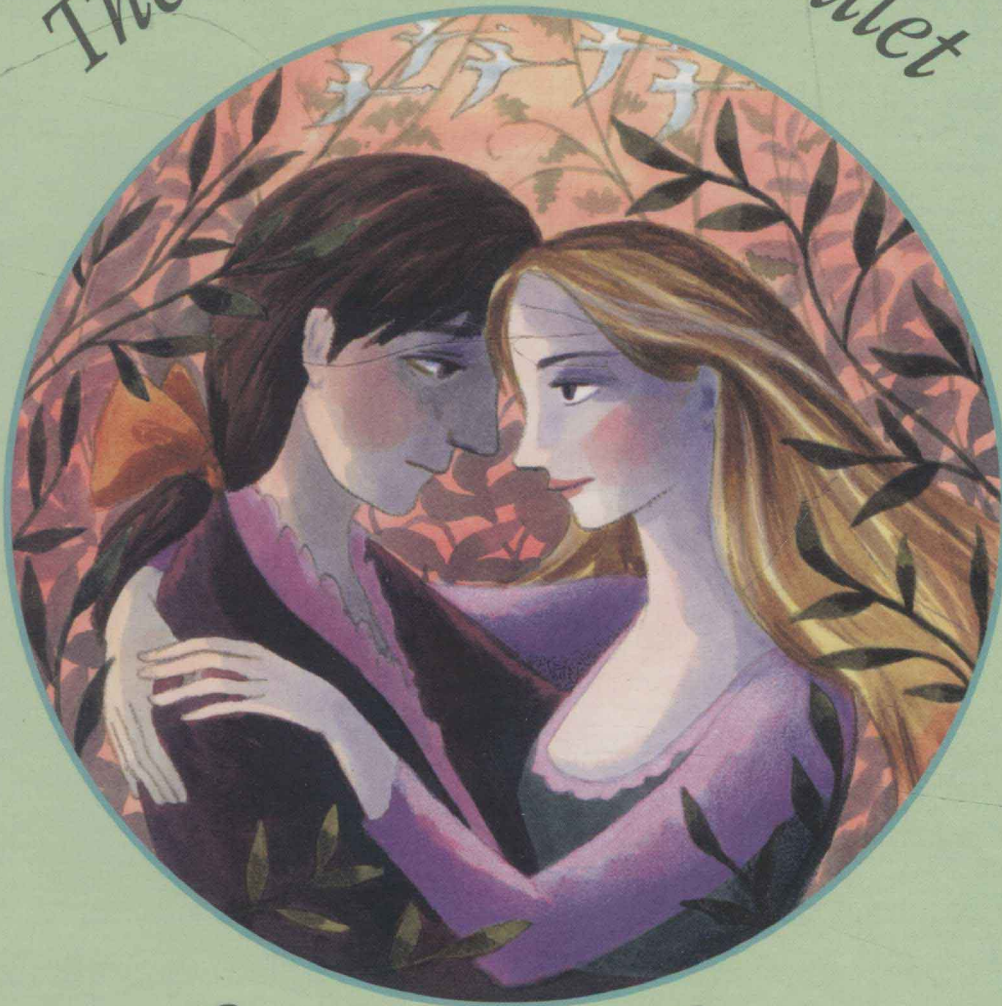


The Magic of the Ballet



Swan Lake

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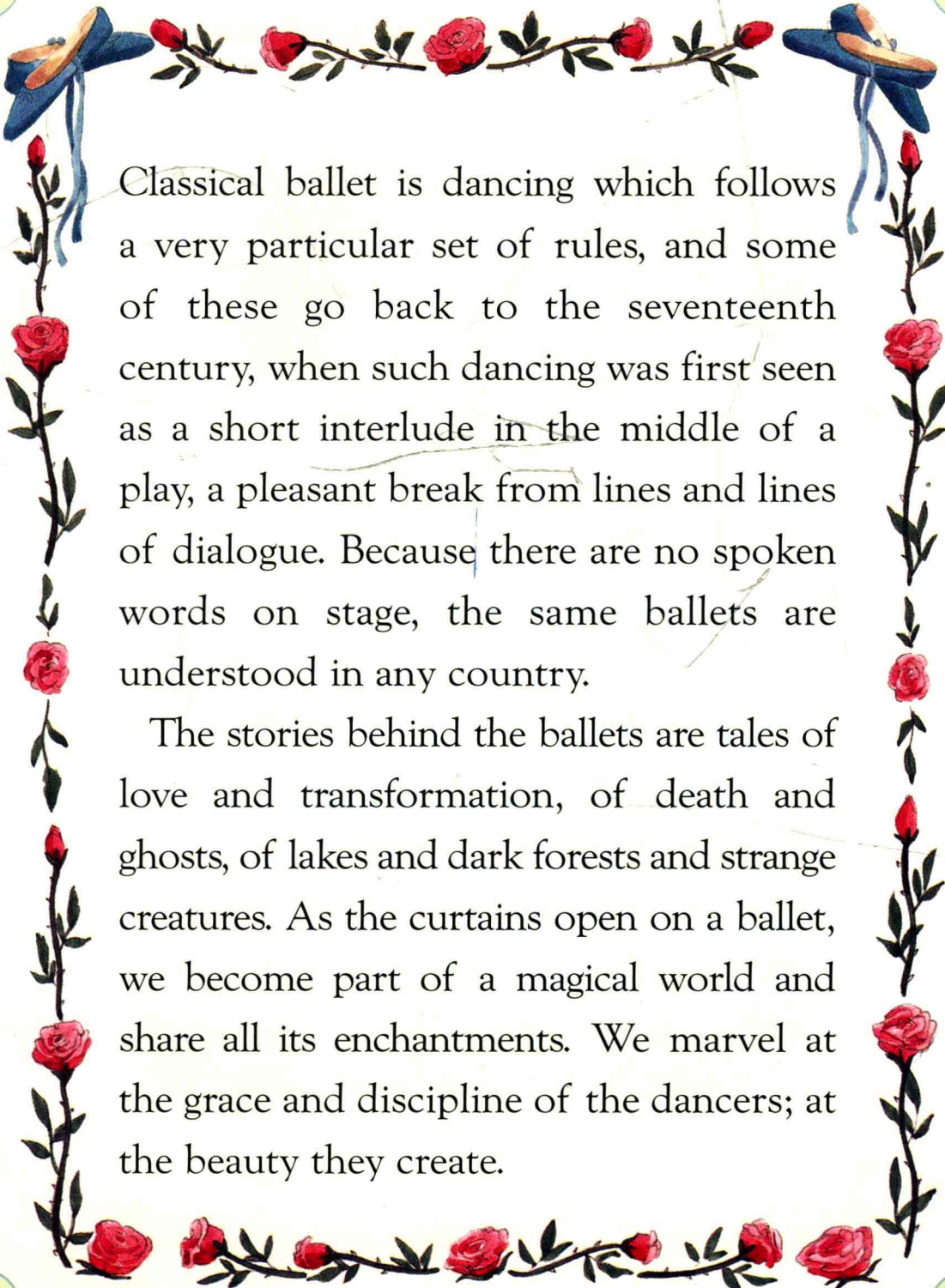
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The Magic of the Ballet



HUMAN BEINGS LIKE TO move their bodies in time to rhythm. Even the tiniest babies enjoy being rocked or gently bounced as you sing to them, and we all know how feet long to move when we hear a strong and exciting beat. “That’s toe-tapping music,” we say, and what we mean is we would like to dance to it.

There are many different kinds of dance: folk, disco, ballroom, tap and so on.



Classical ballet is dancing which follows a very particular set of rules, and some of these go back to the seventeenth century, when such dancing was first seen as a short interlude in the middle of a play, a pleasant break from lines and lines of dialogue. Because there are no spoken words on stage, the same ballets are understood in any country.

The stories behind the ballets are tales of love and transformation, of death and ghosts, of lakes and dark forests and strange creatures. As the curtains open on a ballet, we become part of a magical world and share all its enchantments. We marvel at the grace and discipline of the dancers; at the beauty they create.



*'Von Rothbart swooped down from his branch and the
black span of his wings obscured the moon.'*

Swan Lake




LISTEN. THESE THINGS HAPPENED long ago. There was daylight and darkness. There was Good and Evil. There was the kingdom and the forest. In the kingdom, Prince Siegfried was about to celebrate his birthday. The forest, however, was the lair of the magician, Von Rothbart.





In the deepest and greenest part of the forest, there was a silver lake which people called 'The Lake of Swans'. Whispers were that every bird floating on the still waters was really a young maiden trapped by Von Rothbart and transformed into a swan for as long as there was light in the sky.




THE MAGIC OF THE BALLET






At dusk, (so the story went) each bird took on her human shape for the length of the night, and in this way, Von Rothbart would remind them of the human happiness they had lost. Every single night, the magician took on the feathers and talons and wide amber eyes of an enormous owl, and he sat and watched the pale dancers from the branches of a tree beside the lake. The most magnificent swan of all was once a princess. As the sun set, and her feathered wings fluttered into arms, she would remember her name.



“I was Odette,” she would sigh. “Once, I was Odette.”





But listen. It was the day of Prince Siegfried’s birthday, and in the palace, everyone was preparing for the celebrations.







SWAN LAKE





The Queen had planned a ball, and every eligible young lady from every neighbouring country had been invited.

“It is time,” the Queen told her son, “that you found yourself a wife. There is a limit to the time a young man of royal birth should spend in frivolous pursuits such as hunting.”



“Then why, dearest Mother, did you present me with this crossbow as a birthday gift?” replied the Prince.

“Because I knew it would please you,” said the Queen. “In return, I insist that you please me and choose a wife at the ball tomorrow night.”



“Very well, Mother,” said Prince Siegfried. “You know I would do anything to bring a smile to your lips. Until the ball,

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however, I am a free man and I'll enjoy my 'frivolous pursuits', as you call them, for a little while longer."



Siegfried looked out of the window, thinking that perhaps it was too late to go hunting that day. Just then, however, a formation of white swans crossed the sky, making for the dense forest.



"Come," Siegfried called to his companions, "we may be too late, but how beautiful they are! Let's follow them."



The hunting party set off. Although the young men had heard stories about the foolishness of wandering through the forest at dusk, they put them out of their minds. Were they not armed? And what royal prince would ever admit that he was afraid? Nevertheless, as the shadows



thickened and the sky grew dark, Prince Siegfried's friends urged him to return to the safety of the palace.

"Wait," said Siegfried. "Can you see something white moving through the branches? I'm going to look."



He arrived at the clearing beside the lake in time to watch the great, white birds that he had been hunting fly down to the ground. He raised his crossbow to his



shoulder and aimed it at the most splendid swan of all, when suddenly, in a shudder of white light, the wings bent themselves into arms, the pale feathers were gone, and his arrow was pointed at the loveliest woman he had ever seen. The other birds had also turned into young maidens, but Siegfried threw down his bow and ran towards the one he already knew he would love forever.

“Please,” he implored, as she tried to escape him. “Please, I will never hurt you, I promise. Please do not run from me.”

In his nearby tree, Von Rothbart, in the guise of an owl, hooted and spread his dark wings, but Siegfried had eyes and ears only for the woman before him.

When he caught up with her, she

trembled in his arms as though she were still a bird and he a hunter, but his kind words soothed her in the end, and she spoke her name aloud to him.

“I am the Princess Odette,” she said, “and I am condemned to be a swan during the daylight hours. We are all of us in Von Rothbart’s power, and at night we dance in human form, but he watches us always. Even now, his eyes are fixed on us.”

“Where?” cried Siegfried. “Show him to me and I will put a single arrow through his heart.”

“Oh, no, you must not,” cried Odette, “for then you will surely kill me! He has bound his life to mine and twisted them together in a single thread. If he dies, then so do I. The spell will be broken only

when I can find the person who will love me forever. Someone who will be faithful to me alone.”

“Then you are free,” Siegfried laughed, “for I shall love you through this life and beyond it. Come with me and be my bride.”

Hearing these words, Von Rothbart swooped down from his branch and the black span of his wings obscured the moon. He clawed Odette to his side.



“Go!” said Odette. “There is nothing you can do. The dawn is nearly here and we shall all be swans again.”

“I will come back for you,” Siegfried cried. “I will find a way to break the spell.”

“But go now,” Odette sighed. “Only your faithful love can free me from this terror.”

All through the next day, the day of the ball, Siegfried was in a dream of love and sorrow. How could he tell his mother that he had found his bride? How could he bring Odette to the palace when Von Rothbart watched and watched her with his amber eyes?

When the ball began, and all the princesses were paraded before him, Siegfried hardly noticed them. Then there came a knocking at the gates.



“Lady,” said a messenger, kneeling before the Queen, “a knight and his daughter have arrived and they beg to enter.”

“Let them in,” said the Queen. “All are welcome at this feast.”

The knight was dressed from head to foot in black. Something about his face, and the yellowish light that shone from his eyes seemed familiar to Siegfried, but then he caught sight of the knight’s daughter, and recognized Odette, dressed in glittering black. So happy was he to see his swan-lady again that he forgot every other thought in his head and never considered how his beloved had come to be here, at the palace.

All through his life, the Prince had learned nothing about deception. Even the



presence of the black knight did not arouse his suspicions, but the Princess, although she had the body and face of Odette, was none other than Odile, Von Rothbart's daughter. Her father had given her the outward appearance of Odette for one reason and one reason alone: to entrance and delude poor Prince Siegfried, who would thus be tricked into breaking his faith with his true love.

And oh, this Odile, how she danced and turned, and turned and smiled and how