

The Three Princes of Serendip

By B. Walpole as rewritten by Richard Eyre

Long, long ago in a land far off, at the very end of the earth a land called Serendip there lived a great and wise king named Jafer. Serendip was a resplendent island where tall trees grew on emerald mountains.

King Jafer had three sons. When each was born, a strange and beautiful bird with golden wings and eyes like fire dipped low out of the sky, but was seen only by a handful of children near the ancient peak of Great Serenity.

The King wanted to prepare his sons well so that they could someday become good rulers of Serendip. He wanted them to learn three things: 1. Virtue, 2. Science, and 3. Wisdom. Being a wise man himself, he asked even wiser men and women, both of his own country and of other lands, to come and teach his sons.

But few teachers would come from other countries because the ocean that surrounded Serendip was filled with great dragons sea monsters who attacked ships with their sharp claws and slapped holes in them with their long, whipping tails. The teachers who did come from other lands were therefore filled with courage as well as knowledge.

The three princes were good students. Their teachers taught them much virtue, science, and wisdom ... as well as grammar, languages, poetry, and music. They also taught the management and handling of elephants the most important and useful animal in Serendip.

When they were no longer boys but young men, King Jafer decided to interview them (and to test them) one at a time. To the eldest prince he said, "I want you now to be king," holding his own crown over the boy's head. The prince noticed that his father's fingers held the crown very tightly, and he said, "With respect father, I decline. I am not yet prepared to rule."

When the middle prince came in, the King got up off his throne and offered the magnificent chair to the son, saying that it was time for a new king. The prince noticed that the King's voice was strong and clear and told him that he was still a great and able king and could rule yet for many years.

Then the King sent for the youngest prince and asked him to be king. The young prince noticed the sparkle in the King's eyes and knew it was a test. "Oh, no, great King. I am yet a boy and your eyes are still clear and your mind strong."

King Jafer was pleased each of his sons had wisdom and modesty. He decided to complete their education by sending them abroad, for he knew that until they had seen other parts of the earth they would not realize how many good people there are in the world, or how many good ideas, or how many different ways there are of thinking, of living, and of being.

He called them to him and said: "My beloved sons, the Ancients have said that the mists of yesteryear were marvelously distilled into a magic formula, written in one hundred lines of verse upon a single scroll. The formulapoem is called Death to Dragons, and from it a liquid potion can be made which, when poured into the oceans, will poison and kill the dragons that surround our island. I send you forth to find Death to Dragons. Do not return until you find it or until you have my permission to come home.

The three princes, wearing plain clothing and riding unadorned elephants (for they felt they would learn more if they could not be recognized as princes)

set off on their journey. As they started their trek to the ocean... they noticed, more than ever before, the beauty of Serendip. They knew they would miss their home and their father, but they were determined to find Death to Dragons.

The journey across the ocean to India was a dangerous one, but the princes found a large and fast boat and made it safely across. During the journey they saw several of the ugly and ferocious sea dragons riding on the waves.

On the other side, the princes began to ask questions and to search for anyone who knew of the formula for Death to Dragons. They were extremely good at asking questions and they did so in such a polite and fair spoken way that people were naturally inclined to like them and to try to help them. They were sent to an old sage who had heard of an ageold, one hundred line poem. "There is only one copy in all the world," he told them. "An ancient seer called Aphoenicius guards it and carries it in a silver cylinder. He has a hundred disguises and is at times invisible. He never stays in one place for more than one night."

"Have you ever seen Aphoenicius?" asked the eldest prince.

"He stayed with me one night," said the sage "and because you are so courteous and because I believe you seek the poem for a noble purpose, I will tell you what I know. At night Aphoenicius spoke in his sleep and said what I believe to be two lines from the magic verse:

"Though the treasure saline be,

You will not scoop it from the sea."

The princes wrote down the lines, thanked the sage, and continued their journey.

They entered the land of Persia which was ruled by the powerful King Behrarn and purchased camels to cross the desert. Eventually they passed a caravan and were asked by the caravan master if they had seen a camel that had been lost. The eldest prince said, "No, we have seen no camel but may I ask you did your camel have only one eye?"

"Yes," said the master. "Then you have seen him."

"No," said the eldest, "we saw no camel. But did the one you lost have a tooth missing from the front of his mouth?"

"Yes," said the master. "You are joking with me. Show me where my camel is."

"We've not seen it," repeated the first prince, "but did it have a lame hind leg?"

With that, the caravan master, convinced that these young men had stolen his camel, had them arrested and brought to court.

King Behrarn, hearing of the case and finding it interesting, decided to sit in judgment personally. The three princes were not allowed to speak but there were many witnesses who had heard the eldest prince describe the camel completely, and thus it appeared that they must be guilty. Regretfully (because the young men were polite and upright) the King sentenced them to die as the law demanded. But Behrarn was a good king, inclined toward leniency, and

offered to pardon them if they would return the camel. The princes could only repeat that they had never seen the camel.

Just then a great bird with golden wings and shining eyes swooped low in the sky. Only one old woman saw it, but immediately afterward the lost camel's owner burst into the courtroom saying that his neighbor had found the camel and begged forgiveness for his false accusation of the three princes.

King Behram, embarrassed by his improper judgment and impressed with the three brothers (who had never revealed their identity as princes) invited them to his castle and asked them to explain how they knew so much about a camel they had never seen.

The eldest prince graciously did so:

"Where we saw tracks, we noticed the grass was nibbled on only one side of the road so we knew the camel had lost an eye. Along the road we noticed partly chewed bits of grass and concluded that the camel was dropping them through the gap of a missing tooth. And in the tracks themselves, we saw evidence of a dragging rear leg. We know even more than we told, King. We know that the camel carried butter and honey. We noticed ants, which seek after fat on the left of the road, and flies which seek after sweet on the right."

Delighted and even more impressed, King Behram invited them to stay at his palace for a time. They agreed to do so, and continued to ask everyone they met about the old man with shining eyes who carried the formula for Death to Dragons. Because they were so friendly, and because their motive in wanting the formula was unselfish and altruistic (to save their island from fierce sea dragons), everyone wanted to help them, but few had heard of old Aphoenicius and his silver cylinder.

One evening at a dinner attended by several of King Behram's ministers and viziers, the three princes were sitting together and, as they often did, discussing their feelings and observations. The eldest said that he sensed that the wine they were drinking came from a vineyard that grew on a sepulcher or cemetery. The youngest prince said he felt that the mutton they were eating came from a lamb that had been raised and suckled by a dog rather than a ewe sheep. The middle brother said that he wished his own feeling was as harmless as these, but alas, it was not. He perceived that one particular Vizier, seated there in the dining room, was plotting to take the life of King Behram.

The King, sitting across the table, heard his name mentioned and insisted that the three princes tell him their entire conversation. When they had done so, King Behram asked them how they were able to perceive such things, and they told him that it was by what they observed and by what they felt. The first prince, for example, told him that he had experienced a peculiar and sad feeling as he tasted the wine and then had glimpsed a vineyard cemetery in his mind. The third prince explained that the mutton tasted slightly unusual and put him somehow in mind of a dog. The second brother said he had noticed one of the viziers change color as the King had spoken earlier of punishing the guilty and that the Vizier's eyes, full of maliciousness and indignation, had not left the King since.

The next day, King Behram checked the accuracy of the princes' feelings. He summoned the wine master who confirmed that the wine had come from a vineyard planted over a sepulcher. He summoned the shepherd who told him a story of how a wolf had killed a ewe sheep leaving a tiny lamb which had been suckled and raised by the shepherd's dog. And, in checking court records, he found that the angry Vizier had a son who had been banished from the country in punishment for a crime. Amazed and impressed, the King went to the three princes to ask their advice on how to discover or escape from the Vizier's plot

revenge. The second son said he had observed that the Vizier had a lady friend to whom he probably revealed his plans.

King Behram located the lady, befriended her and flattered her with promises of gifts and positions, and she told him of the Vizier's plot which involved presenting a jeweled cup to the King at the next state dinner and then proposing a toast to his health. The jeweled cup was to contain poison.

When the night of the dinner came, and the Vizier presented the jeweled cup, the King said, "So much feeling comes with the cup that I cannot accept it until you drink from it first." In horror the Vizier said, "I am fallen into a misfortune which I had prepared for others." King Behram, urged by his ministers to put the traitor to death, insisted on consulting first with the three princes. They advised him to show compassion and to imagine how he would feel if he had a son and if his son, like the Vizier's, had been banished. Thus the King adopted an attitude of empathy and arranged for the Vizier to be banished rather than executed. Banished to the same land where his son had previously been sent.

Before his banishment, the repentant Vizier went to the three princes to voice his gratitude. In their conversation, the princes asked if he had any knowledge of the ancient sage with shining eyes who carried the secret of Death to Dragons. The Vizier recalled once spending a night in an inn with such a man, who in his sleep had muttered a portion of a verse so curious that the Vizier had committed it to memory:

"And often from the sight is hidden
Such magic not by self-love bidden."

For saving his life, King Behram offered the princes any three wishes he could grant. They replied that their only wish was to serve him well and to be his friends.

Shortly thereafter, King Behram called the three brothers to his side to ask them a great favor. "When my grandfather was king," he explained, "he possessed the great 'Mirror of justice' which had the power to reflect both truth and false hood. Whenever there was a dispute in the land, the two arguing or opposing parties were made to look into the mirror. The right or truthful party was reflected as he was, but the wrong or dishonest person was reflected in the mirror with a face of dark purple. The guilty party could return to his former complexion only if he went down into a deep pit for 40 days with only bread and water and then came forth and confessed his error to everyone. Because of the mirror there was justice in the land. People dealt with each other fairly and thus grew prosperous and happy."

The three princes listened attentively and with great fascination. (Indeed, listening was among their greatest skills.) The King explained that his father and his uncle had fought over the throne after his grandfather's death. When his father won the battle and became king, the uncle, in bitterness, had stolen the Mirror of Justice, taken it to the far coast of India and sold it to a young king.

The mirror did not reflect justice when it was taken out of Persia, but the Indian king who purchased it found that it did something else, also of great value. In his kingdom, a large and terrible five fingered hand rose from the ocean's horizon each morning and hung ominously in the sky all day. In the evening it suddenly descended, grabbed a man from the city or the shore, and hurled him into the sea. The Indian king discovered that, when the mirror was held up to reflect the hand, it changed its behavior, grabbing a cow or dog or some other animal each day to cast into the sea instead of a man.

King Behram explained that a young queen now ruled the Indian kingdom a daughter of the king who bought the mirror. King Behram said that he had petitioned her to return the mirror, but she had steadfastly refused except on condition that someone succeed in destroying or disposing of the hand. "Now," said King Behram, "with my great confidence in you three brothers, I am asking you to go and conquer the hand and then to bring the Mirror of justice back to me."

Without any plan or foreknowledge of what they would do, but with faith in their own ingenuity and in the power that seemed to guide them, the three princes accepted the challenge of the King. They also hoped that at the far coast of India they could find further clues in their quest for Death to Dragons. After brief preparations, they took their leave.

After seeing them off, King Behram. walked back to his palace, noticing with great joy the beauty of the fields and forests around him and the rich color and textures of the baskets and rugs made by the townspeople of the villages he passed. He stopped along the way to pray for the welfare and success of his three young friends and thus found himself following their example and their advice to be both watchful' and prayerful.

A few days later a merchant, knowing of the King's great love for music, came to the palace exhibiting before King Behram some instruments and musical treasures brought from far off lands. In the merchant's company was a young woman of such appealing grace and beauty that the King could not take his eyes from her. Inquiring, he was told that she was Dfliramma, a young woman of unknown origin who the traders had found as a small girl, abandoned in the forest, dressed in blue silk and wearing a curious necklace of tiny interlocking silver crowns. The merchant had adopted her as a foster daughter. The King, somewhat overwhelmed by her beauty, said to the merchant, "She is not of the number who has need of ornaments to set herself off. Rather, the ornaments have need of her to make them more bright and glittering."

Only then was the King informed that Diliramma was also a singer. She was summoned and sang before the King in a way that filled him with rapture so that he could only say, "You have equally charmed both my eyes and my ears."

Unsurprisingly, the King offered to make her the palace musician and to give her sumptuous apartments in the palace. The merchant, pleased at his foster daughter's good fortune, quickly agreed.

In the days that followed, King Behram was in bliss, hunting in the royal woods by day and listening each evening to Diliramma's songs.

One morning he invited her to go on a hunt with him. She agreed, and off they went with a hundred servants, riding the great royal elephants. Most of those who surrounded the King were "yes men" quick to agree with him and striving to say to him only what he wanted to hear. But Dihamma was different, joking and laughing and saying exactly what she truly thought and felt.

After observing the hunt for a time, she gave King Behram a challenge. "I would like," she said, "to see you pierce both the hoof and the ear of a deer with a single arrow."

Great marksman though he was, the King thought the task was impossible... until he remembered the attitude of the three princes who always said there was a creative way to do everything. He thought for a moment, then shot an arrow that grazed and tickled the deer's ear. The deer lifted his hind leg to scratch his ear and as it did, the King let fly another arrow which pierced the

deer's ear and its hoof. The courtiers and servants cheered and clapped, not only for the King's skill but for his stratagem; but Dilaramma winked and said, "You have deceived both the deer and myself and succeeded only through a trick." In sudden silence, all eyes were turned to Dilaramma and the King, whose face turned red with embarrassment and temper. He was not used to anyone joking with him or being critical in any way. On impulse and anger he had her stripped of her cloak and instructed his guards to leave her in the deepest part of the forest.

When the king arrived back at the palace, he realized what he had done, and inside of him a great conflict occurred between anger and love. Love said, "What sir, ought you, for an indiscretion, for a trifle, to treat so cruelly the most beautiful person in the world? Bring her back!" Anger replied, "No, you cannot resent this indignity too much! If you recall her, will you not be thought like the weathercock which turns with every wind?"

Recognizing the truth of the first voice, King Behram sent all of his guards to find and bring back Dilaramma. But they returned at nightfall, reporting that she was nowhere to be found. Imagining that she had been eaten by a wild beast, the King felt the terrible burden of guilt. He became very ill, and as days passed, his condition grew steadily worse.

In the meantime, the three princes were experiencing a very challenging journey to the far coasts of India in their quest to find and recover the Mirror of Justice. They reached a wide river which was the boundary of the coastal kingdom. On their side of the river was an ancient monastery on the steep rocky hillside that faced the river. The Abbot in charge was impressed with the polite behavior of the three princes but became very concerned when they told him of their quest to vanquish the great hand and recover the magic mirror. He told them of a demon who lived underground in the forest on the opposite bank of the river a demon who took delight in protecting the great hand and who could look up through the cracks in the earth and see the intent in men's eyes. "If he sees intent to fight or destroy the hand," said the Abbot, "the underearth demon pushes the ground up, causing trees to fall and boulders to roll, knocking the men from their horses and either burying them or swallowing them into deep earth cracks."

The third prince, always full of courage, said he would cross alone to test the danger. He hired a boat and crossed the river, but just as he stepped to the shore the ground began to heave. Huge stones tumbled in his direction and tall forest trees fell toward him. He scrambled back into the boat and paddled back out into the river just in time.

The other two princes watched from the opposite bank, frightened and confused by what they saw. They pulled their brother to safety and all three returned to the monastery where they asked the Abbot if there was any way to get past the demon.

The Abbot told them of the monastery's great library and said he believed that most every answer could be found in books. For the next several days the Abbot and the three princes researched and studied. At last they found an ancient passage that reminded the princes of the verses in *Death to Dragons*. It said:

"One feather from a peacock's tail

In wisdom's hand may oft prevail."

Since it was the best they could find, the Abbot presented each of the three princes with a beautiful peacock's tail feather and said, "It is possible to follow even a clouded or dark saying part of the way."

Not feeling that they could wait any longer, the princes hired a boat and set out to cross the river, hoping that something in their sagacity or intuition would help them get past the under earth demon. They made the river crossing in silence, each searching his mind for a strategy. Just as they neared the other bank, the middle prince noticed that his peacock feather had dots on it that looked like blue eyes. "Let me go first," he said, "I have an idea." He climbed from the boat, holding his feather over his eyes like a mask. He could see through the feather's tiny cracks, but the underworld demon saw only the flat, blue eyes of the peacock feather and could not see the intent in the prince's real eyes. The earth remained still and calm. The other princes followed his example, and all passed through the forest safely.

On the other side they found the coastal kingdom and met the young Queen who dazzled them with her beauty and courtesy and who quickly agreed that they should have the Mirror of Justice if they could conquer the evil hand.

That evening the Queen took them to the seacoast where they saw, low in the Eastern sky, a huge suspended hand. As the sun set, the hand swooped toward the beach. As it did, one of the Queen's guards held up the Mirror of justice. The hand changed direction, grabbed a milk cow from the nearby field, and hurled it far out into the ocean.

The following morning the three brothers went to the seacoast and observed the frightening spectacle of the great fivefingered hand rising in the sky just beneath the sun and then stopping to hang there in the Eastern sky. The day wore on, and still the princes could develop no plan of action. just as evening fell, a golden winged bird with shining eyes flew silently overhead. Only the youngest prince noticed. Then without warning, he stepped out onto the beach and asked the guard to lay the mirror aside. As he did, the sun set and the hand suddenly swept down directly toward the youngest prince. As the huge hand came closer with all five of its fingers extended, the young prince held up his own right hand with two fingers extended and the others curled together. Immediately, the hand veered off its course and plunged into the sea, sinking to the depths like a stone. The other two princes rushed to their brother who explained that it had come to him that the hand's message was that five men, perfectly united in an evil cause, could destroy the world. His response was that two people, perfectly united in worthy purpose, could overcome all evil and master the universe.

The young Queen, who had watched the drama, rushed forward, congratulating the young prince and exclaiming, "Everywhere, true courage meets with quick respect." He repeated to her the message his two fingers had sent to the hand that two people, perfectly united, could overcome all evil in the universe.

The Queen quickly kept her end of the bargain by giving the three princes the Mirror of Justice. She begged them to stay at her palace for a day or two before returning to King Behram and they consented.

That evening, as they celebrated the demise of the hand at a great palace party, the princes noticed that the Queen, despite her joy in her country's deliverance from the hand, still had a look of sadness that occasionally showed in her dark and lovely eyes. Later, when the other guests had left, the princes asked her to share her hidden sorrow.

She told them that she had once had an elder sister called Padmini who had been her best friend. As they had played together one afternoon, years ago when they were both small children frolicking together in their blue silk dresses and their interlocking crown princess necklaces, a fierce nomadic tribe had charged them on horseback and stolen away Padmini. Guards had pursued the

kidnappers and finally caught them three days later. But by then the evil men, hoping to escape the guards, had left Padmini in a dense forest. She had never been found.

Deeply touched, the eldest prince said, "As a vine bowed with the weight of grapes, we are honored to share your grief."

The three princes then told the Queen of their quest for Death to Dragons and asked if she had ever seen or heard of the old sage called Aphoenicius, the keeper of the silver cylinder.

After a moment's thought, the Queen recalled a strange but kind man with shining eyes who had whispered to her a short verse shortly after her sister Padmini had been taken.

"One may seek but cannot borrow
This mystery lying close to sorrow."

The princes did not understand the verse, but wrote down the words with the other clues they had collected and, leaving with the Queen their fondest wishes and best regards, departed the next morning to carry the prized Mirror of justice back to King Behram.

As was their practice, the princes tried to notice everything and to learn all they could during their journey. On their way, they came to a small village and decided to spend the night there. They made friends with several of the villagers and were introduced to the village chief. As they talked, they noticed the worry and anxiety in his face and asked if there was any help or assistance they could give. The chief told them of a rumor that Drakir, the three headed serpent, had broken loose from his cage high on the top of Prison Mountain. Drakir had been captured and imprisoned many generations before by the people of this very village by the ancestors of the chief and the other villagers who now told the tale of his escape to the three princes.

"The high Prison Mountain is very far away and if Drakir truly has escaped, it will take some time for him to come. But we must get word to King Behram, for Drakir will surely go there first to get the Standard of Power." They explained that when the ancients had captured Drakir, their leader had been a blacksmith. His leather apron was thought to possess magic. It was called the "Standard of Power" and was kept at the king's palace. "If Drakir gets the Standard," said the village chief, "he will become even more powerful; he will be unstoppable and will take control of all the land."

The three princes told the chief that they were on the way to the King's palace and would extend the warning and would safeguard the Standard. "Before we go," said the eldest, "is there any more you can tell us of Drakir?" The chief said that their warning of Drakir's escape had come from a strange, elderly traveler with shining eyes who had stayed only one night and had said that the dragon could be overcome only if his three long necks could be somehow twisted together into a great single chord. This would take away his strength. Once his strength was diminished, the great imperial bird, Simurgh, a bird with feathers the color of sky, grass, and sunset, would carry him back to his mountain prison.

Recognizing that the old traveler must have been Aphoenicius, the three princes asked where he had gone. The chief said that no one had seen him leave, but some children had seen a bird with golden wings and shining eyes fly from the house where the old man had slept.

In gratitude and friendship the princes left their peacock feathers with the village, instructing the chief to send one of the feathers by runner to the King's palace if trouble ever came to the village. The princes promised that the moment they received one of the feathers, they would rush to the rescue. After making this promise, they set off at a quick pace to return to King Behram.

When the three princes arrived back at King Behrarn's palace, they were shocked at how very ill the King had become. He lay on his back, white as ash, and could not even lift his head in greeting. The princes, who had been so anxious to present the King with the recovered Mirror of Justice and to warn him of the dragon Drakir's escape, were suddenly concerned only for the King's life and health.

In a feeble voice King Behrarn told them of Diliramma of his deep love for her, and of his terrible and angry mistake in leaving her in the woods to die. His guilt and his grief were too deep, he said, and he felt now that he would die.

Quickly the princes presented him with the great mirror, hoping it would lift the weight and gloom from the King. He was pleased, and a tiny flush of color returned to his cheeks, but still he did not lift his head.

Searching for other ways to brighten the King's spirits, the three princes decided to reveal their true identity, knowing that their father was a friend of King Behrarn. The King managed a slight smile and said he had known that the princes were of noble birth and had received wise tutoring. "Give my regards to your father," he said, "for unless I can overcome this heavy grief I will soon be gone."

Deeply concerned, the three princes went on a long walk together trying to create an idea that would restore the King's spirits. The eldest said, "Finding a remedy for an affliction of the heart is not so easy as finding a stray camel or uncovering an ugly plot or facing a fearsome hand."

All night they walked and talked. In the morning they went to the King with an idea: "In the seven most spectacular locations in your kingdom, build seven splendid castles. Into each castle put a beautiful princess a daughter of a neighboring king. Also bring the seven best storytellers in the land and put one in each castle. Use your great wealth and resources to do all of this quickly. Then for one glorious week go to a separate castle each day, first conversing with and getting to know each princess, then listening to the best story of the storyteller."

The idea amused King Behram. and took his mind off his own misery. Though still flat on his back, he called in his ministers and started the projects immediately.

Now able to think of something besides the King, the princes turned their attention to the danger of the three headed serpent. They had not told the sick King of the danger, but they used the authority he had given them to have the Standard of Power attached to the very top of the high flagpole in the center courtyard of the palace. The pole was very hard and stout, made of ebony wood. There at the top of the pole, they reasoned, the Standard of Power would be high out of Drakir's reach and in a place where they could keep an eye on it.

The King's engineers constructed the seven palaces in record time, and the King's ambassadors arranged for the seven most beautiful princesses and the seven most creative storytellers to occupy them. The day was set for the King to start his week of visits.

On the night before the King's journey, the three princes sat together discussing their increasing hopes for the King's recovery and their decreasing

hopes that they would ever find Death to Dragons. The youngest prince glanced out of the window into the moonlit courtyard and gasped as his eyes fell on a fearsome sight. There was Drakir, smoke coming from his three mouths, all six evil little eyes staring up at the Standard of Power high on the ebony pole. As the princes watched from the window, Drakir first tried to burn the pole with a blast of fire from his three red throats. But the thick, hard ebony pole didn't burn well and the dragon became impatient. Grasping high up on the pole with one mouth, lower with a second, and biting the bottom of the pole with his third mouth, Drakir used his awesome strength to pull the pole right out of the ground.

At that exact moment the princes noticed a fleeting opportunity to do something they had thought would be impossible. They jumped from the window; the eldest grabbed the great dragon's tail and held fast while the middle and youngest princes each seized one end of the long flagpole and ran around in a great circle, twisting the three snakelike necks together as the three heads continued to hold fast to the pole in defiant anger.

As the necks twisted into one great chord, the dragon's strength drained away and the princes were able to bind the heads together so that the necks could not come untwisted.

When they had done so, just as Aphoenicius had promised, an enormous imperial bird with wings of blue, green, and rose, swept out of the night sky, snatched the weakened dragon in his sharp talons, and flew away with him toward the prison place on the distant high mountain.

The next morning, right on schedule, King Behram was carried (still unable to walk) to the first of seven castles, which was nestled in a high mountain meadow. The beauty of the place, and the enchantment of the lovely princess who greeted him, lifted his spirits as the three princes had predicted. And the storyteller's tale, later in the evening, was so exciting and engrossing that the King lifted his head from his pillow and began to forget his grief and feel some will to live. By the end of the day the King had regained enough strength to sit up in his bed.

Each castle, each princess, and each storyteller through the days of the week was better than the one before, and by the time he reached the seventh castle, the King was able to stand and walk, and some of the light had returned to his eyes.

The three princes had decided to meet the King at the seventh castle, but as they journeyed toward it, they were overtaken by a messenger bearing a peacock feather. Knowing that this was the distress signal from their friends in the small village, they changed course immediately and made haste toward the village, which was a distance of a few days' journey.

When they finally arrived, they beheld great disaster. Fire had burned the village to the ground. They found the old chief who told them that several days ago the villagers had looked up to see the great imperial bird flying over, carrying Drakir toward Prison Mountain. Drakir's evil eyes had seen the village and even in his weakened condition he was able to belch out enough fire from his nostrils as he passed overhead to touch off fire in the village. Strong winds had fanned the flames and the village had been destroyed.

Seeing the misery and the suffering of their friends and brothers, the three princes wept.

"Was any life lost?" asked the eldest.

"Only two people are missing," said the chief, "and neither was a permanent resident of our village. One was the old man with shining eyes who had come again to stay for a single night. The other was a young woman with a beautiful voice whom some villagers had found wandering lost and dazed in the forest some weeks ago. The girl would answer no questions about her identity, but the village nursed her back to health and she had favored them with her lovely singing."

Realizing that the two who were lost were the very two people they most wanted to find, the princes, after doing all they could for the village, prepared to depart in sorrow, intent on returning to check on King Behram.

As they left the village, the princes paused to look again at the desolation. As they thought about the villagers who had lost their homes they wept once again, their tears collecting in a hollow on the large boulder where they stood.

When they looked up, ready to begin their journey, their eyes fell upon a shocking sight. There, near a stream bed in a fireblackened field, was the charred body of a man, burned beyond recognition except for his right forearm and hand which was untouched by fire and which tightly clutched a silver cylinder.

"The keeper of the potion has been killed," they exclaimed, "and though his death brings deep sadness the magic formula will now be ours!"

The eldest pulled the cylinder from the fingers and walked down by the stream with his brothers to open it. But, alas, only ashes fell from the cylinder. Only small fragments of the scroll were unburned. The only readable lines were:

Though the treasure saline be
You will not scoop it from the sea.

And often from the sight is hidden
Such magic not by self love bidden.

One feather from a peacock's tail
In wisdom's hand may oft prevail.

One may seek but cannot borrow
This mystery lying close to sorrow.

"After so great a search, we have found only the lines we already know," exclaimed the middle prince. "It was a hundred lines and it is lost forever," said the eldest, casting the cylinder aside.

At that moment they heard a sound up on the bank near where Aphoenicius's burned body lay. Looking up, they saw the ashes stir, and a bird with golden wings and shining eyes rose from the spot. As they watched, the bird swooped down next to them and snatched the silver cylinder from the ground at their feet and carried it in flight to the great boulder where the princes had rested and wept. To their amazement, the bird began scooping up their tears into the silver cylinder. Then it flew off into the East like an eagle.

The princes, perplexed by the bird and saddened that their own quest had ended, continued their journey. Several miles further on they heard screams coming from a wooded valley beneath the trail. Rushing down they caught glimpse of a girl racing through the trees, chased by a bear. Their shouts succeeded in scaring the bear off and they rushed to the frightened girl. Thanking them, she explained that she was a homeless girl who had been kindly cared for by the villagers. After their great loss of homes and food in the fire, however, she felt she would be too much of a burden so she had left, sneaking away unseen.

The princes asked her if her name was Diliramma and as her eyes widened with apprehension, they assured her that King Behram loved her and had almost died from the grief and guilt of his anger which he thought had cost her life.

Overcome with joy, she told the princes that she was Diliramma but that her real name was unknown to her. In gratitude for the saving of her life, she gave them a gift from around her neck, a small and intricate necklace, made from tiny interlocking crowns.

With great excitement, the princes told her that they now knew her true name. Diliramma (or Padmini by her rightful name) could hardly believe that she had now discovered her sister, her own true name, and the fact that King Behram loved her and wanted her back.

The journey back to the King was pure joy for Padmini. For the princes, there were mixed feelings. They were happy to have helped so many, yet sad about the failure of their own quest.

As they approached his palace, King Behram came forward to meet them. The joy he felt when he saw that Diliramma (Padmini) was with them was so intense that even the birds were silent.

In his joy, King Behram found great compassion. He sent the engineers who built his seven castles to assist in rebuilding the burned village, and he had the food and provisions from the castles removed and taken to the village. He sent word to the young Queen of the coastal kingdom that her sister had been found and was to become his wife... and invited her and all her entourage to come for the wedding and for a long visit.

To make happy endings even happier, the seven princesses in the seven castles married the seven storytellers who thus became noblemen and kings.

The three princes were filled with joy for so many, but because their own quest had failed, their hearts felt like "plump walnuts bored by hungry worms." But the next day, their spirits were lifted by the arrival of a messenger from their own kingdom informing them that their father now wished them to return.

Joyfully and obediently they said their goodbyes and set out on their return journey. King Behram wrote a letter for them to carry to their father. The letter said that the princes brought to his kingdom and to his life "a state of splendor and perfect tranquility."

The princes made great haste until they got to the ocean. They found it so infested with the sea dragons that there were no more boatmen and no more boats for hire. Finally they found an abandoned boat and set out on their own. Quickly they were surrounded by sea dragons on all sides and thought that the end surely had come.

Just then they heard the flutter of great wings and, looking up, saw the golden bird with shining eyes, clutching the silver cylinder in his talons. Down he swooped, letting several drops spill from the cylinder and into the boiling sea. Suddenly the sea dragons went limp and lifeless and slipped silently down into the depths of the sea.

The princes sailed swiftly across the ocean channel and they found elephants to complete the journey to their father's palace. just as they arrived and embraced their father, messengers also arrived with the news that dead dragons now lined the coast and that no live ones were to be found anywhere in the channel.

After all the dragons were dead, the golden bird sprinkled the rest of the silver cylinder's contents out across the emerald mountains of Serendip. As they fell, the tiny droplets turned into the sapphires, rubies, and opals that still exist in abundance in that land,

As his sons told him of their adventures and travels, the wise old father, King Jaffer, laughed with delight as they realized that the princes' tears of compassion for the poor and afflicted were the very potion that brings death to dragons.

The princes became wise rulers of Serendip. They governed with their sagacity, with their compassion, and with the insight and inspiration they had learned both to seek and to follow.

Occasionally, wherever people are and usually when least expected, the bird with golden wings and shining eyes dips into sight, but it is seen only by those who are looking up.

Epilogue to the Fable

As with all good fables, each person who reads the tale finds his own set of meanings and messages. And when he reads it again, he may find more.

Walpole felt that serendipity was a quality that grew within people who, like the three princes, had a cause or mission and pursued it with sagacity, sensitivity, and wisdom. But there are additional lessons all related to this central theme and to each other. There are lessons about noticing and listening ... about feeling deeply ... about wishing only to serve... about faith and intuition in situations where no preplan can exist... about being watchful and prayerful... about thinking creatively and laterally ... about following nudges and intuition... about the answers and wisdom of books ... about the importance of justice but also about its incompleteness without mercy... about the power of unity and the value of stories and storytellers... and about how all we ever really know is what we have learned for ourselves.

Serendipity: The ability through sagacity and good fortune to find something good while looking for something else.

Sagacity: notice, watch, observe, be aware, learn, refuse to wear the blinders of obsession or self-consciousness.

The attitude of good fortune: see changes as opportunities, surprises as excitement, disappointments with silver linings.

Thoughtful goals: set and list objectives and pursue them until something else (better) is discovered.

NOTES: