

# The Magic Horse

*From 1,001 Arabian Nights*

IN ANCIENT PERSIA, the New Year was celebrated at the beginning of spring. At that time a grand feast was observed throughout the land, and at the royal palace, artists, natives and strangers were invited to present their finest skills or treasures to the king. If the king was pleased, he would grant them a fine gift.

Near the end of one of these feasts, a traveler came before the king and presented a beautiful, wooden horse, richly decorated.

"I flatter myself, sir," said the stranger, addressing himself to the king, "that your majesty has never seen anything as wonderful as this."

"Any capable artist can create a horse such as this one," frowned the king.

"Sir," replied the traveler, "it is not its decoration, but its use that makes this horse so exceptional. On his back I can ride through the air to the most distant part of the earth, in a very short time. I can even teach anyone else how to ride the magic horse."

The king was interested. "On that mountaintop over there," he said, pointing to a mountain over ten miles away, "there is a palm-tree of a particular quality, which I happen to like. Go, if your horse is as fast as you claim, and fetch me a branch of it."

The stranger mounted his horse. Turning a peg in the neck, away he and the horse flew. Within 15 minutes he returned with a palm branch in his hand. He laid it at the king's feet.

The king was impressed. At once he asked to purchase the horse. "Your Majesty," said the traveler, "the artist who sold me this horse made me swear that I should never part with him for money."

"What would it take then?" demanded the king. The stranger replied that he would gladly give the horse away if his majesty would only bestow on him the hand of the princess, his daughter, in marriage.

When the royal courtiers heard this extravagant request, they burst out laughing. Young Prince Firouz Shah was enraged, even more so when he saw his father, the king, looking thoughtful, as if he were seriously considering the offer to give his sister's hand in marriage to this man.

Stepping up to his father, Prince Firouz said, "Forgive me, father, but is it possible you can hesitate a moment what answer to make to this insolent fellow? Can you bear to think of degrading our royal house by an alliance with a traveling salesman?"

In truth, the king was worried that if he refused the marriage request, then another king could get the magic horse. He asked his son to examine the horse carefully, and report his opinion of it.

The prince approached the horse. The traveler came forward to show the prince how to manage it, but the young man was in too great a fury to listen. Leaping into the saddle, he turned the peg. In an instant, the horse rose into the air, with him upon it.

The stranger was terribly alarmed when he saw the prince fly away on the magic horse before he had learned how to manage it. He threw himself at the king's feet, and begged the king not to blame him for any accident which might happen to befall the prince, since it was his own carelessness that had exposed him to the danger. At once, the king realized the danger of the prince's situation. He cursed the stranger and his fatal horse, and ordered his officers to seize him and carry him to prison.

"If my son the prince does not return safely," said he, "in a very short time, your paltry life, at least, shall be sacrificed to my vengeance!"

In the meantime, Prince Firouz was carried through the air with breathtaking speed. Soon he could scarcely see the earth at all. He tried turning the peg the other way, but when he did, the horse only rose further from the earth. He was greatly alarmed and began to regret his rash impulse to ride the horse. He turned the peg every which way but nothing worked. On examining the horse closely, he at last discovered another peg behind the ear. On turning that peg he soon found that the horse started to descend.

As he drew near the earth, he realized it had already become already dark. Spotting a rooftop higher than all others, he landed the horse upon it and dismounted. Hungry and tired, he groped about and found he was on the roof of some large building. At last he came to some steps. Climbing down the steps, he found a door, then a light. He saw a number of guards asleep on pallets, with their swords lying beside them. This, along with the fact that this was the highest rooftop in the land, convinced him that he must be in a palace. He knew that if any of the guards awakened he would be in great danger, so he decided to quietly climb the steps back to the roof, and to sleep for the night in a dark corner, then before dawn to leave on his magic horse before anyone woke.

But the princess had already been awakened by the sounds she heard on the roof. She instructed her guards to find out what had alighted and to bring the trespasser to her at once. The guards roughly brought the prince before her, and he fell on his knees.

"Forgive me, princess, for awakening you," he said. "I am the son of a king, and one who has taken an entirely unexpected adventure, the particulars of which I would be happy to relate to you."

The lady was the daughter of the king of Bengal. Many of her attendants by this time were awakened also. The princess told Firouz she would be glad to hear all about his adventure in the morning, but for the present asked him to withdraw. At the same time she ordered her attendants to conduct him to a chamber, and to supply him with food and refreshments.

The next day, the prince remained a guest of the princess. Over the next few days the two of them got to know each other, and it was not long before they fell in love.

One afternoon the prince said to her, "Ah, my princess, everything seems different now. I was thinking about that scoundrel who tried to trick his way into the royal family. He was a no-good louse to be sure, but he may be in prison or even executed on my account, when I know that I jumped on that horse before he had a chance to show me how it works."

The princess said, "Are you thinking of going back now?"

"Will you come?" he asked. The princess of Bengal was glad to agree.

The next morning, she left a note so none would worry and they left at daybreak to the roof where the horse still remained. Prince Firouz helped the princess to alight. Turning the peg, they were out of sight before any attendants in the palace were stirring. In thirty minutes the prince arrived at the capital of Persia.

He landed at the prison. Indeed, the stranger was imprisoned there, and nearly beside himself since his execution was scheduled to take place the very next morning.

The prince took the princess on his magic horse to a cottage in the woods not far from the palace.

"Stay here while I go see my father," he said to the princess. "I'll show my father I'm well and urge him to hold the execution of the fellow who brought the horse. Most of all, I want to tell my father all about you, and I'm sure he'll prepare a suitable reception at the palace to welcome you."

He explained to her the particulars on how to operate the magic horse, in the event she might need to flee for safety while he was away.

Indeed, danger was lurking even as they spoke. A thief behind the bushes had overheard their conversation, all of it. "What luck!" he thought with glee, "a princess alone and a magic horse! I'll take her to the Sultan of Cashmere, who is seeking a bride, and gain a handsome reward."

The thief waited for the prince to disappear into the woods, then sprang on the princess, mounting the magic horse, and holding her securely in front of him. Overjoyed at how easy it all was, he turned the peg exactly how he learned to do it, and the horse immediately rose into the air. Astonished was the prince on the ground to hear the alarmed cries of his lady love, circling overhead, as the magic horse dipped and dove from inexperienced hands, and he could do nothing about it. He cursed the kidnapper with a thousand curses.

While the king was overjoyed to see his son, and at his request ordered a stay of execution for the seller of the horse, he understood why his son must leave again so

quickly. The prince put on the clothing of a dervish, and determined never to return till he had found his princess again.

The sultan of Cashmere was very impressed with the Princess of Bengal. Her distress at her kidnapping only added to her natural beauty. The Sultan delivered the promised reward and escorted the princess to his palace. He directed his attendants to bring the horse after them.

The princess hoped the Sultan of Cashmere would prove honorable and reasonable and would return her to her beloved prince of Persia, but she was much disappointed.

In fact, the next morning she was awakened early by the sound of trumpets and the beating of drums, which echoed through the palace and city. When she asked the cause of this rejoicing, she was told it was to celebrate her marriage with their sultan, which was to take place later that day.

Desperate, there was only one thing she felt she could do. She rose and dressed herself carelessly, and in her whole behavior appeared to be unbalanced in her mind. The sultan was soon told of this strange development. When he came to visit her, she put on the appearance of frenzy, flew at him, and this she did every time he came into the room. The sultan was much disturbed, and offered large rewards to any doctor who could cure her, but whenever any doctors approached, the princess would fly at them, too, and beat her fists, so that all began to lose hope for her recovery.

During this time, Prince Firouz, disguised as a dervish, had been traveling through many provinces, full of grief, and uncertain which way to go to find his beloved princess. With nearly all hope gone, he rested on a rock. Then who should happen to pass before him but the seller of the magical horse, more tattered looking than ever, whom his father had apparently released from prison.

"And where, I may ask, is the magic horse?" he said with a smile. "Has it proved as unpredictable a item to you as it did to me?"

The two sat and shared their troubles. In the way of telling tales, the scruffy man related a story of a princess from Bengal had become mad on the day of her wedding with the Sultan of Cashmere. As he described the circumstances, a flicker of hope lit the

prince's heart. Could this princess of Bengal be the same lost love he sought? The prince determined to find out.

Arriving at the capital city of Cashmere, he put on the clothes of a doctor. Presenting himself before the sultan, he claimed that he could cure the princess.

"First," said the pretend doctor, "I must see her where she cannot see me." So he was led into a closet, where he could watch her through a hole in the door. She was carelessly singing a song, in which she mourned her unhappy fate.

"Yes!" he thought, trying to contain his excitement. "It is my bride!"

When he left the closet, he told the Sultan that indeed the princess could be cured, but he would need to speak with her alone.

The Sultan agreed. As soon as the prince entered her room, she began to rave at him in her usual furious manner, at which point he held her wrists and whispered urgently, "I am Firouz, the prince of Persia."

The princess stopped raving at once, and the attendants withdrew, delighted at this proof of the doctor's abilities. In more whispers, the prince shared his plan with her. Then he returned to the Sultan. The pretend doctor shook his head, and said, "All depends upon a mere chance. You see, the princess, a few hours before she was taken ill, must have touched something enchanted. Unless I can obtain that something, whatever it was, I cannot cure her."

The Sultan of Cashmere remembered the horse, which was still kept in his treasury. He showed it to the imaginary doctor. On seeing it, the young man said, very gravely, "I congratulate Your Majesty. This indeed is the magic object that enchanted the princess. Let this horse be brought out into the great square before the palace, and let the princess be there. I promise that in a few minutes she shall be perfectly cured."

Accordingly, the following morning the magic horse was placed in the middle of the square, and the supposed doctor drew a large circle. He placed around it chafing dishes, with a little fire in each. The sultan, with all his nobles and ministers of state, watched with great interest. The princess was brought out with her head covered in veils, and led to

within the circle. The pretend doctor placed her upon the enchanted horse. He then went round to each chafing dish and threw in a certain powder, which soon raised such a cloud of smoke that neither the physician, the princess, nor the magic horse could be seen through it. At that instant the prince of Persia mounted the horse himself. Turning the peg, while the magic horse rose into the air, he called down: "Sultan of Cashmere, a bride's heart must be won, not purchased!"

The same day the prince of Persia and his beloved princess arrived safely at his father's court. Their wedding was immediately celebrated with the greatest splendor that had ever been seen in that land and they lived happily ever after.

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