

The Magic Horse

Once upon a time far away in the land of Persia a traveller approached the King's palace. As he looked towards its spiralling towers and gates of gold, he could feel the excitement of the season stirring around him. A tinge of green was spreading across the dusty land and poppies bloomed in the meadows. It was Nowruz, the Spring Festival, when everyone celebrated the start of a new year.

The traveller was a man of mysterious powers but, despite all the things he could do, he did not have what he really wanted. His heart beat fast as he thought of today's plan. For many months he had been working toward his goal. Perhaps today he would achieve his heart's desire.

He joined the procession that was wending its way towards the castle gates. It was a cheerful crowd. Acrobats were limbering up beside the queue of people. Jugglers were juggling. Someone was carrying a cageful of singing birds. Each person was bringing their best skill or treasure to present to the King. It was the custom that the King would bestow a Nowruz gift on anyone that pleased him.

When it was the traveller's turn, he bowed low to the King and wheeled a large box before him.

"In this box, Your Majesty, I have a horse such as you have never seen before. Upon its back I can fly through the air with great speed. And, what is more, I can teach anyone else to do the same."

"Let me see this wonder," said the King. "A flying horse is certainly unusual."

The traveller opened the box. With a flourish he drew out a wooden horse, carved and painted with the most excellent craftsmanship. Its coat gleamed with the oil that had been rubbed into it. Its saddle was a wonder of leather and clinking metalwork. The saddle blanket was embroidered with all the colours of the rainbow. There was, though, no stamp to its feet, no breath in its nostrils, no life in its eyes.

"Very pretty, I'm sure," said the King dismissively. "As to flying – well, I'll believe that when I see it! Bring me dates from the palm tree at my country house!"

The traveller flung his cloak back over one shoulder and mounted the horse.

"Your Majesty!" he said. He turned a blue knob on the horse's neck and looked up towards a high window.

To everyone's amazement, the horse rose in the air. A stiff, mechanical toy had become a beautiful mover. Its legs stretched out as for galloping and its tail streamed behind it as it flew – yes, flew – through the window. You never heard such a buzz as there was in that palace then – unless it was when the horse re-appeared at the window and landed gently in front of the throne. It had a date branch in its mouth.



“Amazing!” exclaimed the King. “I will buy the horse from you, my good man. How much do you want for it?”

“Your Majesty is too good,” said the traveller. “I thank you but I have all the money I need. What I ask in exchange for my magic horse is the hand in marriage of your daughter, Princess Mina.”

“How dare you!” shouted Mina's brother, Prince Firouz. “How can a commoner like you dare even to think of a princess bride? You are above yourself, sir, and you shall pay!” And he jumped on the horse and turned the blue knob.

“Wait!” called the traveller, alarmed. “I haven't shown you how to stop!” But it was too late. The Prince was already out of the window and flying high above the city.

“Guards! Seize this man!” ordered the King. “Take him to prison until my son comes safely home. Fancy bringing me such a dangerous thing!”



Up in the air, Prince Firouz was realizing that knowing how to start the horse was not enough. In fear he grasped the horse's mane, which was streaming back as they rushed through the air at breakneck speed. They were getting higher and higher all the time. Far below him, he could see a patchwork of fields. The town was long gone.

I have to get down, he thought desperately. He found the blue knob and turned it back the other way but the horse just went right on flying. They were over the hill country now, heading east.

The Prince tried pulling on the reins, as he would with his own horse, Black Fire. **This** horse ignored him and went right on flying, gaining height again as they approached the mountains.

“Stop, horse, stop!” ordered Prince Firouz but to no avail. The horse just went right on flying.



Firouz remembered the traveller had said the horse was magic. “Abracadabra!” he cried. “Abracadabra alakazam!” But no - the horse just went right on flying.

“Open sesame!” he shouted wildly. Below him, a sentry was surprised to see a locked door swing open - but the horse just went right on flying. They were far beyond the borders of Persia now. The countryside below was strange to the Prince.

“If you please,” he whimpered, his teeth chattering with cold. His grandmother always insisted that these were magic words too. But the horse showed no sign of hearing him – not by the twitch of an ear, nor the turn of its head. Or perhaps it **didn't** please. Either way, it just went right on flying into the darkening sky.

What do I do now? Prince Firouz asked himself, burying his face in the horse's mane. But what was that scratching his nose? He sat up and felt carefully among the stiff hair. There was a second knob, a red one this time! His heart leapt. Gently, he twisted the knob clockwise. No movement. He tried a bit harder. *This must be it surely*, he thought. He tried the other direction and, at last, the horse started to go down.

He looked around him. He had come a long, long way. Ahead of him lay a palace, its terracotta walls looking dark in the moonlight. The horse landed gently on the roof. Filled with gratitude, Prince Firouz dismounted and stretched his weary limbs. He tiptoed round, exploring every cranny and searching for a way out. Through an archway he could see some stairs. Oh no, there were guards standing at the bottom! Quickly, he slipped back into the shadows.

It was his bad luck that the Princess of the palace had the room below the roof and that she had very good hearing. Or perhaps it was his good luck.

“Someone is on the roof!” she declared to her guards. “Bring him to me!”

The guards grumbled as they went up the stairs but, sure enough, there in the corner was a windswept man in fine clothes. The guards seized him and hustled him to the stairs.

“Let me bring my horse!” said the Prince. Muttering some more, the guards dragged that along too.

“What's a grown man doing with a wooden horse?” they mumbled to each other.

“I am Aru, Princess of Bengal,” said the Princess, trying to draw herself up to a regal height but actually looking adorable - or so the Prince thought. “Who are you and what are you doing on my roof?”

“I am Prince Firouz of Persia, Your Royal Highness,” said the Prince, making a quite magnificent bow - or so the Princess thought. “I landed on your roof after an adventure with my horse,” he added, forgetting that the horse really belonged to the poor traveller.

"I love adventures!" declared the Princess. "You must tell me all about it!"

"In the morning," she added. It didn't seem quite proper to listen to him while in her dressing gown, beautiful though it was. She told the guards to take Prince Firouz to the best spare room and give him food of the finest.

Next day and for many days after that, the Prince and Princess sat and talked about many things. They talked of adventures on horseback, their kingdoms and families, their favourite colours (Firouz said his was red) and the shape of elephant ears. They laughed together, as they fed the monkeys that lived around the palace. Prince Firouz admired the way little wisps of Princess Aru's hair escaped from her head-covering and curled around her face. Aru admired Firouz's fine shoulders and the flash of white teeth when he smiled.

One day, the Princess asked idly, "Where did the magic horse come from?"

Firouz remembered then the traveller and his own happy heart felt compassion.

"Actually," he said, shame-faced, "a traveller brought it to my father as a Spring Festival offering. He said he wanted to marry my sister! I was so cross with him I rode off on the horse before he could teach me to stop. Of course, I did manage to learn for myself but I fear my father will have thrown him in jail. That is hardly fair, when I have had such an adventure and met you, my beloved. Perhaps I should go back and make sure he is all right. Will you come with me and ... marry me?"

Princess Aru agreed immediately. She had fallen in love with Prince Firouz and, besides, a flight on the magic horse would be a splendid adventure.

"Let's go first thing tomorrow," she said.

The horse soared above the Bengali skyline, as the rising sun cast a beautiful, pink glow on the mountains. What sights they saw that day!



When they neared the Persian palace, Firouz brought the magic horse down before a cottage in some woods.

"You wait here, beloved Aru," he said. "I will return by nightfall. I will explain to my father and prepare a reception for you. You keep the magic horse with you in case of emergencies. Look! You turn this blue knob here to go up and this red one to come down. You need to look where you want to go." He kissed her good-bye and went off to see the King.

He didn't see the man who was hiding among the trees, listening in.

At the palace, Prince Firouz was just in time to save the life of the traveller: the King's patience was running out. He had been filled with grief at the loss of his son; he was sure Firouz must have fallen to his death. The King was overjoyed to see Firouz and sent orders to let the traveller go. Neither the King nor the traveller suggested the magic horse should go back to its original owner. So the man set off down the road from the palace with neither horse nor princess - but with weary steps and a heavy heart. He wondered where he had gone wrong.

Up on a palace balcony, Prince Firouz was telling his family where he had been and about the Princess of Bengal. A shadow fell upon them. They looked up.

"Oh no!" Firouz wailed. "There she is! I must rescue her!"



He ran helter-skelter down the palace steps and down the hill, falling further and further behind as the magic horse shot away above the town and headed south.

As he travelled through the Persian countryside, the people bowed as they recognized the Prince. Firouz decided this would never do, if he wanted to creep up on the thief who had stolen his beloved Aru. He disguised himself as a dervish – a wandering Sufi monk. He walked for many days in this guise, with hope dwindling that he would find his true love again.

Meanwhile, Princess Aru had troubles of her own. The thief who had flown off with her had heard that the Sultan of Cashmere was looking for a wife. The Sultan appreciated beautiful women and the thief was hoping for a big reward for bringing him the Princess.

The Sultan was indeed impressed with Princess Aru. Her sadness made her eyes large and luminous. The Sultan escorted her to some rooms in his palace and fetched a reward for the thief. While he was in the treasury, he locked away the magic horse. Then he started to arrange the wedding.

The Princess told the Sultan that she did not wish to marry him. She told him she was already betrothed. She told him she would like to go now. He did not listen.

Princess Aru thought and thought about what she could do. She couldn't get the horse – it was heavily guarded. She couldn't get out of her rooms – there was a lock and a guard on the door. She decided the best she could do was to try to delay the wedding. Perhaps she would be able to escape later. Or perhaps Firouz would come and find her. She started to leave her hair wild and to tear at her clothes. She raged at anyone who came near her and sang tunelessly about her misery. Word soon got back to the Sultan that she was sick in her mind and he sent out a request for a doctor to come and cure the Princess.

Down on the road, Firouz, still dressed as a dervish, met the traveller who had brought the horse. They shared their miseries, the one bemoaning his lost love, the other his lost chance. "If only it were **my** wedding that was being prepared," said the traveller. "The Sultan does not know how lucky he is. Mind you, I hear his princess bride is so home-sick she is quite ill", he added, for this was the story that the Sultan had put about. "I'd have a go at winning the prize for curing her but I don't go near palaces now."



Prince Firouz wondered about that princess bride. *Just maybe*, he thought, *it was his princess bride in the palace*. He said farewell to the traveller and made his way there, stopping along the way to swap his felt hat, full robe and short, ragged jacket for the respectable coat of a doctor. He presented himself at the gate. The guard wished him more luck than the last thirty doctors who had come.

Prince Firouz told the Sultan he must first watch the Princess without her being able to see him. With a heart full of hope, he was led to a secret window. It was Aru! Hiding his delight, Firouz said he would need to treat the Princess alone. The guards were only too pleased not to face the Princess's raving. As soon as the door closed, Firouz and Aru rushed into each other's arms. Before long, the Princess had told Firouz where the horse was and they had hatched a plan together.

Entering the throne room, Firouz bowed low to the Sultan. "Your Majesty, this kind of illness may be caused by touching something enchanted. Has the Princess been in the presence of magic recently?" he asked cunningly.

The Sultan thought and then exclaimed, "The horse! The flying horse! Fetch it here at once!"

At Firouz's direction, they brought the magic horse down into the palace courtyard. He laid fires in a circle around it. He requested that the Princess be brought down into the circle. She was led forth, singing dreamily.

Firouz lit the fires. The Sultan watched carefully.

Then, reaching into a pouch on his belt, Firouz whirled round. A special powder flew from his hand and landed on each fire. With a hiss, red smoke plumed up, hiding the couple and their steed. They leapt up, Firouz turned the blue knob and up they galloped, high above the palace. As they wheeled away towards Persia, Firouz's voice could be heard drifting down. "A bride's heart must be won, not bought," he called.

In the town below, the traveller heard it too. *Ah, is that where I went wrong?* he said to himself.

Firouz and Aru didn't hear him. They were already far away on the first of many journeys in a happy life together. 