

The Suitors of the Princess Fire-Fly

Old Hungarian Fairy Tales, #2

by Baroness Emmuska Orczy, 1865-1947

Published: 1895
Dean & Son Ltd, London



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FAR, very far away, and long, very long ago, when all the world was inhabited by the fairies, there lived a great and mighty king called Fire-fly. Now do not run away with the idea that this Fire-fly was in any way like the little glowing insects that are read about in Natural History books. True, he had wings like those flies nowadays, and also a body something like theirs, but he was a fairy fly, and wore a most beautiful crown on his head, which at night shone as brilliantly as the stars. Then this Fire-fly had a most gorgeous palace, which lay right in the

middle of a wide river. This palace consisted of one magnificent lotus flower, and a more exquisite dwelling-place it would be impossible to see. His dearest and most precious treasure was his daughter, a most lovely princess. The king was so proud and fond of her that he would not allow any one even to look at her, but kept her hidden inside the pink petals of his beautiful lotus palace, and there the princess grew up more and more lovely every day, till her fame spread far and wide, and all the flies and moths and beetles of the neighbouring kingdoms got out their finest wings in order to go to woo and win this incomparable Fire-fly miss.

But the princess was very proud and very vain of her own beauty, and she said to her mother one day: "It is quite useless for either Dragon-fly or Stag-beetle, or, in fact, any of them to try and woo me, for I will not marry any one unless he perform some perilous task which I will impose upon him. Then if he fails, and dies in the attempt, I shall be thankful to have escaped being married to so foolish and careless a being; or if he should not dare to attempt the task, it will be a proof that he values his life higher than his love, and is therefore not worth having."

As this beautiful princess was very much spoiled at home, her mother and father, King and Queen Fire-fly, both acceded to her whim, and the king issued a proclamation, by which he declared that no suitor should have the hand of his lovely daughter unless he performed the task she imposed upon him.

Forthwith did Prince Gold-beetle start from his kingdom of Gladiola over the grass, and placed his heart and hand at Princess Fire-fly's feet. She listened to all he had to say, and smiled very sweetly. "Yes," she said, "all that you say is very pretty indeed, and I am sure your proposal is exceedingly flattering; but you know the condition, without which I cannot possibly marry you."

"Name the condition, lovely princess," said the Gold-beetle; "no task, be it ever so hard, would be too much to undertake for such a prize."

"You must bring me, from anywhere you like," said the beautiful Fire-fly, "one spark of fire!"

"Is that all you wish for?" said the Gold-beetle. "I fly, and before another night has descended and passed by I will lay this spark at your feet." And away he flew, quite confident that he would be able to obtain so simple a thing as a mere little spark of fire, which the moment night came could be found in every house in the neighbourhood. You will hear presently how he fared in his quest.

In the meantime the beautiful Fire-fly had another suitor. Lord Cockchafer appeared upon the scene, and, obtaining entrance into the Lotus Palace, he boldly asked for the honour of becoming the Princess's husband, but she turned away quite disdainfully from him:

"I don't think I should ever care to marry you at all," she said; "but I am so very, very anxious to possess a spark of fire, and I really would like to know if you would be brave enough to undertake a perilous task in order to please me."

"I will travel night and day," said Lord Cockchafer, "till I bring you what you wish."

Away he went, tripping merrily, and blissfully unconscious of the fact that he was not the only one who was bent on this curious errand.

Presently Fire-fly had another suitor—a beautiful suitor he was too, with his shimmering suit of green and gold, my Lord Dragon-fly. He thought to dazzle her by his beauty and make her forget her foolish fancy about this spark of fire. But the princess would not listen even to him; she only smiled, and said—

“I will only marry him who brings me this spark of fire.”

And away he had to go. And thus, day after day, there came a regular crowd of suitors round the beautiful princess; but day after day she sent them off in quest of a spark of fire.

Prince Gold-beetle waited till night set in, then flew off gaily to the nearest city. He came up near a lovely little house, standing in a large garden; he looked in at the window, and there he saw a large table laid out with tea and cakes, sweets and fruit, and twelve little girls and boys sitting round, having their tea; on the table a large lamp was burning very brightly.

“Why, this is just what I want,” said Prince Gold-beetle; and as the window was open he flew in. The lamp burnt beautifully, it quite fascinated him; he flew quite close, in order to get a better view of the bright flame.

“Oh, what a lovely beetle,” he heard one of the little children say, “Mother, do look! What beautiful wings it has!”

“Oh, dear, it is flying so near the lamp I am sure it will burn its wings,” said another.

The Gold-beetle took no notice of what they said, but drew nearer and nearer to the coveted prize; there was a spark of lovely fire, how pleased the beautiful princess would be when he brought it home for her. At last he made a bold dash to catch the flame, when lo! alas! he felt his poor wings all singed and burnt; he could not fly any more, but fell fainting on the tablecloth. He heard the little children say to each other—

“Stupid beetle to go flying into the lamp; now it has burnt its lovely wings.”

Then somebody else said, “Throw away the nasty thing, or put it out of its misery.”

That was the end of poor Prince Gold-beetle’s life.

Another suitor of Fire-fly, a Hawk-moth, while fluttering about one evening, wandered into a room where, at first, he could see nothing, it seemed pitch dark; presently he noticed a large luminous object, which turned out to be long blue flames, apparently emerging from a large bowl, filled with plums; all round he saw eager little laughing faces, and every now and then little fingers would boldly make a dash into the bowl and bring out a flaring sugar plum. Hawk-moth watched them for a time, very much interested; you see, they don’t play snapdragon in the Lotus kingdom. Then he suddenly thought this would be a grand opportunity to steal a lovely spark of blue fire, and with it claim the hand of the proud princess. He fluttered round the bowl for some time, but no one paid any attention to him, they were all so merry pulling out the plums and eating them. It seemed so easy that Hawkmoth determined to try his luck, and boldly flew into the flames. Alas! poor fellow, he was burnt to a cinder, you could hardly tell him from a raisin.

One after another the suitors tried, and one after another they failed. There was a Hornbug who actually, one night, saw a green light in a cat's eye; he tried to snatch that, but you may well imagine how pussy, very much annoyed, made a short meal of my lord Horn-bug.

A venturesome Carrion-beetle having drifted towards the sea-shore, late one night, saw some fish lying there apparently all glowing with fire. He picked off one of the glistening scales, and went away proud and happy, quite convinced that the necessary prize—the much-sought-for spark of fire—was at last in his grasp. He was hurrying to get to Lotus land as fast as his legs could carry him, when he met a Stag-beetle, who apparently was also carrying a luminous object in front of him. The fact of the matter was, that Mr. Stag-beetle had also fallen madly in love with the beautiful but capricious princess, and had determined to succeed in bringing her a spark of fire, even if it should cost him his wings!

After several unsuccessful attempts he had found at the foot of a large tree, a funny little bit of old wood, which gave out a beautiful little bright blue light. He approached very carefully (as he had been severely burnt several times), and you may be sure he was delighted when he found that it did not give out any heat, so that he was able to carry it off without burning himself. He was hurrying off with his prize to claim the Princess, when he met Mr. Carrion-beetle bent on a similar errand.

They both stopped short, and glared at each other. No explanation was necessary. Each knew where the other one was hurrying to, and each was determined to get there first. They could not both marry Princess Fire-fly, that was very evident, so, after talking matters over for a while, they determined to fight it out till one of them remained dead on the battle-field. It was pitch dark, but the fish-scale and the bit of wood were quite enough light to kill one another by, so they each put down their prize, and began boxing in true beetle-like fashion.

As they both were equally tall, and equally strong, the fight lasted a considerable time. When lo! behold! as the first ray of dawn illumined the eastern sky, and the two combatants turned for a rest, previous to renewing hostilities, there, on the ground, instead of the two tiny sparks of blue flame, lay only a nasty fish's scale and an ugly bit of wood. King Phosphorus had vanished with the dawn. Further fighting was useless. Carrion-beetle and Stagbeetle each went his own way to seek fortune elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the Princess, in her beautiful palace, waited in vain for the return of one of her many suitors. When she heard of the sad fate of Prince Gold-beetle, she wept bitterly, for though she was so proud and vain, she was not wholly devoid of feeling, and of the many who had come wooing her she had preferred Prince Gold-beetle. When the Queen saw her tears, she tried to make her forego her purpose; but all her persuasions were of no avail, for the Princess was very obstinate, and would not own to being in the wrong.

Suitor after suitor came, and they were one and all sent off on the same hopeless errand. One day a most beautiful "Red Admiral" was on the point of committing suicide on the thorn of a rosebush, being so fearfully despondent on account of his non-success, when he caught sight of a luminous object

underneath the very branch upon which he meant to end his life. His joy was great; what was it? Would it hurt him? He thought not, it looked so beautiful as it lay and sparkled in the sun. All round it was a hoop of gold. He went closer; no, it did not burn. Then came the question, how was he to convey it to the Princess? It was far too heavy for him to carry. Whilst he was considering how he could possibly convey it, he heard footsteps, and in another second a little child's voice exclaim, "Why, look! here is your diamond ring you lost; ... how lucky it is I have found it," and the child picked it up and gave it to a grown-up lady who was a little way off. This was the last straw for the beautiful Red Admiral, and in another minute he had committed suicide.

And thus it was with one and all—some were frightened, and never attempted the task, others were badly singed, some died, none succeeded, and even to this day, in far-off lands, where the lotus grows, we always say when we see a crowd of insects fluttering round a flame: "Ah! Princess Fire-fly has many suitors to-night!"

