

## The Dove

On the morning the queen fell violently ill, the king summoned his son into his room. When the young man entered, the king was sitting at his mahogany desk looking at an 8x10 glossy photograph of his wife. The prince could tell by the look on his father's face that he was angry.

"My son," the king began, speaking slowly. "You are the one to blame. What have you done to her? Why have you inflicted this illness upon her, your own mother?"

"Father, how can you say such a thing!" the prince answered. "I am as grieved as you are that she has become so sick."

"Surely you have done something!" the king said. "All day long she lies upon her bed calling out your name. She is in a delirium. I won't dare to mention the things she has said. They are simply too horrible!"

"Really, father," the prince said. "I haven't the slightest idea why she should be acting this way. I assure you that I have done nothing to bring this calamity upon our house. Perhaps I should go and see her."

"Absolutely not!" the king shouted, pounding his fist on the desk. "You are positively forbidden to set foot in her room. There's no telling what would happen. She wants you, son. She wants you in a very unnatural way."

"Whatever do you mean?"

The king's face flushed red. "I cannot even say it!" he exclaimed.

"Father," the prince said gently. "I have never once been with a woman and I have no desire to be with one even now. Women do not interest me. Neither do men. I prefer to be alone, to keep myself upright and pure. I shall not give in to any temptation."

"Indeed, for your own sake, I hope that you can be so strong. Your mother is a very beautiful woman. But I tell you—"

He stood up and walked around the desk to where his son was standing. The king's lips were trembling.

"—I tell you now, my son, if you should ever so much as have one lustful thought for your mother, you shall be banished from my house and from this land forever. Hear me well!"

That same day the king sent for a doctor who was trained in both the white and black arts of medicine. The physician was a miracle worker, famed throughout the land for his extraordinary powers. He had cured many whose illnesses were thought to be incurable. No one knew the secret of his power. All that was known was that he was a very powerful healer, one who had the keys to both life and death.

The physician arrived at the castle early that evening amid great fanfare, surrounded by throngs of those whom he had cured. There were farmers in bib overalls and mechanics in monkey suits; professors draped in black robes and diplomats in tuxedos and top hats; some in the crowd wore business suits, others work shirts and trousers. Outwardly they showed no signs of illness, but in fact they were a miserable lot. Indeed, they had been cured of their ailments, but their faces were dull and lifeless. Their eyes were sunken, their cheeks hollow. Only when they sang the praises of the wonderful healer who had cured them did they show any sign of vitality. "The physician has made us well!" they shouted with enthusiasm. "He has rid us of all diseases. Now we are immortal. Praised be the physician!"

The physician himself was riding on a bier carried by six men in dark suits wearing sunglasses. They were toting machine guns and looking suspiciously around them for would-be assassins. Clad in a surgeon's apron, with a stethoscope around his neck and a head mirror strapped to his skull, the physician smiled and waved to the masses cheering him.

The king and the prince waited for the physician on the portico in front of the castle gate. After the physician had been helped down from his bier, the king greeted him with open arms. "We have heard of your great powers," the king said, "that you have the power over life and death itself! I am confident that you will be able to cure my sick wife."

"Yes, certainly," the physician said still smiling. "My successes have been many. Let me assure you

that I will cure whatever illness the queen has.”

“I give you my complete trust,” the king said. “Whatever you need shall be yours. All that I have is at your disposal.”

“Thank you, indeed,” the physician answered, patting his medical bag and adjusting the stethoscope around his neck. “It is very good that you should offer me such hospitality, for my needs, quite naturally, are many.”

“I shall give you the best room in my house,” the king said, “and the best food and wine for yourself and your bodyguards. My only request is that your men leave their weapons in my vault. I assure you that you will be quite safe here.”

“Of course,” the physician replied.

The physician was immediately shown to the room where the queen lay. He remained inside only a short time, however, and when he emerged, his expression was grave. “It is quite serious,” he told the king. “Much worse than I expected.”

The king looked at his son, who felt a sudden pang of anguish in his stomach.

“Is there any hope?” the king asked the physician.

“Yes, there is always hope. I have already given her an elixir. It is the same elixir I have given to everyone I have cured. But it is possible that we are faced here with powers much greater than my own.”

“Of what powers do you speak?”

“I have heard from a maidservant that at the same hour the queen fell ill, a bird—a white dove—landed on the sill of her window.”

“What is so unusual about that?”

“It is quite possible that the bird has cast a spell on her.”

“A spell? Utter nonsense!”

“Do not be so hasty in your judgment,” the physician cautioned. “It is quite possible that the bird, being a dove, is the avatar of a goddess.”

As the prince listened to the physician speak these words he was reminded of an incident that had taken place several days before, which he had not told his father about. He had risen early in the morning and, strapping his sharp hunting knife to the side of his goatskin coat, had gone out for a day of hunting in the forest. He’d had a particularly unlucky day. He wasn’t able even to snare a rabbit. The prince was walking along a rocky creek when suddenly he came to a small waterfall. At the base of the falls was a pool and he saw, bathing in the misty spray, the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen. She was naked, and when she came up out of the water he felt something begin to stir deep down inside him. For the first time in his life he began to experience the awesome sensations of manhood. He wanted her. He admitted it. But he refused to let himself be tempted by her. He turned to leave, but just as he did, she called out to him.

“My dear,” he heard her voice gently say.

He began walking away, trying to ignore her.

“My dear,” the voice called again.

He turned back and faced her. She was walking towards him, her long black hair dancing over her breasts.

“You are the prince,” she said.

“How is it that you know me? I have never seen you before in my life.”

“Who in the entire kingdom does not know the prince?”

“Leave me alone,” the prince said. “I am on a hunt. I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Do I disturb you?” the woman said teasingly. “Or is it that I interest you?”

“No,” the prince said firmly, feeling uncomfortable now that the woman was standing directly in front of him. “You do not interest me in the least!”

“Then why is your heart pounding so? How do you account for these strange feelings of excitement that you have? Is it not because you desire me?”

“Even if I should desire you, it would mean nothing.”

“Nothing? Indeed, would you not like to kiss me, to rest your head on my breasts, to lie down beside me?”

“No,” the prince cried. “I would not like to do any of those things. Leave me alone! Do not tempt

me in this way!"

The woman placed her hand on the prince's bare shoulder and began stroking it.

"Listen to me, my prince. I know that I must obey your every command. I cannot force you to do anything against your own will. But I have been watching you for many days. I have never seen a man more daring or more powerful than you. It is you alone whom I want, you alone who can make me happy. Do you not see how beautiful I am? I can truthfully say, in the whole earth there is none more beautiful than me. And that is why I want you. I deserve the best that there is in the world, and you, indeed, are the best."

"Stop!" the prince shouted, pushing away her hand. "I shall not listen to you anymore!" He turned and ran back into the forest, his heart pumping. But as he ran, he knew she had been right. He had wanted her. Yes, he still wanted her. He stopped suddenly and looked behind him. The woman could not be seen, but there, perched on the limb of a tree overhead, was a beautiful white dove.

When the prince awoke the next morning—the morning after the arrival of the physician—he learned that his mother had died. The funeral was held that very afternoon. The physician did not attend. Immediately after the queen's death, the king had commanded that the miracle worker be bound in chains and cast into the dungeon. Deprived of their machine guns, the physician's bodyguards hadn't been able to save him. The king had had them thrown into the dungeon as well.

"The physician has failed us," the king said bitterly to his son, while they stood at the queen's open casket. "I had heard so many good things about him and had placed so much faith in him. But he failed."

"There was nothing that could have been done," the prince said.

"Oh, my precious wife," the king said, looking into the casket. "If only you could know how much I loved you! You were indeed the most beautiful woman in the world. I can't bear to be apart from you."

After the ceremonies had ended and the casket had been taken on the physician's bier to the cemetery and lowered into the grave, the king retired to his room and would not permit anyone to see him. The prince remained at his mother's grave long after everyone else had left. He had not seen her once since she had fallen ill. He felt—no, he *knew*—that it had been his fault after all. He had told no one about the incident with the woman in the forest or of the beautiful white dove. He was too afraid. He sensed that his father still held him accountable for the queen's death. The old man did not know exactly how or why, but he sensed that his son had in some way been responsible.

When night fell the prince was still at the graveside of his mother. He hadn't eaten anything all day. He felt groggy and wanted to sleep, but he forced himself to stay awake. He sorely missed his mother.

Several hours had passed when suddenly he heard a sound coming from behind his mother's tombstone. He looked up and saw a woman standing there. She was wearing a thin, gauzy, white-colored gown. It was his mother. But she had been transfigured. It hardly seemed possible, but there she stood, much more beautiful than she had ever been before.

"Mother!" the prince said in a low whisper. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, it is I."

"Oh, mother!" he cried with joy, running over to her and embracing her. "It really is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, my son. Are you happy to see me? I shall not deny it, I am very happy to see you."

She held the prince in her arms, just as she used to when he was a child. The prince felt so warm, so safe. The queen bent down her head and kissed him.

"Oh yes, mother!" the prince said, cuddling up close to her. "Kiss me. Kiss me again and again!"

And she kissed him, on his hair, on his forehead, on his cheeks, on his mouth. Together they fell down on the grassy lawn, stripped of their clothes, and he penetrated her.

A crowd gathered around the dead body of the prince. All of the ragged followers of the physician, including the bodyguards, were there, their faces drawn. The physician himself was present. There was a look of fear in his eyes.

"What do you intend to do?" the king demanded of him.

"You must understand," the physician answered nervously, "that I have never been in this position

before. I fear that I have reached the limits of my power.”

“You have no choice but to succeed. For if you should fail again, I will certainly have your head! To have lost both my wife and my son within a day of each other is simply unbearable for me. You must do something!”

“I will do what I can,” the physician said quietly. He looked around at his followers. They were sullen. One of them looked gravely at the physician and said, “You have promised us immortality, yet of what use are your promises if, indeed, you do not have the power to raise a man from the dead?”

The physician nervously reached into his medical bag and took out a vial of his most potent elixir. He bent down and put the vial to the prince’s lips. The liquid trickled out of the bottle into the dead man’s mouth. There was no sign of life. He reached back into his medical bag and pulled out a second vial, again emptying it into the mouth of the prince. The physician’s hands were shaking as the last drop of the elixir fell from the bottle.

The dead man began to stir. His chest began to move up and down. He was breathing. The prince’s eyes fluttered open.

A smile crept over the face of the physician. He had raised the prince from the dead! Slowly he lifted his arms into the air.

“I have triumphed!” he cried. “I have triumphed!”

The crowds, stunned for a moment in disbelief, suddenly broke into a cheer.

The king went over to the prince, cradling his son’s head in his arms. “My son, my son,” he wept. “I was worried that you had joined your mother.”

The prince looked up at him. “I have seen her,” he said weakly. “I have been with her.”

“You have seen your mother!” the king cried. “You were actually with her?”

“Yes,” the prince answered.

“So she’s still alive!”

“I am not sure about that,” the prince replied.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“But father, I must confess. I...I—”

“What is it, my son?”

“I lay with her.”

“You have lain with her!” the king said uncomprehendingly. “You have lain with your dead mother?”

“Yes, father, I have.”

The king turned away. “Oh, sorrow upon sorrow,” he cursed. “Why has fate given me this burden?” He buried his head in his arms and began weeping.

The prince felt his strength returning, but it was not the same strength he had once had. Now his eyes, like the eyes of the physician’s followers, were sunken. His cheeks were hollow. Slowly getting up, he looked at the physician and said, “Why have you brought me back? Why have you taken me from my mother?”

The physician looked at him benevolently. “Rejoice, my son. Once you were dead but now you are alive!”

“But you have taken me from my mother!”

“Do not be angry. Is not life among the living better than life—or should I say, death—among the dead?”

The prince staggered over to the physician, reaching for his hunting knife. “It is not for you to decide who shall live and who shall die!”

The physician turned to run away, but the prince caught him by the neck. The two struggled for a moment, but the prince tightened his grip and plunged his knife deep into the miracle worker’s side. The physician groaned and fell to the ground. Barely able to speak he looked up and said to the prince, “You have destroyed not me but yourself.”

One of the followers from the crowd came over and examined the body of the physician. “He is dead,” the man said. “Why have you done this, my prince? Why have you taken away the only hope we had in this world?”

On that day, in accordance with his father’s command, the prince was banished from the land. He went to live by himself in the forest, to become a hunter once more, in pursuit of a certain white dove.