



A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN.

LONG before you or I were born, there lived a King and Queen who had an only son, called Egor, who was remarkably handsome. As this young Prince grew up, his parents became very anxious that he should get married; but this was no easy matter, as Prince Egor was very difficult to please, and he had never seemed to care for any of the Princesses of his acquaintance.

"If I am to marry," said the Prince to his father, "my bride must be the most beautiful woman ever seen, as well as the cleverest."

One day, as the Prince was strolling about the grounds of the palace, he saw a big, black raven sitting upon a tree, and, as he looked at the bird, he fancied that it smiled upon him.

"What a curious creature," thought the Prince, aloud. "I wonder whether it can talk?"

"Of course I can!" answered the raven. "That is exactly what I am here for. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate to you. You wish to get married, do you not?"

"Not in the least—there you are wrong," laughed the Prince.

"Well, your parents are anxious that you should, and you refuse to do so unless you meet a Princess who is more beautiful than any other woman living?"

The Prince nodded.

"Very well, then; I know the very person for you."

"And her name?"

"Is Queen Agraphiana the Fair, of the Hundred and Thirteenth Kingdom at the World's End. It is a long journey."

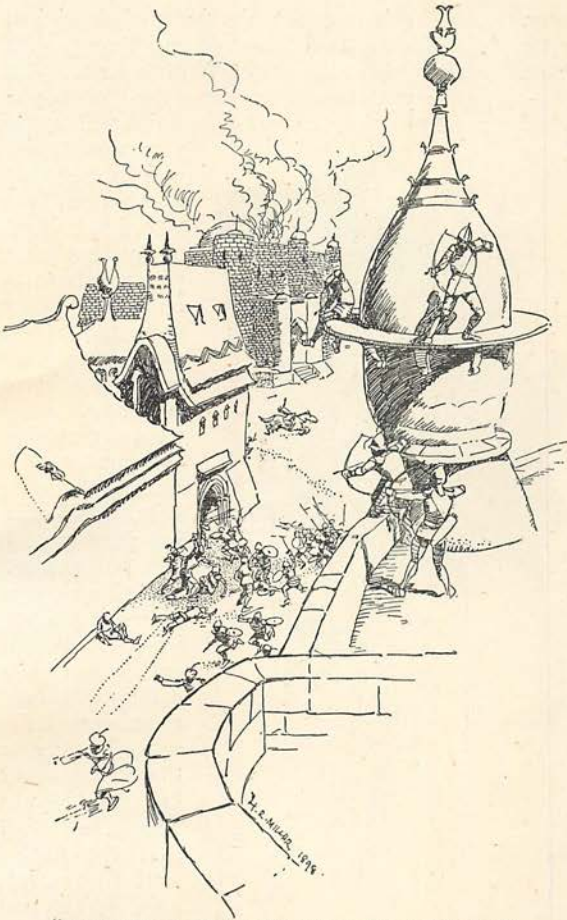
"I have heard of her great beauty, certainly," said the Prince; "but I always heard that she was married."

"Rubbish!" answered the raven. "Never believe what people say. Go in search of her as soon as ever you can, and lose no time."

The Prince was intensely amused. However, he returned to the palace to prepare for his long journey; and in spite of all his parents said to him, Egor mounted his horse and galloped off towards the Hundred and Thirteenth Kingdom at the World's End.

On rode the Prince, for days and weeks and months, until he reached the Hundred and Twelfth Kingdom, which he found in a great state of disorder. Soldiers were lying about dead and wounded in the streets, while others were fighting and killing each other right and left. Just as Prince Egor was about to ask the meaning of all this uproar, some strong, handsome men in armour came galloping along the roads, crying:—

"Victory! Long live Queen Agraphiana the Fair!"



"FIGHTING AND KILLING EACH OTHER RIGHT AND LEFT."

A tremendous cheer arose from all sides, and the streets became bright with soldiers of all arms.

"What on earth has happened?" asked the Prince, at last, of a soldier near him.

"We, of the Hundred and Thirteenth Kingdom, with Queen Agraphiana at our head, have defeated these people of the Hundred and Twelfth Kingdom."

"Where is your Queen? I should like to see her."

"She is in the camp; follow me, and I will lead you to her."

They had not gone far before they came to an encampment, and out of one of the tents Queen Agraphiana the Fair advanced to meet them.

"Hail to you, Prince Egor," she said. "Have you come as friend, or as foe?"

"Friend, of course, most beautiful Queen."

"Then you are welcome. You must be tired; you have evidently had a long journey;

come in and rest, and if you will stay with us in camp for awhile, we shall all be glad to have you among us."

The Prince was charmed; never had he seen so beautiful a woman. He spent two whole days in Queen Agraphiana's society, and, of course, fell so much in love with her that he married her.

The young Prince and his bride soon left the encampment, and went to live in Queen Agraphiana's kingdom, where they were extremely happy for a long time.

At last war broke out in the Hundred and Eleventh Kingdom, and Agraphiana had to join her army, but refused to take her husband with her, although he begged very hard to be allowed to accompany her.

"No, no," she said, firmly; "I can manage my own affairs quite well. I don't want to have you run into any danger. You can remain here and look after the palace and the kingdom during my absence. You may go where you please, and do what you like; but—mind you don't open the door of that cupboard, or bad luck will attend us."

The Prince promised to obey her, though he was sorely disappointed at not being allowed to go with her and fight; however, as there was no help for it, he determined to do his best to amuse himself at home, while his wife did the fighting.

He did not venture anywhere near the mysterious cupboard, until one day, when he felt particularly dull, and did not know what to do with himself. He had been strolling about the palace, when he suddenly found himself opposite the forbidden cupboard! He hesitated, looked at it, and then laughed. "How ridiculous!" he exclaimed. "What possible harm could happen if I open that little door?"

So he turned the key and—entered!

Right in front of him, hanging from the ceiling by one hundred and thirteen iron chains, was a hideous-looking skeleton!

"Beware, my Prince, beware!" cried a voice, and on looking round, Egor beheld his old friend, the raven.

"What harm can an old, deceased skeleton do to me?" asked the Prince.

But the only answer he got from the bird was, "Beware!"

"Have mercy on me, Prince Egor," groaned

the skeleton. "I am so thirsty, give me water. My throat is so dry, I have hung here for over twelve years without a morsel of food, and without a drop to drink."

The Prince felt very sorry for the wretched creature, and in spite of another mournful "Beware!" from the raven, he fetched two huge pails of water and poured the contents down the skeleton's throat. After a moment's silence, the skeleton shook himself, and with a tremendous wrench forced the iron chains asunder, and was once more free.

"I am more than grateful," said the skeleton, giving the Prince his bony hand; "but I am afraid you won't see Queen Agraphiana again, for now she shall be mine by right of conquest."

So saying, the skeleton took a great leap out of the window and disappeared, leaving the astonished Prince in a state of great misery.

"Well," said the familiar voice of the raven, "you have rushed upon your fate."

The Prince took no notice of the bird, but sat by the window and wept.

"Look!" cried the raven; "there they go!"

Prince Egor looked up, out of the window, and was horrified to see the wretched skeleton fly past him carrying the beautiful Queen Agraphiana in his arms.

"Miserable wretch that I am!" cried the Prince. "What am I to do?"

"Dry your eyes," advised the raven, "and follow the skeleton like a man; try and get her back, and smash him to atoms! That is what you have got to do."

"But whither have they flown? How can I follow?" asked the Prince.

"They have gone to the skeleton's dominion, which is the Two Hundred and Twenty-sixth at the Other Side of the World's End. But before you attempt to rescue the Queen, you must secure a certain horse, which will enable

you and your wife to escape in safety from the skeleton. Now, to find that horse you will have to cross the fiery river, and call on an old witch to whom this horse belongs, and whose friendship you must gain—which will be no light task—still, you must try. I will be at hand to advise you. Here is a silver whistle; take it, and when you come to the fiery river, sound the whistle three times, and a very high bridge will appear, so high that the flames will not reach you when you cross, and it will remain there until you use your whistle again."



"RIGHT IN FRONT OF HIM WAS A HIDEOUS-LOOKING SKELETON."

Prince Egor thanked the raven, and started off at once to the skeleton's dominion. On, on, he walked, for days and weeks, until he came to the fiery river, which he crossed by means of the magic bridge that appeared the moment he whistled for it. At last he came to a curious-looking hut, standing on chickens' legs, and which was surrounded by a hundred poles, on ninety-nine of which were human skulls.

Prince Egor did not stop to look at them, but entered the hut, in which sat a hideous old witch. "Good-day, to you," he said. "I have come to serve you as groom, if you will have me."

"By all means," replied the witch; "and what wages do you require?"

"None; I only want one of your horses. But just now I am simply

famished, and should like something to eat and drink."

The old witch gave him as much as he wanted, and then told him to go to bed.

"You must get up early in the morning," she said, "and take my horses out for an airing; but take care, and don't lose them, or your head will add to the decorations of my outer wall."

Next morning Prince

"What made you come back, you idiots?" he heard the witch ask them, angrily.

"We could not help ourselves," they answered; "the moment we got into the forest, a number of wild birds and beasts surrounded us and drove us back."

"Well, next time he lets you out, you must on no account return."

At midnight, when all was silent, Prince Egor rode away to the fiery river; he whistled three times, and immediately the bridge appeared. When he had crossed, the raven flew down upon his shoulder, saying:—

"Leave the bridge as it is, for the witch will pursue you, and when she is half-way across you may whistle, and the flames will devour her as she falls through the breaking bridge; otherwise she

might erect a bridge of her own, which you would not be able to destroy."

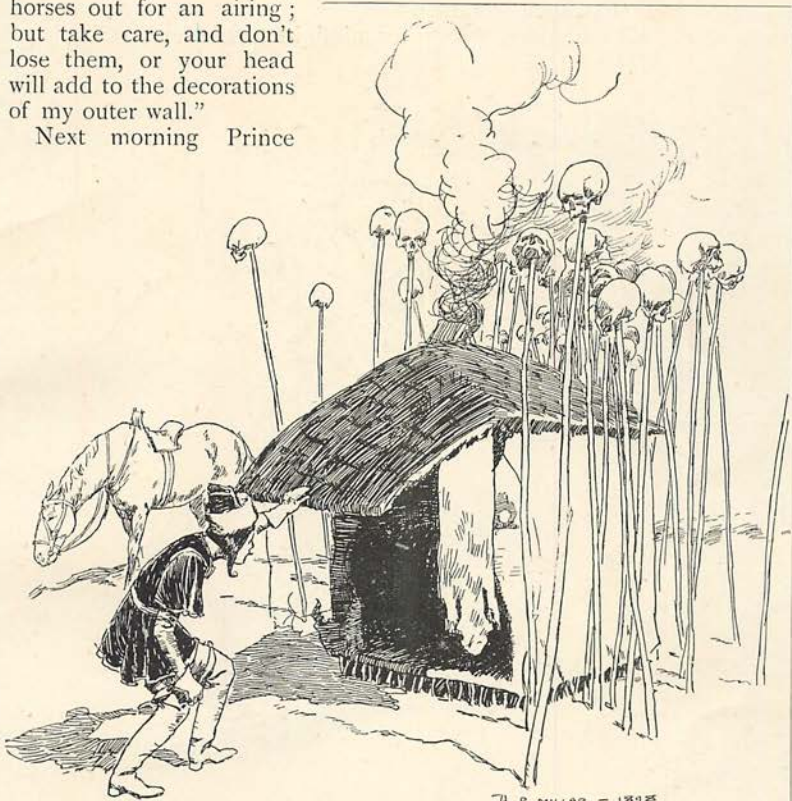
When the witch awoke and found that both the Prince and the mangy pony were missing, she flew into a terrific rage and gave chase.

"A bridge!" she cried, when she arrived at the fiery river. "What luck; just what I wanted."

But just as she got half-way across, Prince Egor whistled, and down went the bridge, sending the old witch head-over-heels into the flames, which immediately devoured her.

Prince Egor then, by the raven's advice, took his pony to a lake hard by, and made it drink until it became quite well and strong again, and was transformed into a handsome and powerful horse.

At last, after three days' hard riding, the Prince rode up to the skeleton's gloomy



"PRINCE EGOR ENTERED THE HUT."

Egor went to the stables, and let all the horses out, but he had hardly done so, when the animals snorted and neighed and galloped off as hard as ever they could, and before Prince Egor knew what had taken place, they were out of sight. The Prince was in despair, and began to wonder what he had better do, when, to his delight, he beheld the raven.

"Do not fret," said the bird, "I will send all the horses safely home; meanwhile, you go back and enter the very last stable, where you will find a mangy pony lying in a corner, which is the horse for you. Take it, and at midnight mount him and ride away as hard as ever you can."

Away went the Prince to the stable, saddled the sick pony, and waited. Presently he heard the horses all come galloping home.

palace, where he was thankful to hear that the skeleton was out hunting, but that Queen Agraphiana was in.

On hearing his voice, the Queen rushed out to meet him.

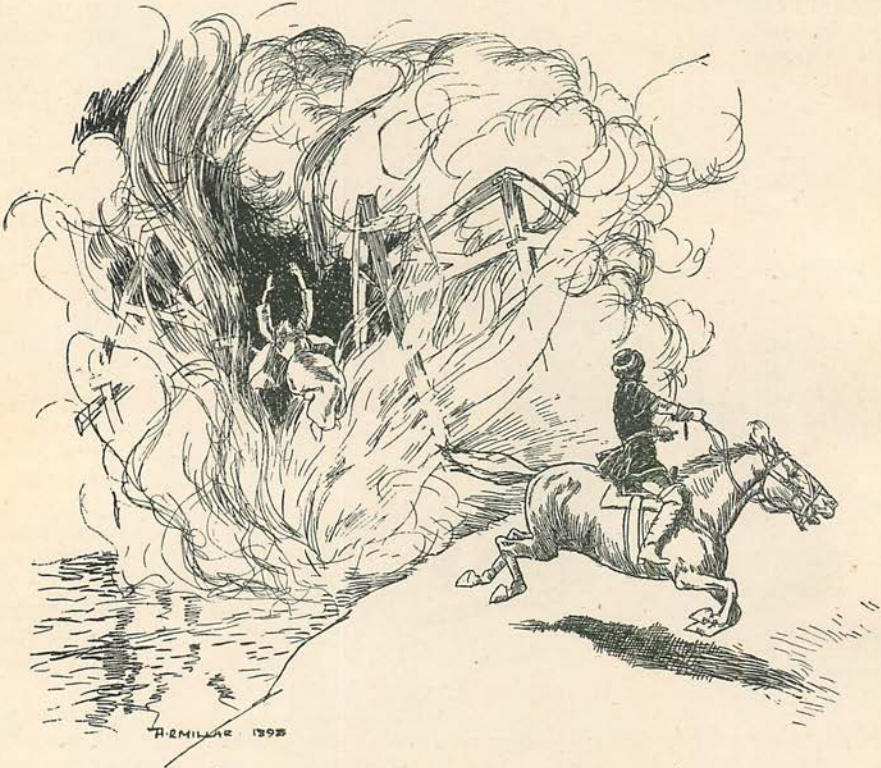
"Oh, my Prince, my Prince, where have you been all this long, long time? I thought you never would come to save me," she said.

"Prince Egor has been to the palace, and has carried away the Queen," replied the horse.

"But we shall overtake them."

"I am not so sure of that, as the Prince has secured the best horse in the witch's stables."

"Never mind, let us try our best."



"PRINCE EGOR WHISTLED, AND DOWN WENT THE BRIDGE."

Prince Egor told her where he had been and what he had done.

"Ah, why did you not listen to me, my Prince? You would have been saved all this terrible worry."

"Never mind, dear one, let us lose no time, but fly from here at once before the skeleton returns."

"But he will overtake us!"

"I doubt it, as I have secured a splendid horse which runs faster than any bird can fly."

The young couple seated themselves on the animal and galloped off.

Meanwhile the skeleton, returning homewards, was surprised to find his horse remarkably restive.

"What is the matter?" he asked; "is there trouble in the air?"

After a long and anxious ride, the skeleton came in sight of the Prince and Queen Agraphiana, and, quickening his pace, he was about to draw his sword, when the Prince's horse suddenly turned round, and galloping straight up to the skeleton, knocked him off his saddle on to the ground, then rushing at him, he trampled upon him and crushed every bit of life out of the hideous creature. Queen Agraphiana then mounted the skeleton's horse and rode away with Prince Egor to her own kingdom, where they lived happily for many a long year; occasionally visiting Prince Egor's parents, who were delighted with their daughter-in-law. As for the raven, he established himself in the palace, and was Prince Egor's greatest pet, as well as his most faithful friend.