

The Phoenix and the Carpet

Robert, Anthea, Cyril, Jane and their baby brother the Lamb are desperate to liven up a boring afternoon. They have drawn magical symbols in chalk near the fireplace and burned some aromatic wood. On the mantelpiece is a mysterious egg which has recently arrived in the house. Robert accidentally knocks the egg off the mantelpiece into the fire. The egg cracks open, and from within the fire emerges the PHOENIX, a gold-feathered creature the size of a chicken.

PHOENIX: Which of you put the egg into the fire?

(The bird looks around, then bows in a bird-like manner to Robert)

I am your grateful debtor. Do you know who I am? I am the Phoenix. My fame has lived for two thousand years. Allow me to look at my portrait.

(The Phoenix cocks its head to one side)

It's not a flattering likeness. Phoenix – in ornithology – is a fabulous bird of antiquity. *Antiquity* is quite correct. But fabulous? Well, do I look it? At least I *am* the only one of my kind.

(The Phoenix whirrs his golden wings and flutters to the table)

I'm nearly cool now. *(Turning to Robert)* I will not vanish or anything sudden. *(To all the children)* I will tell you my tale. I had resided for many thousand years in the wilderness, and I was becoming weary of the monotony of my existence. But I acquired the habit of laying my egg and burning myself every five hundred years – and you know how difficult it is to break yourself of a habit.

I awoke one morning from a feverish dream and I saw two people, a man and a woman. They were a prince and princess, and the story of their parents was one which I am sure you will like to hear. In early youth the mother of the princess happened to hear the story of a

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certain enchanter... well, to cut about seventy long stories short, this prince and princess were so fond of each other that they did not want anyone else, and the enchanter had given them a magic carpet (you've heard of a magic carpet?) and they had just sat on it and told it to take them right away from everyone – and it had brought them to the wilderness. And as they had no further use for the carpet, they gave it to me. That was indeed the chance of a lifetime!

Well, I got the prince to lay out the carpet, and I laid my egg on it; then I said, "Now, my excellent carpet, prove your worth. Take that egg somewhere where it can't be hatched for two thousand years, and where, when that time's up, someone will light a fire of sweet wood and aromatic gums, and put the egg in to hatch." And you see, it's all come out exactly as I said. The words were no sooner out of my beak than egg and carpet disappeared. I burnt myself up and knew no more till I awoke over there. *(Pointing to the fire)*

(There is the sound of a key turning in the lock, and the Phoenix pauses)

Oh, here's your father! You should all be in bed, so wish yourselves there, and wish the carpet back in its place. *(Whispering)* I shall sleep on the cornice above your curtains. Please don't tell anyone about me.

by E Nesbit, adapted by LAMDA