

"The Pigeon's Bride"
Yugoslavia

There was once a king who had an only daughter. She was as lovely as a princess could be and by the time she reached a marriageable age the fame of her beauty had spread far and wide over all the world. Neighboring kings and even distant ones were already sending envoys to her father's court begging permission to offer their sons as suitors to the princess's hand.

As he had no son of his own the princess' father was delighted that the day was fast approaching when he might have a son-in-law, and long before even the name of any particular prince was discussed, the princess' mother had planned the wedding down to its last detail.

The Princess alone was uninterested.

"I'm not ready to get married yet," she'd say to her parents every day when they'd begin telling her about the various princes who were anxious to gain her favor. "Why such haste? I'm young and there's plenty of time. Besides, just now I'm too busy with my embroidery to be bothered with a crowd of young men."

With that, before the king could reprove her, the princess would throw her arms about his neck, kiss him under the corner of his mustache, and go flying off to the tower-room where she had her embroidery frame.

Her mother, the queen, was much upset by the princess' attitude. "In my youth," she said, "girls were not like this. We were brought up to think that courtship and marriage were the most important events in our lives. I don't know what's getting into the heads of the young girls nowadays!"

But the king, who was still smiling from the tickling little kiss which the princess had planted under the corner of his mustache, answered, "Tut, tut! We needn't worry yet! Take my word for it, when some particular young man comes along she'll be interested fast enough!"

At this the queen, ending the discussion every day with the same words, would shake her head and declare, "I tell you it isn't natural for a girl to be more interested in embroidery than in a long line of handsome young suitors!"

The princess was interested in her embroidery -- there's no doubt about that. She spent every moment she could in the tower-room, working and singing. The tower was high up among the treetops. It was reached by winding stairs so narrow and so many that no one any older than the princess would care to climb them. The princess flew up them like a bird, scarcely pausing for breath.

At the top of the stairs was a trap-door which was the only means of entrance into the tower-room. Once in the tower-room with the bolt of the trap-door securely fastened, the princess was safe from interruption and could work away at her embroidery to her heart's content. The tower had windows on all sides, so the princess as she sat at her embroidery frame could look out north, east, south, and west.

The clouds sailed by in the sky, the wind blew, and at once the leaves in the treetops began murmuring and whispering among themselves. The birds that went flying all over the world would often alight on some branch near the tower and sing to the princess as she worked, or would chatter some exciting story that she could almost understand.

"What!" the princess would think to herself as she looked out north, east, south, and west. "Leave my tower and my beautiful embroidery to become the wife of some conceited young man? Never!"

From this remark you can understand that the particular young man of whom her father spoke had not yet come along. And I'm sure you'll also know that shutting herself up in the tower-room and bolting the trap-door was not going to keep him away when it was time for him to come. Yet I don't believe that you'd have recognized him when he did come any more than the princess did. This is how it happened:

One afternoon when as usual the princess was working at her embroidery and singing as she worked, suddenly there was a flutter of wings at the eastern window and a lovely pigeon came flying into the room.

It circled three times about the princess's head and then alighted on the embroidery frame. The princess reached out her hand and the bird, instead of being frightened, allowed her to stroke its gleaming neck. Then she took it gently in her hands and fondled it to her bosom, kissing its bill and smoothing its plumage with her lips.

"You beautiful thing!" she cried. "How I love you!"

"If you really love me," the Pigeon said, "have a bowl of milk here at this same hour tomorrow."

With that the bird spread its wings and flew out the western window.

The princess was so excited that for the rest of the afternoon she forgot her embroidery.

"Did the pigeon really speak?" she asked herself as she stood staring out the western window, "or have I been dreaming?"

The next day when she climbed the winding stairs she went slowly for she carried in her hands a brimming bowl of milk.

"Of course it won't come again!" she said, and she made herself sit down quietly before the embroidery frame and work just as though she expected nothing.

But exactly at the same hour as the day before, there was a flutter of wings at the eastern window, the sound of a gentle, "Coo! coo!" and there was the pigeon, ready to be loved and caressed.

"You beautiful creature!" the princess cried, kissing its coral beak and smoothing its neck with her lips, "how I love you! And see, I have brought you the bowl of milk that you asked for!"

The bird flew over to the bowl, poised for a moment on its brim, then splashed into the milk as though to take a bath.

The princess laughed and clapped her hands. Then, as she looked, she saw a strange thing happen. The bird's feathers opened like a shirt and out of the feather shirt stepped a handsome youth.

He was so handsome that all the princess could say was, "Oh!"

He came slowly towards her and knelt before her.

"Dear princess," he said, "do not be frightened. If it had not been for your sweet words yesterday when you said you loved me, I should never have been able to leave this feather shirt. Do not turn from me now because I am a man and not a pigeon. Love me still if you can, for I love you. It was because I fell in love with you yesterday when I saw you working at your embroidery that I flew in by the open window and let you caress me."

For a long time the princess could only stare at the kneeling youth, too amazed to speak. He was so handsome that she forgot all about the pigeon he used to be, she forgot her embroidery, she forgot everything. She hadn't supposed that any young man in the whole world could be so handsome! Why, just looking at him, she could be happy forever and ever!

"Would you rather I were still a pigeon?" the young man asked.

"No!" the princess cried. "I like you ever so much better this way!"

The young man gravely bowed his head and kissed her hand. The princess blushed and trembled and wished he would do it again. She had never imagined that any kiss could be so wonderful.

They passed the afternoon together and it seemed to the princess to be the happiest afternoon of her life.

As the sun was sinking the youth said, "Now I must leave you and become a pigeon again."

"But you'll come back, won't you?" the princess implored.

"Yes, I'll come back tomorrow but on one condition: that you don't tell anyone about me. I'll come back every day at the same hour, but if ever you tell about me then I won't be able to come back anymore."

"I'll never tell!" the princess promised.

Then the youth kissed her tenderly, dipped himself in the milk, went back into his feather shirt, and flew off as a pigeon.

The next day he came again, and the next and the next and the next. The princess fell so madly in love with him that all day long and all night long, too, she thought of nothing else. She no longer touched her embroidery but day after day sat idle in the tower-room just awaiting his arrival.

And every day it seemed to the king and the queen and all the people about the court that the princess was becoming more and more beautiful. Her cheeks kept growing pinker, her eyes brighter, her lovely hair more black, smooth, and shiny.

"I must say sitting at that foolish embroidery agrees with her," the king said.

"No, it isn't that," the queen told him. "It's the big bowl of milk she drinks every afternoon. You know milk is very good for the complexion."

"Milk indeed!" murmured the princess to herself, and she blushed rosier than ever at the thought of her wonderful secret.

But a princess can't keep growing more and more beautiful without everybody in the world hearing about it. The neighboring kings soon began to feel angry and suspicious.

"What ails this princess?" they asked among themselves. "Isn't one of our sons good enough for her? Is she waiting for the king of Persia to come as a suitor? Let us stand together on our rights and demand to know why she won't consider one of our sons!"

So they sent envoys to the princess' father and he saw at once that the matter had become serious.

"My dear," he said to the princess, "your mother and I have humored you long enough. It is high time that you had a husband and I insist that you allow the sons of neighboring kings to be presented to you next week."

"I won't do it!" the princess declared. "I'm not interested in the sons of the neighboring kings and that's all there is to it!"

Her father looked at her severely. "Is that the way for a princess to talk? Persist in this foolishness and you may embroil your country in a war!"

"I don't care!" the princess cried, bursting into tears. "I can't marry any of them, so why let them be presented?"

"Why can't you marry any of them?"

"I just can't!" the princess insisted.

At first, in spite of the pleadings of both parents, she would tell them no more, but her mother kept questioning her until at last in self-defense the princess confessed that she had a true love who came to her in the tower every afternoon in the form of a pigeon.

"He's a prince," she told them, "the son of a distant king. At present he is under an enchantment that turns him into a pigeon. When the enchantment is broken he is coming as a prince to marry me."

"My poor child!" the queen cried. "Think no more about this Pigeon Prince! The enchantment may last a hundred years and then where will you be?!"

"But he is my love!" the princess declared, "and if I can't have him I won't have anyone!"

When the king found that nothing they could say would move her from this resolution, he sighed and murmured, "Very well, my dear. If it must be so, it must be. This afternoon when your lover comes, bring him down to me so I may talk to him."

But that afternoon the pigeon did not come. Nor the next afternoon either, nor the next, and then -- too late -- the princess remembered his warning that if she told about him he could never come back.

So now she sat in the tower-room idle and heartbroken, reproaching herself that she had betrayed her lover, and praying God to forgive her and send him back to her. And the roses faded from her cheeks and her eyes grew dull and the people about the court began wondering why they had ever thought her to be the most beautiful princess in the world.

At last she went to the king, her father, and said, "My love can no longer come back to me because I forgot my promise and betrayed him. So I must go out into the world and search for him. Unless I find him, life will not be worth living. So please do not oppose me, father, but help me. Have three pairs of iron shoes made for me and three iron staffs. I will wander over the wide world until these are worn out and then, if by that time I have not found him, I will come home to you."

So the king had three pairs of iron shoes and three iron staffs made for the princess, and she set forth on her quest. She traveled through towns and cities and many kingdoms, over rough mountains and desert places, looking everywhere for her enchanted love. But she could not find any trace of him anywhere.

At the end of the first year she had worn out the first pair of iron shoes and the first iron staff. At the end of the second year she had worn out the second pair of iron shoes and the second iron staff. At the end of the third year, when she had worn out the third pair of iron shoes and the third staff, she returned to her father's palace looking thin, worn, and sad.

"My poor child," the king said, "I hope now you realize that the Pigeon Prince is gone forever. Think no more about him. Go back to your embroidery and when the roses begin blooming in your cheeks again we'll find some young prince for you who isn't enchanted."

But the princess shook her head.

"Let me try one more thing, father," she begged, "and then if I don't find my love I'll do as you say."

The king agreed to this.

"Well, then," the princess said, "Please build a public bath-house and have the heralds proclaim that the king's daughter will sit at the entrance and will allow any one to bathe free of charge who will tell her the story of the strangest thing he has ever heard or seen."

So the king built the bath-house and sent out his heralds far and wide. Men and women from all over the world came and bathed and told the princess stories of this marvel and that, but never, alas, a word about an enchanted pigeon.

The days went by and the princess grew more and more discouraged.

"Isn't it sad," the courtiers began whispering, "how the princess has lost her looks! Do you suppose she was ever really beautiful or did we just imagine it?"

When the neighboring kings heard this, they remarked softly among themselves, "It's just as well we didn't hurry one of our sons into a marriage with this young woman!"

Now there was a poor widow who lived near the bath-house. She had a daughter, a pretty young girl, who used to sit at the window and watch the princess as people came and told her their stories.

"Mother," the girl said one day, "every one in the world goes to the bath-house and I want to go, too!"

"Nonsense!" the mother said. "What story could you tell the princess?"

"But everybody else goes. I don't see why I can't!"

"Well, my dear, you may go," the mother promised, "just as soon as you see or hear something strange. Talk no more about it now and please go fetch me a pitcher of water from the town well."

The girl obediently took an empty pitcher and went to the town well. Just as she had filled the pitcher she heard some one say:

"Mercy me, I fear I'll be late!"

She turned around and what do you think she saw? A rooster in wooden shoes with a basket under his wing!

"I fear I'll be late! I fear I'll be late!" the rooster kept repeating as he hurried off making a funny little clatter with his wooden shoes.

"How strange!" the girl thought to herself. "A rooster with wooden shoes! I'm sure the princess would love to hear about him! I'll follow him and see what he does."

He went to a garden where he filled his basket with fresh onions, beans, and garlic. Then he hurried home to a little house. The girl slipped in after him and hid behind the door.

"Thank goodness, I'm on time!" the rooster murmured.

He put a big bowl on the table and filled it with milk.

"There!" he said. "Now I'm ready for them!"

Presently twelve beautiful pigeons came flying in by the open door. Eleven of them dipped in the bowl of milk, their feather shirts opened, and out they stepped, eleven handsome youths. But the twelfth pigeon perched disconsolately on the windowsill and remained a pigeon.

The eleven laughed at him and said, "Poor fellow, your bride betrayed you, didn't she? So you have to remain shut up in your feather shirt while we go off and have a jolly time!"

"Yes," the twelfth pigeon said, "she broke her promise and now she goes wandering up and down the world hunting for me. If she doesn't find me, I shall nevermore escape the feather shirt but shall have to fly about forever as a pigeon. But I know she will find me, for she will never stop searching. And when she finds me, then the enchantment will be broken forever and I can marry her!"

The eleven youths went laughing arm in arm out of the house and in a few moments the solitary pigeon flew after them. Instantly the girl slipped out from behind the door and hurried home with her pitcher of water.

Then she ran quickly across to the bath-house, and all out of breath she cried to the princess, "O Princess, I have such a wonderful story to tell you all about a rooster with wooden shoes and twelve pigeons -- only eleven of them are not pigeons but handsome young men and the twelfth one has to stay in his feather shirt because --"

At mention of the enchanted pigeons, the princess turned pale. She held up her hand and made the girl pause until she had caught her breath. Then the princess questioned the girl until the princess knew the whole story.

"It must be my love!" the princess thought to herself. "Thank God I have found him at last!"

The next day at the same hour she went with the girl to the town well. When the rooster clattered by in his wooden shoes, they followed him home and slipping into the house, they hid behind the door and waited.

Presently twelve pigeons flew in. Eleven of them dipped in the milk and came out handsome young men. The twelfth pigeon sat disconsolately on the window sill and remained a pigeon. The eleven laughed at him and twitted him with having had a bride that had betrayed him. Then the eleven went away laughing, arm in arm.

Before the twelfth pigeon could fly after them, the princess ran out from behind the door and cried, "My dear, I have found you at last!"

The pigeon flew into her hands and she took him and kissed his coral beak and smoothed his gleaming plumage with her lips. Then she put him in the milk and the feather shirt opened and sure enough, her true love stepped out.

At once she led him to her father. When the king found him well trained in all the arts a prince should know, he accepted him as his future son-in-law and presented him to the people.

So after all the princess' mother was able to give her daughter the gorgeous wedding she had planned for years and years.

Preparations were begun at once, but the queen insisted on making such vast quantities of little round cakes and candied fruits and sweetmeats of all kinds that it was three whole months before the wedding actually took place.

By that time the roses were again blooming in the princess' cheeks, her eyes were brighter than before, and her long black hair was shinier and smoother than ever.

All the neighboring kings were invited to the wedding. When they saw the bride they shook their heads sadly and said among themselves, "She's the most beautiful princess in the world! What a pity she didn't marry one of our sons!"

But when they met the prince of her choice, they saw at once why the princess had fallen in love with him. "Any girl would!" they said.

It was a big wedding, and the only guest present who was not a king or a queen or a royal personage of some sort was the poor girl who saw the rooster with wooden shoes in the first place.

The queen, of course, had wanted only royalty to attend, but the princess declared that the poor girl was her dear friend and would have to be invited. So the queen, when she saw that the princess was set on having her own way, had the poor girl come to the palace before the wedding and decked her out in rich clothes until people were sure that she was some strange princess whom the bride had met on her travels.

"My dear," whispered the princess as they sat down beside each other at the wedding feast, "how beautiful you look!"

"But I'm not as beautiful as you!" the girl said.

The Princess laughed. "Of course not! No one can be as beautiful as I am because I have the secret of beauty!"

"Dear princess," the girl begged, "please tell me the secret of beauty?"

The princess leaned over and whispered one word in the girl's ear: "Happiness!"