

2. *Grandfather Pavel and the Priceless Pebble*

Grandfather Pavel lived high up among the mountains. He had a hut with a tiled roof, a puppy, a kitten, and nine sheep. Every morning he drove out his sheep to graze in one spot or another spot, wherever the grass grew green among the mountains; and every evening he drove his little flock home again to the sheep pen behind his hut. Then he would light a fire in his kitchen, and he and the puppy and the kitten would sit down to their supper of bread and cheese. But they had to eat their supper by firelight, because Grandfather Pavel was so poor that he didn't possess even a lamp or a candle.

Now there was a little forest up there among the mountains; and one evening, as Grandfather Pavel was strolling along behind his sheep on the way home, he suddenly heard a strange shrill sound, as if someone was blowing on a reed pipe. And the sound was coming from the forest.

'What can that be?' thought Grandfather Pavel. And he pushed his way in among the forest trees. What did he see? He saw a beech tree on fire, and clinging to one of the branches, just above the flames, was a speckled yellow-grey lizard. And when the lizard saw Grandfather Pavel she cried out, 'Oh shepherd, oh my brother, save me from this fire!'

'But I can't push my way through the flames!' said Grandfather Pavel.

'Then stretch out your shepherd's crook,' cried the lizard. 'I will catch hold of it, and you can pull me out.'

Well, Grandfather Pavel thrust his crook against the blazing bark, and the lizard wound herself round it, and Grandfather Pavel swung his crook up and back away from the tree and down to the ground. The poor little lizard scrambled off the crook and sat gulping and panting for a moment or two, and then she said, 'Dear good Grand-

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father Pavel, you have saved my life, and now I must reward you. Follow me.'

'Nay, I can't do that,' said Grandfather Pavel. 'I must drive my sheep home.'

'They can wait for a moment,' said the lizard, 'only just for a little moment! I am the daughter of the Emperor Lizard. He lives in a deep dark cave not far from here. On his head he wears a crown of gold, and in the crown are nine priceless pebbles that shine like nine suns. One of these pebbles shall be your reward, Pavel. You will only have to tap it on the ground and say "Let there stand before me this or that" – whatever you may need – and what you ask for shall be yours.'

'Oh,' said Grandfather Pavel, 'that would indeed be a pebble worth having!'

And he followed the little lizard to the entrance of a deep dark cave up there among the mountains.

'Now wait here,' said the little lizard, running into the cave.

Grandfather Pavel sat on the ground and waited. The sun had set, and it began to grow dark. The sky was dense with clouds: it grew darker and darker. Grandfather Pavel was getting worried, thinking of his sheep, when suddenly from the entrance to the cave there shone a light – a light so brilliant that the mountain side gleamed as if the sun were rising again, and all the birds that had been sleeping among the nearby trees and bushes woke up and began to sing.

The little yellow-grey lizard was coming out of the cave, and the light was shining from a pebble that she carried in her mouth.

The little lizard handed the glittering pebble to Grandfather Pavel and said, 'Take this, collect your sheep, and hurry home. When you get home tap the pebble on the ground and say, "Let there be this, that or the other" – whatever you need – and what you ask for shall be yours.'

Grandfather Pavel took the shining pebble – it was no bigger than a hazel nut. 'Yes,' he thought, 'it's very pretty.' And he thanked the little lizard, put the pebble in his pocket, went to collect his sheep, and drove them home.

There now, the sheep are in the pen, Puppy and Kitten are sitting on the step before the hut door, waiting to welcome Grandfather Pavel: Puppy wagging his tail, Kitten affectionately rubbing her soft body against Grandfather Pavel's leg. Grandfather Pavel pats one,

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strokes the other; goes into the hut, and takes the pebble out of his pocket.

My word, how that pebble glitters! It lights up the whole hut. Puppy and Kitten have to cover their eyes with their paws, lest they be blinded! And Grandfather Pavel says to himself, 'Why should I ask the pebble for anything more? To be sure I've got everything – a hut, nine sheep, and a puppy and a kitten, and now I've even got a light to eat my supper by. So, if you'll just keep on shining, my pebble, it seems to me that's all I require of you.'

So Grandfather Pavel eats his supper in great content. Then he begins to yawn. He's tired. He yawns and yawns. He undresses hastily, puts the pebble under his pillow, scrambles into bed, and immediately falls asleep.

Now he's dreaming about that pebble. In his dream the pebble has a voice, and it's calling out, 'Ask me for something! Why don't you ask me for something?'

Grandfather Pavel wakes and sits up. Rays of light from the pebble are flickering out from under the pillow. Grandfather Pavel takes the pebble in his hand, and says, 'Well then, what shall I ask you for? Something big, or something little? May as well go for something big whilst we're about it!'

So he gets out of bed, taps the pebble on the floor, and says, 'Now if you please, I'll ask you for a white stone palace.'

And hardly has Grandfather Pavel spoken those words than he feels a little jerk, as if an unseen hand had given him a gentle push. Now he's not in his hut, but in a wonderful white stone palace. The walls of the rooms are hung with mirrors in silver frames; there are ivory tables, there are chairs of pure gold, with silk-embroidered cushions plumped up with goose feathers to make them comfortable. And see, here is a bedroom fit for the emperor himself: cosy, warm, a fire in the grate, lighted candles in silver sconces, a shaded lamp burning on a table beside a bed with snowy-white sheets, soft blankets, and a magnificent eiderdown. And curled up at the bottom of the bed are Puppy and Kitten, Kitten purring loudly, and Puppy wagging his bit of a tail with a soft *thump, thump*, on a corner of the eiderdown.

'Well, well, little friends, we're in luck, it seems,' chuckles Grandfather Pavel. 'And since I find I'm still in my nightshirt, I've no more to do but to blow out these candles and get into bed. And as to what I'm going to wear tomorrow (for I don't see my clothes anywhere)

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I'm not bothering my head about that just now. For,' says he with a loud yawn, 'my wits are in a bit of a muddle with the strangeness of it all.'

So he blows out the candles, leaves the lamp burning on the bedside table, gets into bed, and with the pebble still in his hand, falls into a dreamless sleep.

He's woken in the morning by a tap at the door. Now the door opens and there's a soft sound of footsteps on the carpeted floor. He doesn't see anyone; all he does see is a cup of tea floating through the air, and setting itself down on the table by his bed.

'Very curious, but very welcome!' chuckles Grandfather Pavel, drinking down the tea, and nibbling a biscuit which he finds in the saucer. 'And what next, I wonder?'

What next are unseen hands bringing in a round bath, filling the bath with warm water, and a voice from some unseen person saying, 'The bath is ready, my lord, if it will please your lordship to rise.'

'Oh ho, oh ho,' chuckles Grandfather Pavel, getting out of bed, 'my lord, eh? Well, grandad or lordship – it's all one to me. But you don't expect me to go about in my nightshirt all day, I suppose?'

'My lord's raiment hangs on the chair back,' says the voice.

And so it did. Not Grandfather Pavel's old shirt and tattered trousers, but a satin shirt, a velvet tunic embroidered with jewels, elegant silk hose, and shoes with buckles of glittering gold.

So Grandfather Pavel is bathed and dressed by that unseen being with the quiet voice and the gentle hands. And then he is told that his breakfast is ready, and he follows those softly-sounding footsteps into a small, cosy breakfast room, where Puppy and Kitten are already waiting for him, perched on two high chairs at the table.

'Am I still dreaming, Puppy? Am I still dreaming, Kitten?' whispers Grandfather Pavel. 'I feel all in a daze.'

But Puppy and Kitten both assure him that he isn't dreaming. And certainly that breakfast proved real enough. Grandfather Pavel ate and ate. Puppy ate and ate. Kitten ate and ate. The food was delicious.

So, after they had eaten their fill, they all three strolled out into the gardens that surrounded the palace. Birds chirruped and sang, flowers lifted their pretty faces to the sun, and little breezes came and went, whispering among the leafy trees.

It was whilst he was strolling in the gardens that Grandfather Pavel had a visitor. It was a man called Ivan, who had been Grandfather

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Pavel's nearest neighbour when he lived in his hut among the mountains.

'Why, blow me down!' says Ivan. 'Here's strange goings on! To come to a palace, where never a palace stood before! And then in the palace gardens to come across you, neighbour Pavel, dressed up in fancy toggery – what's the meaning of it all? Have I gone mad, and do my eyes deceive me?'

'You've neither gone mad, nor do your eyes deceive you, neighbour Ivan,' chuckled Grandfather Pavel. 'It's just the old tale of one good turn deserves another. Though I must say my turn wasn't all *that* good. Nor did it deserve all it's brought me.'

And he told Ivan about the fire in the beech tree, and about how he had helped the little lizard out of the flames, and about the priceless pebble she had given him as a reward.

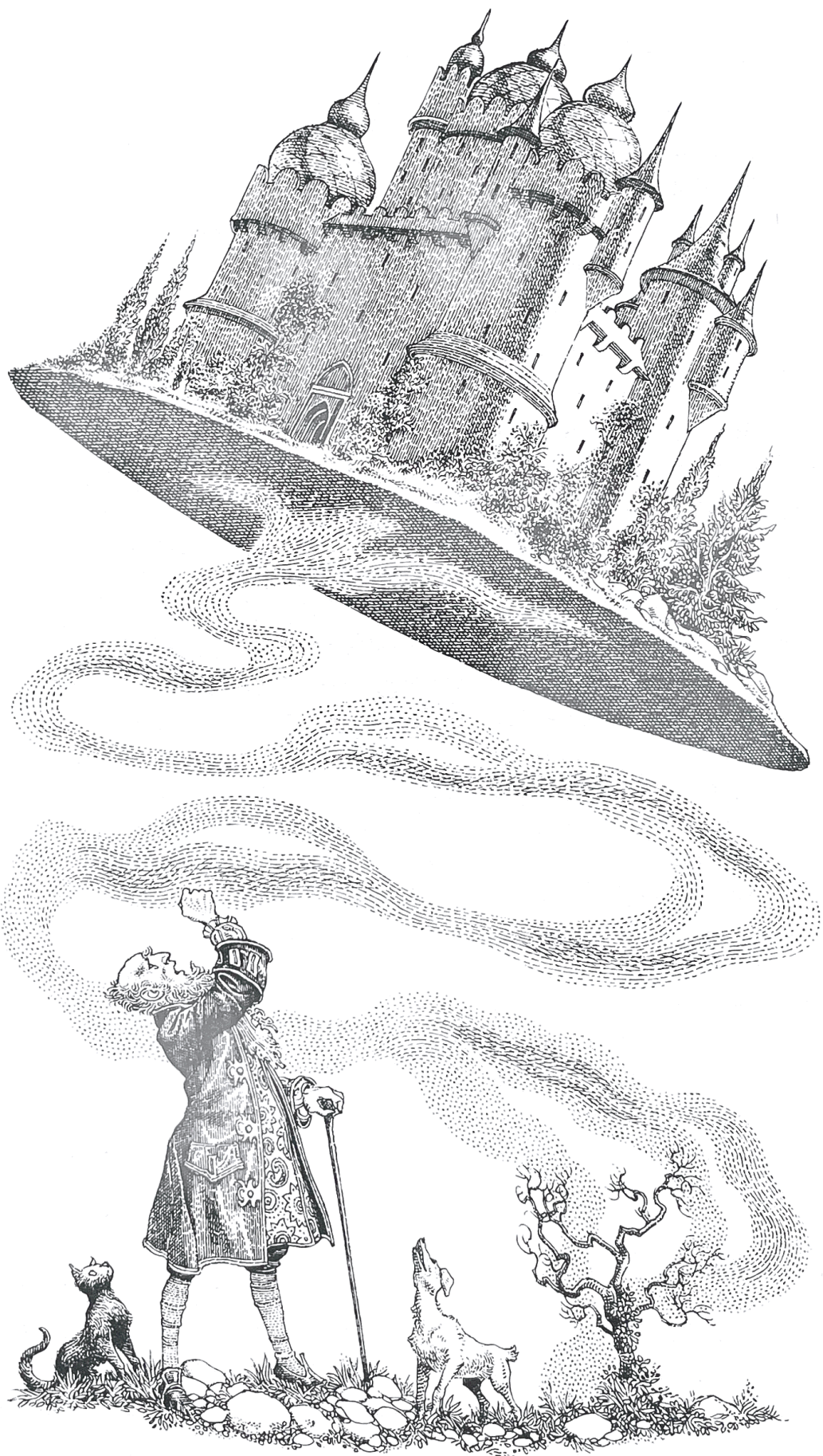
'That's a tale that takes some believing,' said Ivan. 'There's no pebble in the world can do all that!'

So then Grandfather Pavel takes the pebble out of his pocket, and says, 'Seeing's believing, isn't it? Here, tap the pebble on the ground and make a wish!'

Oh foolish, foolish Grandfather Pavel! You ought to know that neighbour Ivan, if not a bad man, is certainly not a good one. And you ought to know that you have put a great temptation into Ivan's hand. Ivan is no better than his ancestor Adam: he is tempted, and he falls. Tapping the pebble on the ground, Ivan cries out, 'Let me be inside the palace, and let the palace with its gardens and orchards be carried far, far away beyond the great river Danube, and let neighbour Pavel, with his puppy and his kitten be left standing here on barren ground!'

Hey presto! Up into the air rises the palace, and away and away sail palace, gardens, orchards, Ivan and all. And there is Grandfather Pavel standing on barren ground, shaking his fist and shouting; and there is Puppy howling, and Kitten wailing; and the priceless pebble and the palace gone, it seems forever and a day.

Gone? Yes, perhaps for many days, but no, not forever. Not if Puppy knows it, not if Kitten knows it! Puppy licks Grandfather Pavel's tear-blubbered face, as he now lies sobbing on the ground. Kitten rubs her soft little body against his listless hand. Don't despair, dear Grandfather Pavel! See now, these two brave little creatures are setting out to get back your priceless pebble for you! If they must go



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to the ends of the earth – well – to the ends of the earth they will go. ‘Goodbye, dear Grandfather Pavel! Keep up your heart, Grandfather Pavel! We, your faithful Puppy and your loving Kitten, will do or die in your service!’

And then and there they set out.

First they are running fast, and then they are running slowly, and then they are walking, for their little legs are aching, and their breath is going *ough, ough, ough!* But on they go and on. And now they have come to the great river Danube, and sit for a moment or two on the bank of the river to catch their breath. And Puppy pants out, ‘Can you swim?’ And Kitten shakes her head and whimpers, ‘No!’

So then gallant little Puppy takes Kitten on his back, and swims across the river. And after he has set Kitten down, and well shaken himself, on they go, and on they go, and on they go again.

The sun sets. Now the world is wrapt in twilight. Now twilight deepens into darkness. Now round and full the moon rises, driving the darkness away before her. And see, there, close at hand, all lit up in the moon’s rays, glitter the white walls of Grandfather Pavel’s great stone palace.

‘Hurrah!’ cries Puppy.

And ‘Hurrah!’ cries Kitten.

Yes, all very well to say ‘Hurrah!’ But how to get into the palace? The entrance door is fast locked, and the windows are shuttered. Puppy sits down and stares at the shuttered windows. He feels he wants to howl. Oh, how he wants to howl! And all dogs are allowed to howl at the moon, aren’t they? He flings back his head, he opens his mouth: ‘*Ow –*’

But Kitten’s claws are out, and she slaps Puppy across his open mouth with those claws; so Puppy quickly shuts his mouth again.

‘Fool!’ whispers Kitten. ‘Don’t you see an unshuttered open window up there under the eaves? And don’t you see a flowering green-leaved honeysuckle embracing the wall and growing up and up? And have you forgotten that I can climb? You wait here. I’ll soon get inside the palace – see if I don’t!’

So up the honeysuckle scrambles Kitten, and in through the open window with her. Now she is inside the palace. And certainly this must be Kitten’s lucky day; for she hears close at hand a loud *Kr-r-raw! kr-r-raw!* Somebody snoring! Yes, she is in that beautiful bedroom where she slept last night on the eiderdown of Grandfather Pavel’s

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bed. The shaded lamp burns on the table, and in the bed lies Ivan, asleep and snoring lustily. Ivan's right hand lies listlessly on the embroidered coverlet, and the fingers of the hand are curled round something. What is that something? Ha, ha! Kitten knows, because little rays of light are gleaming from between Ivan's fingers. Yes, it is the priceless pebble!

Now Kitten is on the bed. Lightly, oh so lightly, she is tickling Ivan's nose with the end of her tail.

A-tishoo! Ivan sneezes. *A-a-tishoo!* He sneezes again. But he doesn't open his eyes. He just lays the pebble on the coverlet and raises his right hand to brush away whatever it is that is tickling his nose. Kitten snatches up the pebble in her mouth, she is out of the window again before Ivan has finished rubbing his nose, she is scrambling down the honeysuckle, she is running to the waiting Puppy.

'Have you got it?' whispers Puppy.

Kitten nods. There is a light shining out between her teeth. But she can't open her mouth to speak, lest she drop the pebble. Now they are both scampering off on the way back to Grandfather Pavel, as fast as they can go. And if they ever felt tired, they have forgotten it, so great is their excitement and their joy at the thought that they are bringing back that priceless pebble to dear old Grandfather Pavel.

So on they run until they come to the shore of the great river Danube. Now it is Puppy's turn to feel proud of himself: because of course, without his help, Kitten, who still holds the magic pebble in her mouth couldn't get across the river.

'Up on my back!' pants Puppy.

So Kitten scrambles on to Puppy's back, and into the rushing water plunges the gallant Puppy.

They have almost reached the opposite bank when a thought strikes Puppy. 'You're sure you've still got that pebble safe, Kitten? You haven't dropped it?'

What an idea! Kitten is indignant. She opens her mouth to say, 'Of course I've got it!'. . . And oh, alas, alas, the pebble drops from her mouth into the rushing waters of the Danube.

What to do now? The two little creatures reach the bank. They sit down on the bank and cry. The pebble is gone forever! How can they go back to Grandfather Pavel with their sad story? Puppy howls and blames Kitten. Kitten sobs and blames Puppy. A fisherman with rod and line comes strolling by. 'What are you crying for?' he says.

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How can they tell him? Puppy is the first to speak. He has thought of an excuse. 'We – we're hungry,' he sobs.

The fisherman feels sorry for them. He casts his line into the water. Soon there comes a *tug-tug* on the line. He has caught a fish – a carp. He draws in his line, unhooks the carp, throws it down before the two unhappy little animals. 'There,' says he, 'you gobble that up, and don't cry any more.'

Puppy and Kitten whimper their thanks. True, they *are* hungry. And though no food of any kind is going to lighten their grief, they may as well eat the food that is given them. They carry the carp away behind a clump of willows, and settle down to their meal. . . Oh glory, glory, and again glory! What do they find in the carp's stomach? What but the magic pebble!

And so it is two of the happiest little creatures in the world that hurry off on the rest of their journey, and bring the priceless pebble back to Grandfather Pavel.

They find Grandfather Pavel where they had left him – in the same lonely spot. But now he is not standing up and shaking his fist and shouting. He is sitting on the ground with his hands before his face. Now and then his body is shaken by a sob. And now and then a tear trickles out from between those poor old hands.

But tears give way to smiles, and sobs to happy laughter, when a triumphant Kitten puts the priceless pebble into Grandfather Pavel's hand.

Now, each one interrupting the other, an excited Kitten, and a no less excited Puppy, tell their story. And when the story is told, Grandfather Pavel taps the pebble on the ground and shouts at the top of his voice, 'Let Ivan be put in a sack, and let the sack be brought here!'

Hey presto! *Bump, bump, bump!* There is the sack bouncing down at Grandfather Pavel's feet. And there is Ivan in the sack.

Grandfather Pavel looks at Ivan gravely. 'I could order you to be beaten black and blue, Ivan,' says he. 'But that, though it might ease my feelings for the moment, would do no lasting good to either of us. So,' says he, tapping the pebble on the ground again, 'away with you, Ivan, sack and all, to the ends of the earth. And there may you be loosed from the sack, and do your best to live honestly, if such grace be given you.'

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Hey presto! There goes the sack, carrying Ivan up into the air, and sailing away and away, until it is lost to sight.

‘And now, my little darlings, my hero Puppy and my heroine Kitten,’ says Grandfather Pavel, ‘what next? I don’t know how you feel about it, but it seems to me that we were happier in our hut than in that plaguey white stone palace. I’m too old to learn new ways. And to be washed and dressed up in fine clothes by folk I can’t see isn’t exactly to my liking. Nor is it to my liking to sit at table and be waited on by unseen hands. Might as well be living with a pack of ghosts! I reckon we were all three happier in our hut – and oh deary, deary me, to think of my poor sheep shut up all this time in their crowded pen, when they should be nibbling the good green grass out on the hills! So, my chickabiddies, don’t you think it would be wise of me just to wish ourselves home again?’

‘Oh yes!’ cried Puppy. And ‘Oh yes!’ cried Kitten. ‘Let’s go home!’

So Grandfather Pavel struck the glittering golden pebble on the ground, and shouted, ‘Take us home!’

Hey presto! Next moment there they are, all three, back inside the little hut among the mountains.

Grandfather Pavel is laughing, Kitten is purring, Puppy is giving little yaps of joy. The sheep are bleating loudly in the pen, and Grandfather Pavel hurries to let them out. Now they are grazing once more on the good green grass among the hills; Grandfather Pavel is sitting down to a breakfast of eggs and bacon, Kitten is lapping up a saucerful of milk, Puppy is gnawing a juicy bone.

‘This is something like!’ says Grandfather Pavel, speaking with his mouth full. ‘It’s an old saying, my darlings, and it’s a true one, “There’s no place like home!” ’