

Yelena the Wise

Once upon a time, in a country far away, there was a soldier whose duty it was to stand guard at a stone tower. This tower was kept locked up and had a great seal on the door as well. One night, exactly at midnight, the soldier heard someone calling to him from the tower.

"Hey, soldier!"

The soldier replied, "Who's that calling me?"

"It's me, a poor imp," answered a voice from behind the iron grille. "I have been locked up here thirty years without food nor drink."

"What do you want?"

"Let me out of here. When you are in need, I shall help you. You have only to mention me, and I shall be right there by your side."

The soldier straightaway tore off the great seal, broke the lock and prised open the door. The imp flew out of the tower, soared into the air and disappeared faster than lightning.

"Well," thought the soldier, "now I've done it: all my years of service will count for nothing. Now I'll be arrested and brought before a court martial. They'll likely make me run the gauntlet — through all the ranks while the other soldiers beat me. No, I'd better run away, while there's still time."

He dropped his gun and knapsack on the ground and took off as fast as he could. He walked all the next day, and the next, and the third. He was terribly hungry, but had nothing to eat or drink. At last he sat down by the roadside, weeping bitter tears, and thought to himself:

"How stupid I am. I served the tsar for ten years. I was always happy and well fed. I got three pounds of bread every day. But, no! I had to go and run off, so as to die of hunger. Hey, imp, it's all your fault!"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the imp appeared and said, "Greetings, soldier! Why so sad?"

"Of course, I am sad, when I haven't had a bite to eat for three days."

"Well, that's easily put right," said the imp. He dashed here and there and brought all sorts of wines and victuals. The soldier ate and drank his fill; then the imp invited him to go back with him.

"In my home you shall live at ease: drink, eat and enjoy yourself as much as you like. Only keep an eye on my daughters — that's all you need to do."

The soldier agreed. The imp took him by the arm, carried him high into the air and took him far, far away to a palace made of white stone. The imp had three daughters, each of them a great beauty. He told them to obey the soldier and to give him whatever he liked to eat and drink; then he flew off to do some more mischief — he was an imp after all. He never sat still, but was always going about the world disturbing people and encouraging them to sin.

The soldier was left behind with the beautiful maidens, to live in such comfort that he had no need of heaven. Only one thing bothered him: every night the three beauties would leave the palace and go somewhere, but where he did not know. When he asked them about it, they avoided his questions and would say nothing.

"Very well," the soldier thought, "I shall keep watch all night and find out where you get to."

That evening the soldier went to bed and pretended to be fast asleep, but inside he was burning with excitement to see what would happen.

When the time came he quietly crept to the girls' bedroom, stopped by the door and knelt down to look through the keyhole. The beautiful maidens took out a magic carpet and spread it on the floor. They each stamped on the carpet and turned into doves, spread their wings and flew out of the window.

"How wonderful!" the soldier thought. "I'll try that myself."

He opened the door to the bedroom, jumped on the carpet and turned into a robin redbreast. The robin flew out of the window and after the others. The doves came down on a green meadow, and the robin settled beneath a currant bush where he could watch hidden by the leaves. Huge numbers of doves flew down to that same spot. They covered the whole meadow, apart from the golden throne that stood in the middle. After a short while the sky and earth were lit up as a golden chariot drawn by six fiery dragons came flying through the air. In the chariot sat Yelena the Wise — more beautiful than can be imagined or guessed or even described in a fairy tale. She climbed out of her chariot and sat on the golden throne. She called the doves to her one by one and began to teach them various pieces of wisdom. When she was done teaching she climbed into her chariot and was gone. At that every single dove took off from the green meadow and each flew its own way home. The robin redbreast flew after the three sisters and ended up in the bedroom with them. The doves struck the carpet and turned back into beautiful maidens; the robin did the same and turned back into the soldier.

"Where did you come from?" the girls asked.

"Aha! I was with you at the green meadow, saw the beautiful princess on the golden throne and heard her teaching you all sorts of cunning things."

"Well you are lucky to be able to tell the tale. For that princess is Yelena the Wise, our mighty ruler. If she had had her magic book with her, she would have recognised you at once and a cruel death would have been your lot. Have a care, soldier! Fly no more to the green meadow to gaze upon Yelena the Wise, or else you will lose that hot head of yours."

The soldier was not downhearted. All their words went in one ear and out of the other. When night came, he again struck the carpet and turned into a robin redbreast. The robin flew to the green meadow, hid beneath the currant bush and watched Yelena the Wise. He admired her untold beauty and thought to himself, "If I could have a wife like that, I could wish for nothing more in this world. I shall fly after her and find out where she lives."

So Yelena the Wise got off her golden throne, climbed into her chariot and soared through the air to her marvellous palace. And behind her flew the little robin.

The princess reached the palace. Her nurses and nannies ran out to meet her, took her by the arms and led her into the finely painted chambers. Meanwhile the robin flew around the garden. He chose a fine-looking tree that happened to stand beneath the princess's bedroom, and perched on one of its branches. He began to sing so well and so sorrowfully that the princess did not sleep a wink — she just had to keep listening.

As soon as the sun came up, Yelena the Wise tailed out in a loud voice, "Nurses and nannies, be quick and run into the garden! Catch that robin redbreast for me!"

The nurses and nannies dashed into the garden and began trying to catch the songbird. But what could the old dears do? The robin hopped from bush to bush, never flying far away, but always out of reach.

The princess lost her patience. She ran out into the garden to catch the robin herself. She approached the bush where the bird was sitting. The bird never stirred, sitting with its wings folded as if waiting for her.

The princess was delighted. She picked up the little bird and took it into the palace. She put it into a golden cage that she hung in her bedroom.

The day passed and the sun started setting. Yelena the Wise flew to the green meadow and returned. She started taking off her robes, undressed and got into bed. The robin looked at her white body, at her untold beauty and trembled all over. As soon as the princess fell asleep, the robin turned into a fly and flew out of the golden cage. He struck the floor and turned into a fine figure of a man.

This fine figure of a man went up to the princess's bed and stared and stared at her beauty. At last he could not resist any longer and planted a kiss on her sweet lips. The princess began to wake up. He quickly turned back into a fly, slipped between the bars of the cage and became a robin.

Yelena the Wise opened her eyes. She looked all around, but there was no-one to be

seen. "I must have been dreaming," she said to herself, turned over and went back to sleep.

The soldier couldn't help himself. He did the same thing a second time and a third, but each time he kissed her she woke up.

The third time she got out of bed and said, "There is something more to this. Let me take a look in my magic book."

She looked in her magic book and immediately discovered that sitting in the golden cage was not a simple robin, but a young soldier.

"Oh you bold villain!" shouted Yelena the Wise. "Come out of the cage. You shall pay for your deceit with your life."

There was nothing for it. The robin redbreast flew out of the cage, struck the floor and turned into a fine figure of a man. The soldier fell on his knees before the princess and began begging forgiveness.

"No mercy for you, you villain," said Yelena the Wise and called for the executioner and his block to have the soldier beheaded.

From out of nowhere a great giant appeared with an axe and a block. He pushed the soldier to the floor, pressed his hot head to the block and raised the axe. The princess had only to wave her handkerchief and the young fellow's head would fly from his shoulders.

"Have pity, beautiful princess," the soldier begged through his tears. "Let me sing one last time."

"Sing, then, but be quick about it!"

The soldier launched into such a sad, mournful song that Yelena the Wise herself burst into tears. She felt sorry for the young fellow and said to the soldier, "I shall give you ten hours. If in that time you manage to conceal yourself so cunningly that I cannot find you, then I shall marry you. If not, then I shall have your head cut from your shoulders."

The soldier left the palace. He wandered into a thick forest and sat down under a bush. He thought and thought, then suddenly cried out, "Oh, imp! All my troubles are because of you!"

That very instant the imp appeared.

"What is your wish, soldier?"

"Listen," said the soldier. "I am about to be killed. Where can I hide from Yelena the Wise?"

The imp struck the damp earth and turned into a great grey-winged eagle.

"Climb on my back, soldier, and I shall carry you into the heavens."

The soldier climbed onto the eagle. The great bird soared upwards and rose above the dark clouds.

Five hours passed and Yelena the Wise took up her magic book. She looked in it and saw everything clearly. She called out in a great loud voice, "That's enough flying into the heavens, eagle. Come down to earth, you cannot hide from me anyway."

The eagle flew back down.

The soldier was even more distraught.

"What can I do now? Where can I hide?"

"Wait," said the imp, "I'll help you."

He hopped up to the soldier, struck him on the cheek and turned him into a pin. He turned himself into a little mouse, snatched up the pin in his teeth, crept into the palace, found the magic book and stuck the pin into it.

Another five hours passed. Yelena the Wise opened her magic book and pored over it. But the book showed her nothing. The princess grew very angry and flung it into the stove. The pin slipped from the book, struck the floor and turned into a fine young fellow.

Yelena the Wise took him by the hand and said, "I am cunning, but you are more cunning still."

Without further ado the pair were married and lived happily ever after.