

The Wicked Prince

The Legend

Once upon a time there lived a wicked, arrogant prince. He thought of nothing but how to subjugate the whole world and strike fear into everyone with his name alone. And so he marched into foreign lands with fire and sword; his warriors trampled the fields and set peasants' houses ablaze; red tongues licked the leaves on trees, and fruits roasted on charred branches. Often a poor mother would hide with her naked infant behind smoking walls, but the warriors scoured everywhere, found them, and then began their devilish sport! Evil spirits could not have acted worse. Yet the prince felt that all was going as it should. Day by day his power grew, his name filled all with terror, and success attended him in all his deeds. From conquered cities he carried off gold and rich treasures, until immeasurable wealth accumulated in his capital: nowhere in the world was there anything like it. He commanded magnificent palaces, churches, and arches to be built, and all who saw these wondrous structures said, "What a great prince!" They did not think of the calamities he had brought upon foreign lands, nor hear the groans and laments rising from plundered and burned cities.

The prince himself gazed upon his gold and splendid buildings and thought like the others: "What a great prince I am! But all this is still not enough for me! I want more! No power in the world must equal mine, let alone surpass it!"

And he went to war against all his neighbors and subdued them all.

He ordered the captured kings to be chained in gold to his chariot whenever he intended to ride through the streets of his capital. When he sat at table, they were forced to lie at his feet and those of his courtiers, snatching scraps of bread thrown to them.

At last, the prince commanded statues of himself to be erected in squares and palaces; he even wished to place them in temples, before the altar of the Lord, but the priests said, "Prince, you are great, but God is greater than you; we dare not do this."

"Very well!" said the wicked prince. "Then I shall conquer God too!"

And, blinded by mad pride, he ordered a strange ship to be built, one that could soar through the air. The ship was painted in various colors and resembled a peacock's tail, studded with thousands of little eyes, yet each eye was the muzzle

of a gun. The prince boarded the ship; he needed only to press a single spring, and thousands of bullets would fly from the guns, which immediately reloaded themselves. A hundred mighty eagles were harnessed to the ship, and thus it rose into the air, toward the sun. The earth was barely visible below; mountains and forests first looked like plowed turf, then like drawings on a flat map, and finally vanished altogether in cloudy mist. Higher and higher the eagles ascended; then God sent forth one of His countless angels, but the wicked prince met him with a volley of gunfire. The bullets bounced off the angel's shining wings like hailstones; only a single tiny drop of blood flowed from the snow-white wing and fell onto the ship where the prince sat. It sank deeply into the wood and pressed upon the bottom of the ship with terrible force, as though it were a thousand-pound mass of lead. The ship plunged downward with unimaginable speed; the mighty wings of the eagles snapped; the wind whistled in the prince's ears; clouds gathered from the smoke of burned cities crowded around and took on monstrous shapes: huge crabs stretching powerful claws toward the prince, rolling fragments of cliffs, and fire-breathing dragons. The prince lay at the bottom of the ship, half dead with fear. At last the ship became entangled in the thick branches of forest trees.

"I will overcome God!" said the prince. "I have sworn to overcome Him, and so it shall be!" And he ordered new airships to be built; they were constructed for seven years. He also commanded lightning to be forged from the hardest steel, so that he might storm the fortress of heaven, and he gathered warriors from every corner of his realm; the troops covered an area of several square miles. The warriors were ready to board the ships; the prince approached his own, but God sent against him a swarm of mosquitoes, just one tiny swarm of mosquitoes. The insects buzzed around the prince and stung his face and hands. Furiously he drew his sword, but slashed only the air, unable to hit the mosquitoes. Then he ordered precious carpets to be brought and wrapped himself in them from head to toe, so that no mosquito could reach him with its sting. His command was carried out, but one mosquito managed to creep beneath the very lowest carpet, crawled into the prince's ear, and stung him. As if fire spread through the prince's blood, the poison penetrated his brain, and he tore off all the carpets, ripped his garments apart, and naked began to thrash and leap before the crowd of his fierce soldiers, who only mocked the mad prince who had sought to conquer God and was himself conquered by a mere mosquito!