

THE FIRE BIRD AND RED FOX

by Karel Jaromír Erben

A King once had a large and beautiful garden. In it there were many rare trees, yet the rarest of all was the apple tree which stood in the middle. It produced one apple each day and that apple was of gold. The tree blossomed in the morning, the bud grew during the day and by nightfall it was ripe; next day another one would bloom. But no ripe apple lasted until the next dawn; each one disappeared from the tree during the night and no one knew where or how it went. The King was very sad about this.

He called his eldest son to him and said: "Go, my son, you will keep watch tonight. If you find who is taking those apples, you shall be richly rewarded, and if you manage to catch the thief, I shall give you half of my kingdom."

The prince buckled on his sword, shouldered his crossbow, took some sharp arrows and went to keep watch in the garden. He sat down under the apple tree and waited. He had not been sitting for long when sleep overcame him and he was powerless to resist. His hands sank onto the grass, his eyes closed and the prince slept soundly until daybreak. When he woke in the morning, again the apple was gone.

"Have you seen the thief?" the King enquired.

"No one came, the apple disappeared all by itself," the prince answered.

The King shook his head disbelievingly. He turned to his younger son and said: "You go and keep watch tonight, my son, and if you catch the thief, I shall reward you richly".

The second prince armed himself as the first one had and went to keep watch. After a while he too fell asleep under the apple tree as his brother had done, and when he awoke the apple was gone.

When his father asked him who had taken the apple, he answered: "Nobody, it disappeared by itself."

Then the youngest prince said: "Father, I will watch tonight to see if the apple also disappears."

"My dear child," the King said, "I think there is little you can do, you are so young and inexperienced. If your two older brothers have failed to protect the golden apple then it will be even harder for you. Yet go if you wish."

In the evening, as it began to get dark, the youngest son went to the garden to keep watch. He too took a sword, a crossbow and some



arrows, but in addition he carried a hedgehog's skin. He sat down under the apple tree and spread this skin on his lap so that it would wake him if sleep overcame him and his hands dropped down. At midnight a golden bird flew down, sat in the tree and was about to pluck the apple. At that moment the prince fired his crossbow and the arrow hit the bird in the wing. The bird flew away but a golden wing feather fell to the ground and the apple remained on the tree.

"So, have you got the thief?" the King asked the next morning.

"No, I have not," the prince replied. "But all is not lost. I have a piece of his coat for now."

He took out the golden feather and recounted what had happened to him. The King rejoiced to see the feather. It was so beautiful and it shone so brightly that at night no lamps were needed in the hall. The courtiers who knew of such things said that the feather came from the Fire Bird and was worth more than all the King's treasures.

From that time on the Fire Bird came to the garden no more and no more apples were lost. Yet the apples no longer delighted the King; he kept thinking of the Fire Bird and it pained him not to possess it. His heart began to wither with grief. One day he called his three sons to him and said: "Dear children, you can see that I am becoming weaker every day. I am sure

that if I heard the Fire Bird's singing it would refresh my heart. The one who brings the Fire Bird alive to me to sing shall receive half of the kingdom and shall be my successor when I die."

The sons immediately prepared to set out. They said goodbye to their father and rode out to look for the Fire Bird. They had not been riding long when they reached a forest and in the forest a crossroads.

"Which way shall we take?" asked the oldest brother.

"There are three of us and there are three roads here," answered the second one. "Let each of us take a different road; if we go in three directions it will be easier to find the Fire Bird."

"And who will take which one?"

"You go whichever way you want, I will take the one which is left," the youngest brother said.

The brothers were satisfied and each chose a different path.

Then one of them said: "Let us leave a sign here so that the one who comes back first will know how the others have fared. Let each of us plant a twig in the ground. Whose twig sprouts leaves, he will have found the Fire Bird – that shall be our sign."

The brothers liked this idea. Each of them planted a twig beside his path and they rode on their way.

The eldest prince rode on along his road until he arrived at a hill. He

jumped off his horse, left it to graze and sat down on the grass. Then he took out his food and started to eat.

The Red Fox came creeping up to him and said: "Please, please young master, I am very hungry, give me something to eat."

As soon as the prince saw him he took his crossbow and fired a sharp arrow at him. Whether he missed him or not, he disappeared.

The same thing happened to the second brother. As he sat down in a large meadow to eat, the Red Fox appeared and asked for a morsel, but as he shot at him he disappeared from sight.

The youngest brother went on until he reached a stream. He was hungry and tired so he jumped off his horse and sat down on the grassy bank to refresh himself.

As he began to eat he too saw the Red Fox who came closer and closer and then stood still at a little distance from him.

"Please, please, young master, I am very hungry, let me have a bite of something, too."

The prince threw him a piece of meat and said: "Come here and do not be afraid, Red Fox, I can see that you are hungrier than I am and I have enough for both of us for today." Then he divided his provisions into two – some for himself and some for the fox.

Red Fox ate until he was satisfied and then he said: "You fed me well, I shall serve you well. Get on your

horse and follow me. If you do what I tell you, the Fire Bird will be yours." Then he ran in front of him, clearing the way for him with his bushy tail. He wiped away mountains, filled in valleys, built bridges over lakes and rivers. The prince followed him on his trotting steed, when all of a sudden he found himself near the Copper Palace.



"The Fire Bird is in this palace," the Red Fox said, "go there at midday – the guards will be asleep – and do not linger anywhere. In the first hall you will find twelve black birds in golden cages, in the second one twelve golden birds in wooden cages and in the third hall the Fire Bird will be sitting on a perch. You will see two cages next to him – a golden one and a wooden one – but do not put him in the golden one, put him in the wooden cage otherwise it will go ill for you."

The prince entered the Copper Palace and found everything as the Red Fox had said. The Fire Bird was sitting on a perch in the third hall as if he were sleeping. He was so beautiful that the prince's heart leapt for joy. He took him and put him in the wooden cage, but then he changed his mind and said: "How can such a lovely bird be put in such a miserable cage? The Fire Bird deserves the golden cage." So he took him from the wooden cage and put him in the golden one. But he had scarcely shut the cage when the Fire Bird woke up and let out a whistle, and all of a sudden such a piping and screeching broke out from all the birds in the first two halls that the guards awoke. They ran in immediately, arrested the prince and took him to their King.

The King was furious and said: "Who are you, thief, that you dared evade so many guards to steal my Fire Bird?"

"I am no thief, but I have come to fetch the thief whom you are harbouring," the prince replied. "At home in our royal garden we have an apple tree which bears golden fruit. Each day one apple would blossom, grow and ripen, but your Fire Bird carried it away each night. And the King, my father, is seriously ill, his heart is withered and he will not recover until he hears your Fire Bird sing. And that is why I ask you to give him to me."

"You may have him," the King answered, "if you bring me Golden Mane instead."

The Red Fox was waiting for the prince outside the castle gate and was very angry when he saw him coming without the Fire Bird.

"Why did you disobey me and take the golden cage?" growled the Red Fox.

"I did indeed make a mistake," said the prince, "but please do not be angry with me for what has happened. Tell me if you know of the horse with the golden mane."

"I do," Red Fox replied, "and I will help you once again. Get on your horse and follow me."

Again he took the lead and ran ahead to clear the way with his bushy tail. The prince rode after him, until all of a sudden they arrived in front of a silver-coloured palace.

"Golden Mane is in this palace," Red Fox said. "Go there at midday when the guards will be asleep and

do not stop anywhere. In the first stable you will find twelve black horses with golden halters, in the second stable there will be twelve white horses with black halters and in the third stable Golden Mane will be standing next to his manger. You will see two halters next to him on the wall – a golden one and a leather one. But be careful, leave the golden one hanging there and use the leather one. Otherwise it will not go well for you."

The prince went to the castle and found everything there as Red Fox had told him. Golden Mane was standing in the third stable and eating oats from a silver manger. He was so beautiful that the prince could not take his eyes off him. Then he took the black leather bridle from the wall and put it on Golden Mane. The horse stood there as calm as a lamb. But then he suddenly saw the beautiful golden bridle hanging on the wall, studded with gems, and he could not take his eyes off it.

"How can such a beautiful horse wear such a miserable bridle?" he thought to himself. "The horse with the golden mane deserves the golden bridle." So he took off the leather halter and replaced it with the golden one. As soon as the horse sensed the golden bridle, he began to rear and neigh and all the other horses in the first two stables began to kick and whinny. Then the guards awoke and came run-

ning, seized the prince and brought him before the King.

"Who are you, thief," the King accused him, "that you dared evade so many guards to steal my Golden Mane?"

"I am no thief. I did not want to take your horse, but I had to," the prince answered.

And then he recounted what had come to pass and how the King of the Copper Palace had refused to give the Fire Bird to him unless he brought him Golden Mane. And then he asked to be given the horse.

"You can have him if you bring me Princess Goldilocks from the Golden Palace in the Black Sea," the King of the Silver Palace told him.

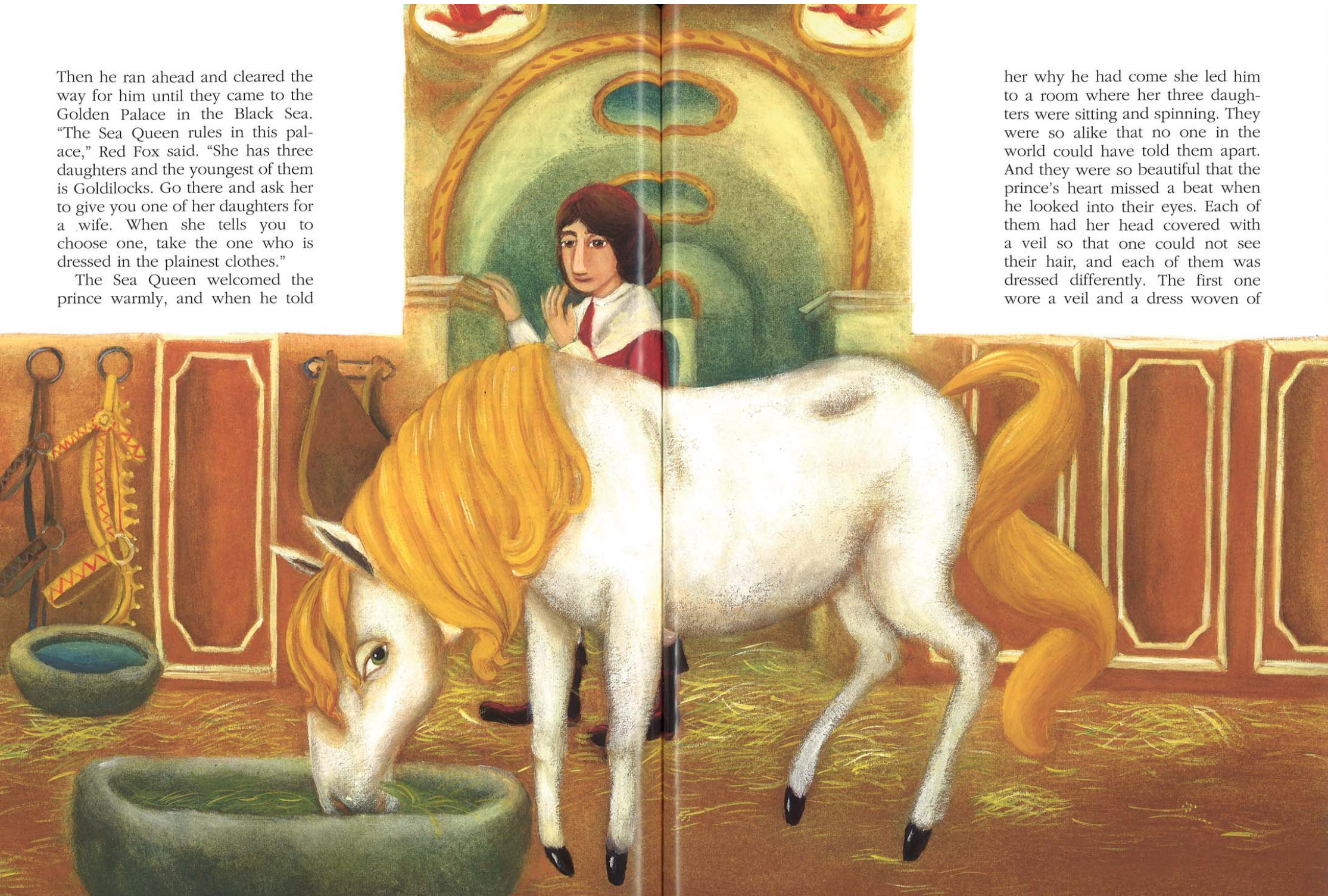
Red Fox was waiting for the prince in the forest and when he saw him coming without the horse he was very angry. "Did I not tell you to leave the golden bridle on the wall and take the leather one? It is a waste of time trying to help you; he who will not listen cannot be helped."

"Do not be angry with me, Red Fox," begged the prince. "I did indeed make a mistake but please help me one more time." "I will help you once more, for the last time," said the Red Fox, "and if you obey me, then you can still make amends for everything that you have spoilt by your foolishness. Get on your horse and follow me."

Then he ran ahead and cleared the way for him until they came to the Golden Palace in the Black Sea. "The Sea Queen rules in this palace," Red Fox said. "She has three daughters and the youngest of them is Goldilocks. Go there and ask her to give you one of her daughters for a wife. When she tells you to choose one, take the one who is dressed in the plainest clothes."

The Sea Queen welcomed the prince warmly, and when he told

her why he had come she led him to a room where her three daughters were sitting and spinning. They were so alike that no one in the world could have told them apart. And they were so beautiful that the prince's heart missed a beat when he looked into their eyes. Each of them had her head covered with a veil so that one could not see their hair, and each of them was dressed differently. The first one wore a veil and a dress woven of



gold and she was spinning with a golden spindle. The second one was wearing a silver veil and a dress embroidered with silver and she had a silver spindle in her hand. The third daughter was clad in a white veil and dress and was spinning with an ordinary spindle.

"Choose whomever you wish," the Queen said and the prince pointed to the girl in white.

"Give me this one."

"Hmm, hmm," said the Queen in amazement. "This is not your own idea, wait until tomorrow."

The prince could not sleep from worrying how he would fare next day. As soon as dawn appeared in the east he went into the palace garden.

Scarcely had he started walking when the white girl appeared before him as if from nowhere: "If you want to recognise me today, give heed to the little fly that will be buzzing round me," she said. Then she left as suddenly as she had come.

In the afternoon the Queen led the prince again to the room where her daughters were. "If you recognise the one you chose yesterday, she is yours. If not, you will lose your head."

The daughters were standing there next to one another. They were all dressed in expensive and beautiful clothes and they all had golden hair which shone so much that the prince was almost blinded. After a while

his eyes become accustomed to the brightness and he noticed a tiny golden fly circling around one of the maidens.

"This maiden belongs to me, she is the one I have chosen," he said. The Queen was surprised that he recognised her and said: "You shall not have her so easily. You must accomplish a task I shall give you tomorrow."

In the morning she showed him a big lake near the forest, handed him a little golden sieve and said:

"If you succeed in emptying that lake with this sieve by nightfall I will give you Goldilocks. You will lose your head if you do not."

The prince took the sieve and went sadly to the lake. He scooped up some water but as he lifted the sieve all the water ran out. Seeing that he could achieve nothing, he sat on the bank, put the sieve down beside him and started thinking about what to do.

All of a sudden the white maiden appeared again as if from nowhere: "Why are you so sad?"

"How could I be happy," replied the prince, "since I see that I shall not win you because your mother has given me an impossible task."

"Do not worry, all this can be done," the girl said. Then she took the sieve and threw it into the middle of the lake. All at once the water in the lake began to boil and thick fog rose up from the water and covered the ground so that one

could not see three steps in front of one's eyes.

At that moment the prince heard footsteps and when he turned around he saw Red Fox and behind him his own horse.

"Hurry, take the girl on the horse with you and ride away," he said to him.

The horse flew back like an arrow on the road which Red Fox had made for him, and the fox destroyed the path behind him, sweeping away bridges, forming valleys, building mountains so that the land was as it had been before. The

prince was happy that he had won the Princess Goldilocks, and yet it saddened him that he must give her in exchange for Golden Mane.

The closer they got to the palace the slower he rode and the sadder he became.

"You are sorry that you must exchange your beautiful Goldilocks for the horse with the golden mane, aren't you?" said Red Fox. "I have helped you in many things, I will not leave you now."

He jumped over a tree root and turned a somersault and in place of



the Red Fox a second Goldilocks stood there. "Leave your maiden in the forest, take me to the King of the Silver Palace and exchange me for Golden Mane. Then ride away as quickly as you can with your princess."

The King was very pleased to receive Goldilocks and he at once gave the prince Golden Mane together with the golden bridle as his reward.

Then he held a feast in honour of the golden-haired princess and invited all the noblemen of his kingdom.

After they had drunk a lot and were very merry, the King asked the nobles how they liked his golden-haired bride.

"She is very beautiful," one of the nobles replied. "She could not be more beautiful and yet it seems to me that she has the eyes of a fox."

He had scarcely said this word when in an instant the princess Goldilocks turned back into Red Fox, sprang out of the door and was gone. He hurried after the prince and the golden-haired maiden, destroying everything behind him. With his bushy tail he swept away bridges, formed valleys, built mountains, so that the land looked exactly as it had done before. When he caught up with them, they were near the Copper Palace where the Fire Bird lived.

The Red Fox said to the prince: "How lovely Goldilocks looks on

the horse with the golden mane! Will you not be sorry, Prince, to exchange Golden Mane for the Fire Bird?"

"Of course I am sorry that Goldilocks must forego the horse with the golden mane," the prince replied, "but when I think that my father will be well again I am sorry no more."

Red Fox replied: "Where Goldilocks and Golden Mane are, the Fire Bird should be too. I have helped you on many different occasions and I shall not desert you now."

He jumped over a tree root in the forest and turned a somersault. And instead of the Red Fox a second Golden Mane stood there, exactly the same as the one Goldilocks was sitting on.

"Take me to the King of the Copper Palace and exchange me for the Fire Bird. Once you have him, ride quickly away," he said.

The King was very glad to have Golden Mane and without delay he handed the Fire Bird to the prince together with the golden cage.

Then he invited many nobles to join him, showed them his horse Golden Mane and asked them how they liked him.

"He is beautiful," said one of the nobles. "He could not be more beautiful but it seems to me that he has the tail of a fox."

So sooner had he said this word than Golden Mane turned back into Red Fox, leapt through the gate and

was gone. He ran after the prince and Goldilocks, destroying the path behind him as he went. He caught up with them as they reached the stream where he had met the prince for the first time.

"Now you have the Fire Bird," he said. "You have more than you asked for so you need me no more. Ride home in peace and do not stop anywhere otherwise things will go ill with you," he said. Then he disappeared.

The prince continued on his way. He had the Fire Bird in the golden cage in one hand, Golden Mane with the golden bridle beside him and the beautiful maiden Goldilocks on the horse. When he arrived at the forest junction where he had parted with his brothers he remembered the twigs each one had planted as a sign. The twigs of his two brothers were dry and brittle, but from his twig a beautiful spreading tree was now growing beside the path. He rejoiced to see this and, since they were both very tired after such a long journey, he decided to rest under the tree.

He got off his horse and helped the golden-haired maiden as she dismounted from Golden Mane. Then he tied both the horses to a tree and hung the Fire Bird's cage on a branch. Before long they both fell asleep.

While they were sleeping his brothers came back, each from a different direction and each

empty-handed. They saw that their twigs were dry and brittle, but that their brother's twig had grown into a beautiful spreading tree. They saw, too, that their brother was sleeping under the tree with a beautiful golden-haired maiden beside him, and they saw Golden Mane and the Fire Bird in the cage above them.

Then evil thoughts arose in their hearts and one of them said to the other: "Our brother will now receive half of the kingdom from our father and will be his successor when he dies. It would be better to kill him. You shall take the golden-haired maiden, I shall take Golden Mane and we will give the Fire Bird to our father to sing for him. And we will divide the kingdom between us."

No sooner said than done. They cut their brother's body into many pieces and threatened the golden-haired maiden with death if she betrayed the truth.

When they reached home they led Golden Mane to a marble stall, put the Fire Bird's cage in the room where the King was lying and gave the golden-haired maiden a beautiful chamber and many serving girls to wait on her.

The old ill King looked at the Fire Bird and asked his sons if they had any news of their youngest brother.

"We have not heard of him. He has probably died on the journey," the brothers answered. Their father remained as low-spirited as before,





the Fire Bird did not sing, Golden Mane let his mane droop sadly and Goldilocks did not say a word; she did not brush her golden hair and she wept without ceasing.

While the prince was lying in the forest, hacked to pieces, the Red Fox came to him. He gathered all the parts together and would gladly have brought him to life, but this did not lie in his power.

But then he saw a crow and two young birds flying above the body. He hid under a bush in the grass, and when one of the young crows alighted on the body to eat it, Red Fox jumped out and caught the bird by the wing as though he would tear it to pieces.

The old crow came closer, full of fear. She sat on a bush and said to Red Fox: "Caw, caw! Leave my poor child alone, he has done you no harm. Should you ever need my help, I shall reward you greatly."

"I need it now," the Red Fox said. "If you bring me both live and dead water from the Black Sea, I will let your child live." The crow promised to bring it and flew away.

She flew for three days and three nights and she came back with two fish bladders full of water. One was full of live water and the other of dead water. The Red Fox took the bladders and tore the young crow in two pieces.

Then he put the two halves back together, sprinkled them with dead water and they grew back together.

Then he sprinkled them with the live water and the crow shook its wings and flew away. Then he sprinkled the prince's chopped body with the dead water. It became whole again, without even a scar. When he sprinkled it with live water, the prince awoke as if from a dream, got up and said: "Oh, how soundly I have slept!"

"Yes, indeed, you have slept soundly," the Red Fox replied. "And if it were not for me, you would never have woken again. Had I not told you not to stop and to go home directly?"

Then he recounted to him what had happened. He walked with him to the edge of the forest not far away from his father's palace, gave him a simple robe, said goodbye and disappeared.

The prince went to the palace and took a post as a stablehand; no one recognised him.

One day he heard two old retainers talking: "It is a pity about Golden Mane. I fear we shall lose him; he hangs his head so sadly and refuses to eat."

"Give me some pea straw," said the prince, "I wager that he will eat it straight away." "Ha-ha, even our carthorses do not eat such stuff," the retainers laughed.

But the prince took some pea straw and put it in the horse's marble manger. Then he stroked his golden mane and said: "Why are you so sad, my dear Golden Mane?"

When the horse recognised his master's voice, he jumped up, snorted, whinnied merrily and started eating the pea straw.

The news spread quickly through the whole palace. Even the sick King heard that one of his stablehands had cured Golden Mane. The King summoned him and: "I have heard that you have cured Golden Mane. I wish you could help the Fire Bird, too, so that he would sing. He is sad, his wings droop and he does not want to eat. If he dies, I shall die, too."

"Do not be afraid, O King," said the prince, "He will not die. Command a servant to bring some barley and he will surely eat; he will be merry and sing again."

"Ha-ha," laughed the servants who were sent to fetch the barley. "He feeds the Fire Bird with barley which even our geese do not want to eat."

But they brought the barley and the prince sprinkled some in the golden cage. Then he stroked the bird's golden feathers and said: "Why are you so sad, my Fire Bird?"

The bird at once recognised his voice, shook himself and began to preen his wings. He started hopping and eating and then he sang so beautifully that the old king's heart was well again. And when the Fire Bird sang for the second and the third time, the King felt so strong that he rose from his bed and embraced the stranger in pure joy.

Then the King said: "What shall we do with the beautiful golden-haired maiden whom my sons brought here with them? She does not speak, she does not brush her golden hair; she eats nothing and she weeps without ceasing."

"Allow me, O King, to have a word with her," the servant said "I may be able to cheer her." The King led him to her, the prince took her white hand and said: "Why are you so sad, my love?"

The girl recognised him at once, she cried out in joy and embraced him. The King wondered that he called her his love and she embraced him. The prince said to him: "My royal father, do you not know your youngest son?"

It was not my brothers but I who procured the Fire Bird, Golden Mane and this lovely golden-haired maiden."

And then he recounted what had come to pass and the girl testified that his brothers had threatened her with death if she told what they had done. The brothers were standing there and saw that they had been betrayed; they were trembling like aspen leaves and they could not say a word. The King was enraged and had both of them executed immediately. Then the prince married the pretty Goldilocks, received then and there half of his father's kingdom and after his father's death the other half too.

