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promise us that you will invite us to your wedding and that we shall sit next to you and you will not be ashamed of us in front of the guests, then we will spin all the flax for you sooner than you think.”

“I shall be glad to do anything you wish,” Liduška said merrily. “Just get on quickly with the work.”

Then the three old women climbed into the room through the window, sent Liduška to bed and started spinning the flax. The one with the wide thumb pulled the thread, the one with the long lip moistened and smoothed it, and the one with the flat foot stepped on the treadle and turned the spinning wheel. The work flew from under their hands. And when dawn began to break and Liduška arose, she saw a huge pile of lovely, even, finely-spun yarn on the spools and her heart leapt for joy. And there was such a big hole in the mound of flax that she could have hidden herself in it. The old women bade Liduška adieu, promised that they would come again in the evening and departed through the window.

The Queen came at midday to see if Liduška had again been idle. She was very surprised to see the pile of lovely yarn. Her face brightened and she praised Liduška for her hard work.

When it began to get dark the old women were already standing by the



Queen forgave him gladly because she loved him and knew that he had erred for love of her.

“Do not draw attention to yourself by crying and lamenting. We will be merry and when the devil comes in the evening, send him to me. I will think of something by that time.”

Jiřík felt reborn and a great weight was lifted from his shoulders. He followed his wife at once and was merry with his children all day, as if nothing had ever been wrong. In the evening the devil came at the agreed hour. He asked the King: “What have you thought of today?”

“Go to my wife, she will tell you what she wishes. I know of nothing more.”

The devil entered the Queen’s room. She was waiting for him.

“Are you the devil who is to carry away my husband?” – “Yes.”

“Can I make one request instead of him, for anything I choose?”

“Yes.”

“And if you fail to fulfil it for me, you will have no more power over him?”

“No.”

“Very well. Come here and pull three hairs from my head – neither more nor less, and I must feel not the slightest pain.”

The devil frowned, came to her, quickly took three hairs and pulled

them out. But the Queen cried out in pain. “See, you have already made one mistake; I told you that it must not hurt. But I pardon you. Now take the three hairs and measure them.”

The devil measured them and the Queen continued: “Now you must make each of the hairs longer by two cubits. But do not think that you can simply add another person’s hair to them; you must make these very hairs two cubits longer.”

The devil looked at the hairs for a while but he knew not what to do. He asked the Queen to let him take them to hell and ask his comrades for help. The Queen gave her consent and the devil took the hairs and vanished.

When he arrived in hell, he gathered all his comrades together, laid the hairs on the table before Lucifer and explained what had to be done.

“You have lost this time, you rascal,” the lord of hell said, “You have met your match. What is to be done with them? If we pull them, they will break. If we hammer them, they will be crushed. If we put them in the fire, they will burn. There is nothing you can do but go back and hand over not the hairs but the signed paper.”

“I will not go to her, it could be the worse for me.”

“Why do you not give more heed to what you do? Now go and hand over that which is no longer yours.”

The devil had to take the signed paper and hand it over to its rightful owner. So he flew down to the castle but, being afraid to go in, he waited at the window until the King should

open it. When he did so, the devil tossed the paper into the room and disappeared. With utmost joy Jiřík picked up the paper and ran to his wife who knew already how things would turn out. She thanked God for delivering her from danger, and they lived happily ever after.



FIRE BIRD AND RED FOX

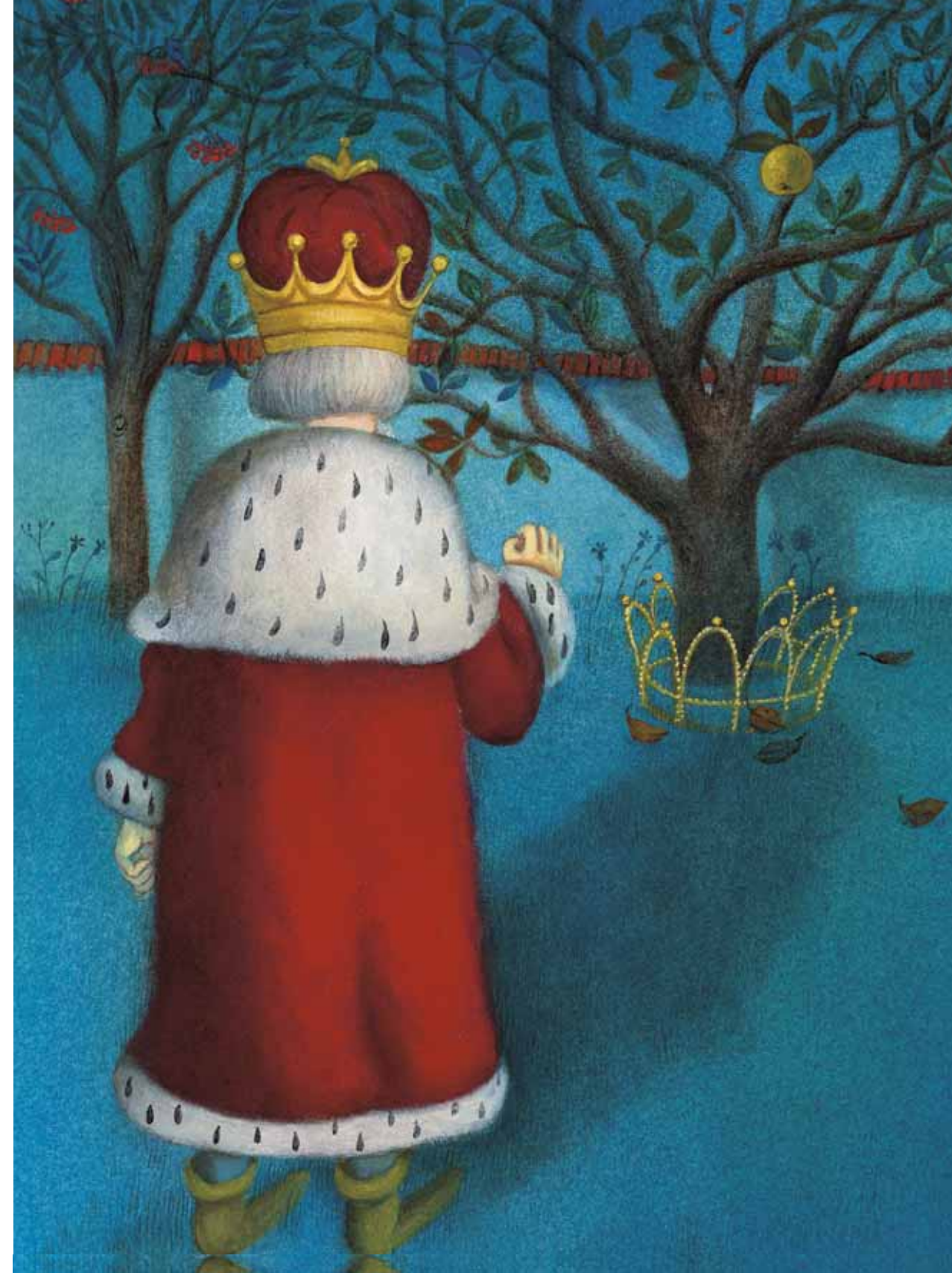
by Karel Jaromír Erben

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 out into the evening twilight 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. The next morning, 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."



stood long before the painting as if enchanted. As he looked at it his heart was full of sorrow and he said: "I wish to have this one and none other!" As he said these words, the maiden bent her head and blushed like a rose, and in that instant all the other portraits vanished.

When he had come down and told his father what he had seen and which maiden he had chosen, the old King frowned, thought carefully and said: "You have done ill, my son, to have uncovered that which was covered. You have exposed yourself to great danger. This maiden is in the power of an evil sorcerer and is held prisoner in the Iron Castle. Many have tried to rescue her but none has returned. Yet what you have done cannot be undone; a promise is binding. Go, son, try your luck and return safely to me!"

The prince bade his father farewell, mounted his horse and rode to fetch his bride. He had to pass through a large forest and through this forest he rode until he was completely lost. And as he wandered through the undergrowth with his horse between rocks and mire, not knowing which way to turn, he heard a voice calling behind him: "Hey, wait for me!" The prince looked back and saw a tall man hurrying after him. "Wait, and take me with you.

If you take me into your service, you will not regret it."

"Who are you," asked the prince, "and what can you do?"

"My name is Long and I can stretch. Do you see the bird's nest there in the high fir? I can reach it without climbing the tree."

Long started to stretch, his body grew rapidly until he was as tall as the fir. He reached the nest, took it in his hand and in a moment shrank again and handed it to the prince.

"You did that trick well. But what use are birds' nests if you cannot lead me out of the forest?"

"Well, it is an easy thing," Long said and started to stretch again until he was three times taller than the highest pine tree in the whole forest. He looked around and said: "The shortest way out of the forest is in this direction." Then he shrank again, took the horse's bridle and led the way. Before long they were out of the forest. A wide plain lay before them and beyond the plain there were high grey cliffs like the walls of a large city, and mountains covered with forest.

"Over there, my lord, comes my friend," Long said and pointed sideways to the plain. "You should take him into your service too. Truly, he will serve you well."

"Summon him here so that I can see what sort of man he is."

"It is a little far, my lord," Long said. "He would hardly hear me and it would take him a long time to come because he has much to carry. I would rather fetch him." Again Long stretched so high that his head almost touched the clouds, took two or three steps, lifted his friend by the shoulders and set him down before the prince. He was a stout man with a belly like a barrel that could hold four buckets.

"Who are you," the prince asked him, "and what can you do?"

"My name, O master, is Broad and I can widen myself."

"Show me, then."

"Master, flee fast! Fast back up towards the forest!" Broad cried, and he began to swell.

The prince did not understand why he should flee. Yet seeing that Long hurried back towards the forest,

