. The instant he caught sight of Axim and the Queen's sword, a thought struck him, and pushing the sleeping man into the sea, he possessed himself of the sword and quickly departed.

On coming into the Queen's presence, he made a profound salutation, saying, "Behold, your Majesty, the sword which you desired,

and which I have procured for you within the stated time. Axim and I had a race, but I lost sight of him on the way. I suppose some wild beast must have eaten him up in the forest."

The Queen did not trouble her head about Axim; all she wanted was the sword.

"If you are still alive after the battle," she said, "you may marry my daughter."

The Colonel, however, had no intention of getting killed; he promptly got lost in the crowd the moment the battle commenced, and was not seen until it was over.

At first the Queen thought that the victory was not going to be on her side, for she lost many of her subjects, and was about to return to the palace miserably defeated, when to her intense joy things began

to look more hopeful, and in a very short time she gained the victory.

Now to return to Axim. He had not been idle, therefore he had not been drowned. The King of the Sea saved him as he was falling and took him prisoner. When Axim heard that the Queen was

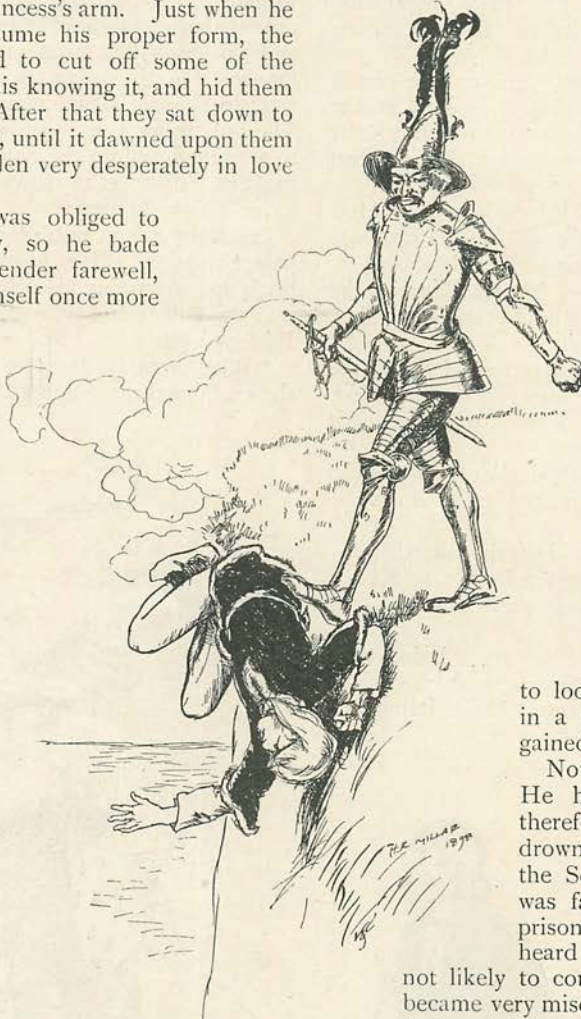
not likely to come off victorious he became very miserable, particularly as he found himself unable to help her.

"If only I could get on land again," he thought, "I might do some good."

At last he begged the King to let him out just to have a look at his comrades.

"It is hard," Axim said, "to be kept a prisoner while there is fighting going on. You will surely not refuse to let me have one glimpse of the glorious spectacle."

The King of the Sea promised to take him up after sunset, and, what is more, he kept



"HE PUSHED THE SLEEPING MAN INTO THE SEA."

his word. As soon as Axim got on shore, he began to pray very hard to the saints that the sun would be so powerful next day as to scorch the King of the Sea; for he and his men hated a hot sun, as they were not accustomed to it in the depths below.

Axim had hardly finished praying when the King of the Sea carried him down again. Next day the sun was so powerful that the King's army could hardly bear the heat and many fainted, while the Queen and her troops fought bravely, killing many of her foes.

At sunset Axim was again allowed up for a few minutes to pray, and next day the sun was so hot that very few of the enemy survived. On the third day the King himself got a sun-stroke, but although he managed to take Axim up on shore as usual at sunset, he felt so giddy that he was unable to fetch him down again at the usual time. Axim was well aware of this; he also knew that he would again have the power to successfully invoke the old woman's blessing if the King did not appear at the given time. There being no sign of the King, Axim hurriedly changed himself into a bird, and by the time the King had recovered sufficiently to fetch his prisoner, that bird had flown! Since then, the King of the Sea has never ventured out of his depths for fear of sun-stroke.

Meanwhile the Queen, having gained the victory, returned to the palace and gave orders for the wedding of her daughter and the wicked Colonel.

Just as the feast was at it highest, Axim walked into the palace and straight up to the Queen.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked, in some surprise. "You promised that I should marry your daughter if I brought you back the sword—why, then, is she about to marry another?"

"You never brought me the sword," the Queen replied, indignantly; "you got eaten up by wild beasts instead, and left the Colonel to do my bidding. Away with you!"

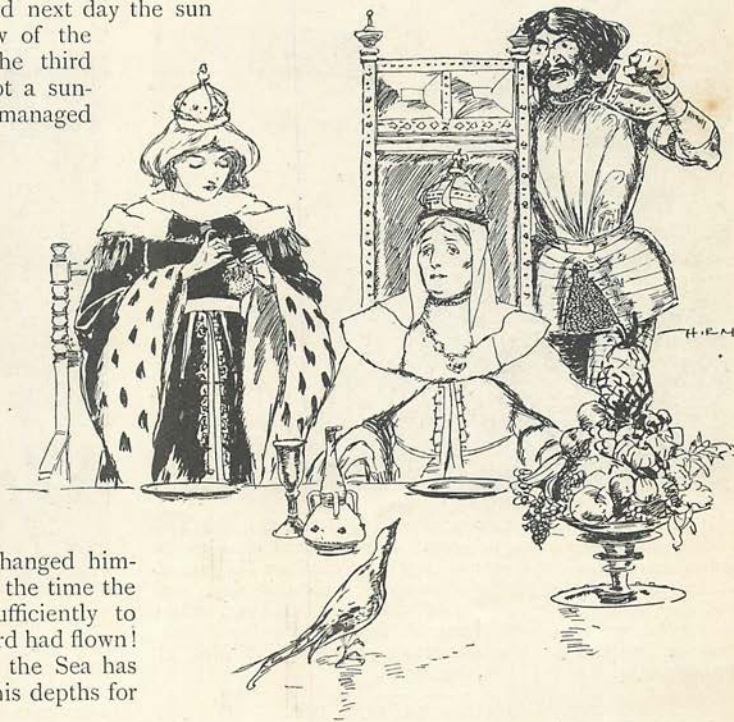
"There is some mistake," said the Princess, getting up from the table and approaching

her mother. "This certainly is the man who fetched your sword, and not the Colonel. I told you it was not the Colonel from the first."

"What proof have you that it is this man?" asked the Queen.

"Will you please change yourself into a bird," the Princess said, turning to Axim, "and I will show my mother what I mean?"

Axim immediately did as he was told, while the Princess took out of her pocket the feathers she had cut off, and showed everybody present from whence she had cut them.



"AXIM IMMEDIATELY DID AS HE WAS TOLD."

"But that is not all," said a voice, and on looking round Axim beheld his friend the old woman; "if it had not been for him your Majesty would never have won the battle," and the old woman then explained everything.

"But," objected the Queen, "how do you know? How are we to believe you? Who are you?"

"This is who I am"—as she spoke she was suddenly changed into a beautiful fairy, and was recognised by all present as the good Queen of the Air Spirits.

After that no more proofs were necessary. The wicked Colonel was promptly beheaded, while Axim and the charming Princess were married and lived happily ever after.