THE MEADOW

One early morning there was a prince standing beside Suzan's bed. It was a prince in a beautiful violet suit of clothes, and he even had a shawl embroidered in gold around his shoulders. He smiled at Suzan, saying, "Hurry up, the time has come!"

"For what?" Suzan asked.

"For coming to my father's meadow."

Suzan hurried to dress and followed the prince. He seemed to know everything very well, for he went directly down the stairs to the front door and took her out of town.

"Is this a fairy tale?" Suzan asked.

"Maybe," the prince said.

"Then it started at the wrong end," Suzan laughed. "In the real fairy tales you don't get the prince until the end."

The prince laughed. "Who is saying that you are going to get the prince?"

Suzan blushed and looked away. "Well, I just thought that you were good looking."

Now the prince blushed saying, "Thank you. But modern fairy tales do not always have a happy ending. You know that too!"

They were out of town and stood looking into the big meadow. It was summer, so the meadow was in full blossom. The buttercup flowers were mirroring the sun, along the ditches the marsh marigolds nodded mellowly, and the violet pinks with the tarred stems waved in the wind. The grass was even more beautiful. The green stems carried the most wonderful spikes with marvelous small flowers looking like laces. Even the slightest wind made them move. And then there were the birds. The sedge warbler and the reed warbler were singing all the time, and the reed bunting hid behind the tall reedstems, and a little away the marsh hawk hovered on its big wings hunting its prey.

"Is this your father's meadow?" Suzan asked.

"Sure."

"It's really beautiful. I love the meadow."

"Are you saying this because you feel that I want to hear that?"

"No, I really mean it. I never say anything just to make people feel better. I say what I mean, and I think your father's meadow is beautiful."

The prince took her hand and started to run out over the meadow so that Suzan did not see him blushing again. It seemed that he liked her very much.

"Where are we going?" Suzan asked.

"Behind the willow tree," he said. "My father wants to talk with you."

As they stood behind the willow tree, Suzan said. "Oh, now I know. Your father is the king of the elves!"

The prince laughed. "No he is not. He cannot agree with the king of the elves, so they have parted the meadows of the land. But you cannot see in your world. It's not Man's business."

"Why am I going to talk with your father?"

"I don't know. Now be quiet, close your eyes and put your hands on my shoulders. Don't open your eyes, until I tell you."

Suzan closed her eyes. Now she could very clearly hear the birds singing and she could smell the soil of the meadow. It seemed that the song of the birds grew into a whole symphony with moving wings, singing throats, and glimmering colors. It was so wonderful, that Suzan did not wish to open her eyes again. But then she heard the prince, "We are here, Suzan! Open your eyes."

She wondered. She felt that she had only been standing with her hands on the prince for a second. She was still more surprised seeing that she was no longer in the meadow but deep in the earth in a little room, in which everything was built by flowers and birds' wings. The king was sitting on his throne in glamourous colors. "Welcome Suzan," he said kindly.

"Where am I?"

"With the king of the meadows," the king said.

"But." She did not say more, because she discovered the prince was gone. "Where is the prince?" she asked.

"He's gone to do his work. Now we are going to have a talk. He clapped his hands and two waiters came in with two glasses. "Welcome, Suzan," the king said. Suzan sipped the glass.

"Do you like it?" the king said. "It's cold elder wine. I think you know the beautiful elder flowers, you are a clever girl."

"What do you know about me?" Suzan asked.

"Don't you think I follow you from down here? I can assure you that I know your people. I'm not quite satisfied with men."

"Why not?"

The king got up. "First I want to show you something." He waved her to a passage which went deeper into the ground. As they walked down this passage Suzan heard a sound she knew: swallows singing. Now they stood in front of a landscape hidden behind thin threads of cobweb. There were trees and rivers and meadows and beaches and everything there should be. Here she saw thousands of swallows.

"What do you say?" the king asked.

"It's beautiful," Suzan answered. "But shouldn't the swallows be with us now? It is summer, you know."

"You are really clever. Therefore you must have seen that there are not so many swallows with you this year."

Suzan nodded. Certainly, she had seen that. "Everybody is afraid that something has happened to them," she said.

The king looked very sad. "Something has happened to them," he said. "That is why I have decided that most of the swallows must stay here for the summer."

"But," Suzan said. Now here was something she did not understand.

The king read her thoughts. "You think that the swallows fly to Africa to spend the winter there, don't you? That's what people have believed for some years. People used to believe that the swallows disappeared in the meadows in the autumn, and that they dug themselves out again on the very first warm day of spring."

"Right," the king said. "But it is not like that."

"Sure it is. People have found out something new by putting rings around the leg of the birds."

"Look at the swallows," the king said. "Look at the bird on the big stone. Do you see?"

Suzan saw that it had a ring around one of its legs. She wondered and asked, "Why have you kept all the birds this year?"

"Because they are dying on Earth. Somebody has spoiled the way everything is put together, just because they think they have discovered everything. Listen to what I tell you: the knowledge that people have obtained makes it impossible for them to see reality."

Suzan was thinking hard. Perhaps it was wrong to ring birds, because it was a pity for them, and because it did not really matter whether they flew to Africa or hid in the meadows for the winter. Perhaps it did not really matter whether one or the other was right, because the swallow was beautiful and necessary for Man.

Perhaps science and investigations did more harm to the way of thinking that people ought to have. Perhaps?

Again the king had read her thoughts. "Right, Suzan. But you have to continue, haven't you? And so have I. But people shouldn't really use so much time on knowledge, but on wisdom."

"Is there a difference?" Suzan asked.

"I think that you know that there is. I do hope, that the swallows can come up to you again. That's the best thing for them, and then I could get a little more time for all my work."

"So you must have more than swallows down here," Suzan tried.

"Certainly, but you won't see that. You may come here once a year, and you will get one secret every year. I do hope that one day it will not be necessary for you to come here. If people would learn to think about their own thinking, the swallows might return."

Then the prince stood in front of them. He took Suzan's hand, quietly whispering, "Time is up. One cannot stand being down here, when one is a human being," he said.

"Because then reason will be hurt," Suzan said.

The king laughed. "That's it! One has to have both wisdom and reason. If one stays too long down here, one will be visionary and romantic, and that is not the intention. A little of each is the best, because then you are able to hope. That is the reason why I send some of the swallows up to you every year. They will show you that hope is worth while. One day there will be more swallows, then you know what is happening." Then he raised his hands and disappeared in a cloud of sweetly smelling elder flowers, hovering like butterflies in the big room.

"Come on," the prince said. "You have to go up to the land of Man again."

"First I want to know, why your father wanted to talk with me."

"To make you think things over," the prince answered.

"I don't do anything else," Suzan said. "I am thinking so much, that people think I am a lunatic. But I like that, and I like you. I hope it will not take another year before we see each other again."

The prince blushed again. He was not used to people speaking frankly to him. "I hope the same," he said quietly. "But we live in different worlds."

"Are you sure," Suzan said. Then she closed her eyes, heard the symphonic concert of birds' voices and stood behind the willow tree. "I am looking forward to coming again," she said. She did not get any answer. The prince was gone, and Suzan rushed over the meadow to tell her sister Laila, where she had been. "Laila, Laila--do you know where I have been!" Then she saw that the meadow was a thousand times bigger then it used to be. She could not even see her own town. She ran and ran through the many flowers, and still the meadow was huge. Then she heard wings above her and saw thousands of swallows circling around her, twittering and singing.

"Oh you good birds, you came anyway! How happy I am! Hurry up to fly out into the world to build nests and have young!!!" The swallows answered with their twittering, flew a few times around her, and disappeared. And now she could see her town again!

"That's good," Suzan said. "Everything is normal again, and still the relations are new. It could not be better!"

Per Jespersen