

The Search for the Golden Bird

MAGNON was a wealthy timber merchant living in the forests of the north, and one night he gathered together his three sons. 'You have learned everything there is to know about the felling of trees and the marketing of timber,' he said, 'so I know that I am leaving my business in good hands. I shall divide my wealth equally between you, only keeping back what I need for myself. Your poor mother is now dead and my relatives are all well provided for.'

'But what is this, father?' asked the eldest son in alarm. 'Are you then leaving us?' 'Indeed I am,' replied Magnon. 'Hawatio is, as you know, beyond shape and form. But whenever He revealed Himself to our ancestors, it was as a great Golden Bird with emerald eyes and feathers studded with rubies. For a long time now no man has set eyes on the Golden Bird but it is said that a herdsman in the extreme south has seen Hawatio, the Golden Bird, several times on the shores of a dried up lake. All my life I have seen images of the Golden Bird on pillars in market places and on the tops of sacred buildings, but now I have the desire to see the Golden Bird Himself before death takes me.'

'This is a great folly,' said the youngest son at once. 'The tale is most likely nothing but an idle rumour.' 'No, no,' replied Magnon, 'the story is well attested, it is no rumour.' 'What do you think?' the youngest son asked the middle one who passed for being something of a dreamer. 'I think,' said the second son, 'that a man can see Hawatio in the mind's eye if he tries hard enough, and so there is no need to travel halfway across the world to find Him.' 'No, no,' said Magnon, 'seeing Hawatio in the mind's eye is not enough'. 'If Hawatio wanted to reveal Himself,' said the eldest son, 'He would do so. But we are not the men today our ancestors were and nothing will change that.' 'Say what you like, my sons,' said Magnon, 'but the desire that is upon me is so great that nothing on earth could hold me back.'

And the very next day Magnon set out for the south on a good horse, taking with him provisions for a long journey and a substantial sum of money.

Magnon crossed rivers and mountain ranges, changing his horse frequently, and everywhere he went he met men like himself who had left all to embark on the search for the Golden Bird. And at the inns where he stayed he came across travellers who told him with joy in their eyes, that at this very moment people were building a great city on the shores of the dried-up lake for Hawatio to dwell in, and that already many had set up encampments there in the desert, and that countless numbers from all parts of the world were hurrying in that direction.

By the time Magnon reached the low moist plains, he was one of a vast host bivouacking in the open air and riding as fast as they could go towards the south. And in the marshes they were stricken with a fever that passed through the band like a whirlwind, and great numbers of them died in agony, and their comrades did not stop to bury them, so eager were they to push on towards the south.

And Magnon himself was laid low, but being still in full vigour he threw off the disease. And, once he had recovered, he stayed awhile to tend the sick and dying as well as he could, and buried many of them with his own hands. In this way he got parted from the main body of the travellers. A little further along the road, a mountain opened up and spat out fire and brimstone, and the main host was buried alive and only those who were behind escaped. Then Magnon found himself alone and, taking a different path, he came at length to warmer and healthier lands where he forgot the sickness and the other perils of the search.

Magnon rode on and at length reached the hot lands where the sun was very high in the sky, and on all sides were vast fertile plains full of wheat and barley, and there were olive groves and vineyards and fruit trees in abundance. And all the towns were full of beautiful gardens and shaded walks where there were fountains playing, and the statues of the Golden Bird in the market places were immense and made of bronze studded with precious stones.

There were now fewer travellers in the inns, as the first wave had abated, and the inhabitants of the hot lands had not departed in such great numbers. But all spoke of the countless travellers who had passed that way, and Magnon learned that there were now two cities built on the shores of the dried up lake where Hawatio had first appeared. One was known as the City of Copper Roofs, because it was so splendid that the inhabitants used copper instead of tiles, and the other was the City of the Bird which had been built at vast expense for Hawatio alone to visit and in which no man or woman was allowed to spend the night.

And in all the towns and villages of the hot lands, Magnon came across men from the north like himself who had settled in these warm regions and married native women who were dusky and fine-featured and more beautiful than any women Magnon had yet come across. And these men all spoke of the search for the Golden Bird as one of the follies of youth that a more experienced man outgrew — and yet not altogether a folly since it had brought them to these prosperous regions, where they lived in ease and comfort and without fears.

But Magnon did not heed them, for he saw a sadness in their eyes, as if they envied those who had the strength and courage to go on, though they themselves could not. And as for himself, having come so far, he was determined to go through to the end.

And at length Magnon came to the edge of a dry plain with nothing but a few tufts of grass and scrub, and there in the distance was a mighty city with roofs of copper gleaming in the afternoon sun. Then Magnon spurred his horse onward, and by evening he was at the gates of the City of Copper Roofs, and he knew that the end of years of searching was at hand.

As for the three sons, they lived on in the forests of the north and carried on their father's business, and were for a while so happy together that none of them felt the desire to marry. But then the eldest son grew restive, and one night he called together his brothers and asked them to give him his share in the business, as he also had resolved to set out on the same search.

‘This is a great folly,’ said the youngest son. ‘For we are happy here and have no reason to change this life’. ‘Yes,’ said the second son, ‘And you should also heed the example of our father. Since we have had no word from him, we can only suppose that he has lost his life in this rash venture.’ ‘All that you say is perhaps true,’ said the eldest son. ‘But the desire upon me is now so great that nothing on earth could hold me back. For me there is only one thing in this world that matters, and that is the search for the Golden Bird. All my life is empty because I have not seen Hawatio face to face.’ And since nothing his two brothers could say was able to change his mind, in due course he set off like his father.

The eldest son followed much the same path as his father, and like him met thousands upon thousands of travellers, all riding as fast as they could go towards the south, for a second wave had now commenced, and more people even than before had been seized by the same desire. Once again, various perils reduced their numbers, but as the eldest son was hardy and vigorous he survived all of them. Like his father before him he reached the hot lands and, many years later, hardened and sunburned by his travels, he too arrived at the dry plain with the City of Copper Roofs gleaming in the distance.

That evening he was shown into a small inn near the city gates, and when his landlord heard from where he had come, he told his guest that an old man who came from the very same region was living nearby — and that, if he wished, he would take him there that very evening.

When the old man saw the vigorous, handsome stranger, he looked at him with much sadness, taking his two hands in his own. ‘I am glad to see you, my son,’ said Magnon. ‘And yet at the same time I am not glad, for I know that you will find here nothing but disappointment.’ The eldest son embraced his father warmly and tried to pacify him, thinking he was perhaps ill, and he said that he would take care of him while he yet lived. ‘No, no,’ said the old man. ‘I am not ill as you think, except perhaps in spirit.’

‘How can that be?’ asked the eldest son. ‘For is it not true, what I have been told ? I had understood that the City of the Golden Bird was not far away from here.’ ‘My son,’ said Magnon, ‘the City of the Bird is near at hand. It is only a few hours riding from this place, and its roofs can be seen from the upper windows of this very house on a clear day.’

‘Why, then,’ said the eldest son eagerly, ‘you must yourself have seen Hawatio, the Golden Bird, many times.’ ‘Would it were so!’ answered Magnon, taking a deep draught from the pitcher he had beside him and offering some to his son. ‘The City of the Bird is vast. It is full of wide avenues and streets lined with gorgeous palaces, and there are countless gardens and shaded walks and man-made lakes.’ ‘Go on,’ said the eldest son. ‘All this I have heard already.’

‘All the streets and alleyways lead to a central square and it is wonderful how one cannot lose oneself in this city. And in this square is a great pedestal higher than any you have ever seen, and engraved upon it are the words, HAWATIO, THE GOLDEN BIRD.’ ‘All this is as I expected,’ replied the eldest son. ‘For it is on this pedestal that Hawatio in the form of a great golden bird with feathers studded with rubies comes to perch in the cool of the evening, and on special occasions one may even converse with Him.’ ‘That is not so,’ said Magnon. ‘I fear that if you waited there for a hundred years, still you would see nothing.’

‘How can this be?’ asked the eldest son, profoundly shocked. ‘Perhaps Hawatio does not show Himself during the hours of daylight, but appears only at night?’ ‘Every man who has spent a night within the gates of the City of the Bird has been found lifeless the next morning with his mouth hanging open, and there is no need to cross half the world to meet with such a fate.’

‘Well, then,’ said the eldest son, ‘it must be that none of you are considered worthy enough to come into His presence, or again perhaps that even now the Golden Bird is on the pillar but your eyes are incapable of seeing Him, since you do not have the strong faith of our ancestors. Or again Hawatio is waiting for there to be enough people gathered together here, before He reveals Himself.’

‘I have thought these things,’ said Magnon wearily, ‘as have all others who have penetrated to this city. But now I believe none of them. The truth of the matter is that the Golden Bird is as far away from us here as in our house in the forests of the north, and never again will a living man see Hawatio face to face.’ ‘What you say is unthinkable!’ exclaimed the eldest son, and he left the room at once.

In the days that followed, the eldest son spoke to many people in the city, and all said, like his father, that no one had seen the Golden Bird by day, and that death awaited all who passed a night within the gates of the City of the Bird. ‘Why should this be?’ the eldest son asked himself. ‘It must be that all those who pass the night there are afraid to look directly into the emerald eyes of Hawatio, the Golden Bird, in all His splendour, and so they turn their eyes away and then they are struck down. But I shall look straight into the heart of this brightness, and will not turn away. And then others will take courage seeing that I am still alive, and little by little mankind will grow accustomed once more to the presence of Hawatio and the Golden Bird will move freely among us as it is said He did in the days of long ago.’ And that very night the eldest son, fully confident in his strength, went to the City of the Bird against the advice of everyone, and was found lifeless the next morning with his mouth hanging open.

Meanwhile the second son and the youngest carried on the business, but the time came when the second son also grew restless and went off on the same search leaving everything to the youngest son. And he also at length reached the City of Copper Roofs where he learned that both his father and brother were dead.

Like so many others he visited the City of the Bird many times by day and saw nothing, but one day when in front of the pedestal he fell into a fit, shrieking out that the Golden Bird was alongside him even then, and that he could feel the golden feathers studded with rubies brushing against his face at that very moment. And those who heard him either pitied him or turned away in scorn, but no one believed him. And not long afterwards he died during one of his fits, and was buried alongside his father and elder brother.

The youngest son was now alone in the family house in the forests of the north, and he married a local girl and lived there quietly for some years. But then his wife died unexpectedly of a fever without giving him any children. After he had buried her he said to himself, ‘All these years I have counted it utter folly to go on the search for Hawatio, and have never troubled myself about the matter. But now I am curious to know the truth, for there is some mystery here that needs to be unravelled.’

So the youngest son sold off his business and equipped himself carefully for the journey, taking varied merchandise to sell on the way and arming himself as well as he could, for the roads had now become exceedingly dangerous. When he started his journey he gave out to everyone that his only object was commerce and he avoided all those who claimed to be searching for the Golden Bird. He slept alone in a tent, avoiding the inns which were now full of cut-throats, and he made a long detour so as not to pass through the marshy lowlands where there was still great risk of fever.

Wherever he passed the youngest son noticed that all was in turmoil and confusion, because so many young men had left their places of birth to go on the search for the Golden Bird. The fields were badly tilled, the ramparts of the great towns crumbling, the great houses in the country badly in need of repair, and there was violence and thieving everywhere. Even the sunny lands of the mid south were becoming empty of youths and many of the young girls had left with them, leaving only the older people and those too weak to travel.

At length like his father and two brothers before him he reached the City of Copper Roofs which was now a very great city indeed with all kinds of manufactures and bazaars and densely populated quarters, and still travellers were flooding in from all sides.

For some time the youngest son observed what was going on without even visiting the City of the Bird once, giving out that his aims were commerce and pleasure only. This aroused no surprise, as there were now many like him who had come to the city to ply their trade which in his case was making wooden statues of Hawatio and selling them for an exorbitant price. The youngest son saw that some merchants had become extremely rich and lived in palaces, while other people were forced to become servants or even sell themselves as slaves, and there were great quantities of beggars and desperate men who had lost all in this venture, and could by no means return to their homelands. The youngest son frequented a group of wastrels and revellers, the sons and daughters of well-off merchants who spent their time drinking and gaming and in an endless search for amusement. They would often say what a good thing it was for the whole world, and for them in particular, that so many gullible persons had set out on this quest for the Golden Bird, and the youngest son always agreed with them. But looking into their eyes he saw that, despite their unconcerned air, underneath they were just as disappointed as everyone else.

A year or so after the arrival of the youngest son in the City of the Bird, a prophet of great renown in the city announced in public that the man who would be the first to spend a night in the City of the Bird and live was already living in the city, and that, because of him very soon everyone — no matter how young or old, high or low — would see Hawatio, the Golden Bird, in all His brilliance for the space of a whole night in the sky above them.

This announcement had such an effect on the young population, including most of the wastrels in the youngest son's milieu, that hundreds of them rushed to the City of the Bird that very night, anxious to be the first to see Hawatio and live, and the following morning were found lifeless with their mouths hanging open. There were so many bodies that there was not enough time to dig graves, and most of them were taken away in carts, and thrown into an open pit by the side of the dried-up lake. And, from then on, no one ventured into the City of the Bird by night again.

All this left the youngest son more puzzled than ever. One day he was sitting drinking on the balcony of the house where he lived in the company of the woman who owned it. 'How is it possible that all who pass a night in the City of the Bird die since by all accounts the city does not contain so much as a cat or a dog?' 'Who can tell?' replied the woman, 'I have not been there myself'. But the youngest son saw that she knew something and pressed her further.

'Has no one ever lived in the City of the Bird even in the beginning?' 'No one,' the woman replied. 'It was built for Hawatio alone and has always been unoccupied.' 'But,' she added after a moment's pause, 'I am a property owner myself and I know what happens when a house is left empty.' 'You mean it gets occupied by people who are not supposed to be there?' 'Exactly,' said the woman. 'Strange sounds can be heard at night coming from the City of the Bird, sounds that you would not expect, of merriment and revelry.' The woman leaned towards the youngest son. 'The City of the Bird is inhabited by phantoms, I am sure of it. They sleep during the day but come out at dusk. And there is something else that no one pays attention to,' but the woman broke off as she saw that someone was passing in the street.

'What is that?' asked the youngest son when the passer-by was out of sight. 'I have it from one of the men that took out the corpses recently from the City of the Bird that all those who have spent a night in that city, even those who are beggars, die with their bellies full.'

The youngest son reflected on what she had said and one afternoon, without telling anyone where he was going, he rode out from the City of Copper Roofs across the dried-up lake in the direction of the City of the Bird which he had still not yet visited despite having been nearly two years in the region. As he rode along he was struck by the quantity of graves that had been dug for all those who had died in the city towards which he was heading and he passed a post marking the mass grave of the latest deaths.

He reached the city walls just before dusk, and passed many people flooding out through the west gate. When the gatekeepers saw the youngest son making as if to go in, they assumed he did not know the dangers to which he was about to be exposed, and told him by no means to enter. But to their astonishment the youngest son took no heed of them, tethered his horse to an iron ring set in the outer gate and calmly walked through the portal.

Night fell and for a while everything was dark and silent, but a little later all the dwelling places in the City of the Bird began to light up, and all kinds of people, young and old, came out onto the streets. They greeted the youngest son warmly and seemed gay and friendly, inviting him to come and feast and make merry with them.

But the youngest son regarded them with distrust, as there was something in their eyes that was cold and inhuman, and he refused their offers. The streets around the central square were now full of bands of revellers, many of them disguised as animals and dancing to the sound of pipes, and there were also beautiful young girls dressed in white muslin dancing amongst themselves, many of whom invited him to join with them, holding out their hands. But once again he saw that their eyes were cold and hard and he rebuffed them. And at the corners of streets there were long tables set out with an abundance of food and drink that anyone could take if he so wished, but the youngest son passed by without partaking of anything even though it seemed to him that he had never been so hungry and thirsty in the whole of his life.

At dawn the streets emptied and the great houses returned to silence, and the youngest son found himself all alone in the central square staring up at the pedestal with the inscription in letters of gold, 'HAWATIO, THE GOLDEN BIRD'. And the whole city now seemed to him a lonely and sinister place, with its magnificent arcades and hanging gardens and long avenues, none of which contained so much as a dog or a cat.

Then the youngest son went out by the portal, nodded to the gatekeepers, untethered his horse, and rode back to the City of Copper Roofs where he informed everyone he met that he had just passed a whole night in the City of the Bird and was apparently still alive. The gatekeepers confirmed that they had indeed seen him entering the previous night and emerging from the city when the gates were opened in the morning. When people asked the youngest son eagerly whether he had seen Hawatio, the Golden Bird, he said that he had not, only bands of phantoms that melted away in the light of day.

On hearing this, some of the men who had crossed half the world to come to this place, and could by no means return to their homes, vowed that they had had enough of this wastage and folly that was ruining the entire world. And they went straight to the City of the Bird with wagon-loads of brushwood and faggots and filled the great houses with them and heaped up mountains of branches before the pedestal in the central square. And at nightfall they set fire to as much as they could, and the flames went through the city from street to street, and all the houses began to blaze.

And the inhabitants of the City of Copper Roofs, seeing great banks of flame rising high in the night sky, all rushed out of their houses, but they saw at once that nothing could be done to stop the fire, and that the whole City of the Bird was alight. And as they watched the flames spread right across the sky, taking on the form of a colossal bird of fire with tail outspread, gleaming like molten gold studded with thousands of giant rubies. And thus it remained all night long, but at dawn it faded away, and there was nothing on the earth below it but a pile of ashes, and it was as if the city had never been.