



The Little Hunchback

A 1001 Nights

Arabic

Advanced
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In the kingdom of Kashgar, which is, as everybody knows, situated on the frontiers of Great Tartary, there lived long ago a tailor and his wife who loved each other very much. One day, when the tailor was hard at work, a little hunchback came and sat at the entrance of the shop, and began to sing and play his tambourine. The tailor was amused with the antics of the fellow, and thought he would take him home to entertain his wife. The hunchback having agreed to his proposal, the tailor closed his shop and they set off together.

When they reached the house, they found the table ready laid for supper, and in a very few minutes all three were sitting before a beautiful fish which the tailor's wife had cooked with her own hands. But unluckily, the hunchback happened to swallow a large bone, and, in spite of all the tailor and his wife could do to help him, died of suffocation in an instant. Besides being very sorry for the poor man, the tailor and his wife were very much frightened on their own account, for if the police came to hear of it, the worthy couple ran the risk of being thrown into prison for willful murder.

In order to prevent this dreadful calamity they both set about inventing some plan which would throw suspicion on some one else, and at last they made up their minds that they could do no better than select a Jewish doctor who lived close by as the author of the crime. So the tailor picked up the hunchback by his head while his wife took his feet and carried him to the doctor's house. Then they knocked at the door, which opened

straight on to a steep staircase. A servant soon appeared, feeling her way down the dark staircase and inquired what they wanted.

“Tell your master,” said the tailor, “that we have brought a very sick man for him to cure; and,” he added, holding out some money, “give him this in advance, so that he may not feel he is wasting his time.” The servant remounted the stairs to give the message to the doctor, and the moment she was out of sight the tailor and his wife carried the body swiftly after her, propped it up at the top of the staircase, and ran home as fast as their legs could carry them.

Now the doctor was so delighted at the news of a patient (for he was young, and had not many of them), that he was transported with joy.

“Get a light,” he called to the servant, “and follow me as fast as you can!” and rushing out of his room he ran towards the staircase. There he nearly fell over the body of the hunchback, and without knowing what it was gave it such a kick that it rolled right to the bottom, and very nearly dragged the doctor after it. “A light! A light!” he cried again, and when it was brought and he saw what he had done, he was almost beside himself with terror.

“Holy Moses!” he exclaimed, “why did I not wait for the light? I have killed the sick man whom they brought me; and if the sacred Ass of Esdras does not come to my aid I am lost! It will not be long before I am led to jail as a murderer.”

Agitated though he was, and with reason, the doctor did not forget to shut the house door, lest some passers-by might chance to see what had happened. He then took up the corpse and carried it into his wife’s room, nearly driving her crazy with fright.

“It is all over with us!” she wailed, “if we cannot find some means of getting the body out of the house. Once let the sun rise and we can hide it no longer! How were you driven to commit such a terrible crime?”

“Never mind that,” returned the doctor, “the thing is to find a way out of it.”

For a long while the doctor and his wife continued to turn over in their minds a way of escape, but could not find any that seemed good enough. At last the doctor gave it up altogether and resigned himself to bear the

penalty of his misfortune.

But his wife, who had twice his brains, suddenly exclaimed, "I have thought of something! Let us carry the body on the roof of the house and lower it down the chimney of our neighbor the Muslim." Now this Muslim was employed by the Sultan, and furnished his table with oil and butter. Part of his house was occupied by a great storeroom, which rats and mice enjoyed visiting.

The doctor jumped at his wife's plan, and they took up the hunchback, and passing cords under his armpits, they let him down into the purveyor's bedroom so gently that he really seemed to be leaning against the wall. When they felt he was touching the ground, they drew up the cords and left him.

Scarcely had they got back to their own house when the purveyor entered his room. He had spent the evening at a wedding feast, and had a lantern in his hand. In the dim light it cast he was astonished to see a man standing in his chimney, but being naturally courageous he seized a stick and made straight for the supposed thief. "Ah!" he cried, "so it is you, and not the rats and mice, who steal my butter. I'll take care that you don't want to come back!"

So saying he struck him several hard blows. The corpse fell on the floor, but the man only redoubled his blows, till at length it occurred to him it was odd that the thief should lie so still and make no resistance. Then, finding he was quite dead, a cold fear took possession of him. "Wretch that I am," said he, "I have murdered a man. Ah, my revenge has gone too far. Without the help of Allah I am undone! Cursed be the goods which have led me to my ruin." And already he felt the rope round his neck.

But when he had got over the first shock he began to think of some way out of the difficulty, and seizing the hunchback in his arms, he carried him out into the street, and leaning him against the wall of a shop he stole back to his own house, without once looking behind him.

A few minutes before the sun rose, a rich Christian merchant, who supplied the palace with all sorts of necessaries, left his house, after a night of feasting, to go to the bath. Though he was very drunk, he was yet sober enough to know that the dawn was at hand, and that all good Mussulmen would shortly be going to prayer. So he hastened his steps lest he should meet some one on his way to the mosque, who, seeing his condition, would send him to prison as a drunkard. In his haste he jostled against the hunchback, who fell

heavily upon him, and the merchant, thinking he was being attacked by a thief, knocked him down with one blow of his fist. He then called loudly for help, beating the fallen man all the while.

The chief policeman of the quarter came running up, and found a Christian ill-treating a Muslim “What are you doing?” he asked indignantly.

“He tried to rob me,” replied the merchant, “and very nearly choked me.”

“Well, you have had your revenge,” said the man, catching hold of his arm. “Come, be off with you!”

As he spoke, he held out his hand to the hunchback to help him up, but the hunchback never moved. “Oho!” he went on, looking closer, “so this is the way a Christian has the impudence to treat a Muslim!” and seizing the merchant in a firm grasp he took him to the inspector of police, who threw him into prison till the judge should be out of bed and ready to attend to his case. All this brought the merchant to his senses, but the more he thought of it the less he could understand how the hunchback could have died merely from the blows he had received.

The merchant was still pondering on this subject when he was summoned before the chief of police and questioned about his crime, which he could not deny. As the hunchback was one of the Sultan’s private jesters, the chief of police resolved to defer sentence of death until he had consulted his master. He went to the palace to demand an audience, and told his story to the Sultan, who only answered,

“There is no pardon for a Christian who kills a Muslim. Do your duty.”

So the chief of police ordered a gallows to be erected, and sent criers to proclaim in every street in the city that a Christian was to be hanged that day for having killed a Muslim.

When all was ready the merchant was brought from prison and led to the foot of the gallows. The executioner knotted the cord firmly round the unfortunate man’s neck and was just about to swing him into the air, when the Sultan’s purveyor dashed through the crowd, and cried, panting, to the hangman,

“Stop, stop, don’t be in such a hurry. It was not he who did the murder, it was I.”

The chief of police, who was present to see that everything was in order, put several questions to the purveyor,

who told him the whole story of the death of the hunchback, and how he had carried the body to the place where it had been found by the Christian merchant.

“You are going,” he said to the chief of police, “to kill an innocent man, for it is impossible that he should have murdered a creature who was dead already. It is bad enough for me to have slain a Muslim without having it on my conscience that a Christian who is guiltless should suffer through my fault.”

Now the purveyor’s speech had been made in a loud voice, and was heard by all the crowd, and even if he had wished it, the chief of police could not have escaped setting the merchant free.

“Loose the cords from the Christian’s neck,” he commanded, turning to the executioner, “and hang this man in his place, seeing that by his own confession he is the murderer.”

The hangman did as he was bid, and was tying the cord firmly, when he was stopped by the voice of the Jewish doctor beseeching him to pause, for he had something very important to say. When he had fought his way through the crowd and reached the chief of police.

“Worshipful sir,” he began, “this Muslim whom you desire to hang is unworthy of death; I alone am guilty. Last night a man and a woman who were strangers to me knocked at my door, bringing with them a patient for me to cure. The servant opened it, but having no light was hardly able to make out their faces, though she readily agreed to wake me and to hand me the fee for my services. While she was telling me her story they seem to have carried the sick man to the top of the staircase and then left him there. I jumped up in a hurry without waiting for a lantern, and in the darkness I fell against something, which tumbled headlong down the stairs and never stopped till it reached the bottom.

When I examined the body I found it was quite dead, and the corpse was that of a hunchback Muslim.

Terrified at what we had done, my wife and I took the body on the roof and let it down the chimney of our neighbor the purveyor, whom you were just about to hang. The purveyor, finding him in his room, naturally thought he was a thief, and struck him such a blow that the man fell down and lay motionless on the floor. Stooping to examine him, and finding him stone dead, the purveyor supposed that the man had died from the blow he had received; but of course this was a mistake, as you will see from my account, and I only am the murderer; and although I am innocent of any wish to commit a crime, I must suffer for it all the same, or else

have the blood of two Musselmans on my conscience. Therefore send away this man, I pray you, and let me take his place, as it is I who am guilty.”

On hearing the declaration of the Jewish doctor, the chief of police commanded that he should be led to the gallows, and the Sultan’s purveyor go free. The cord was placed round the Jew’s neck, and his feet had already ceased to touch the ground when the voice of the tailor was heard beseeching the executioner to pause one moment and to listen to what he had to say.

“Oh, my lord,” he cried, turning to the chief of police, “how nearly have you caused the death of three innocent people! But if you will only have the patience to listen to my tale, you shall know who is the real culprit. If some one has to suffer, it must be me! Yesterday, at dusk, I was working in my shop with a light heart when the little hunchback, who was more than half drunk, came and sat in the doorway. He sang me several songs, and then I invited him to finish the evening at my house. He accepted my invitation, and we went away together. At supper I helped him to a slice of fish, but in eating it a bone stuck in his throat, and in spite of all we could do, he died in a few minutes. We felt deeply sorry for his death, but fearing lest we should be held responsible, we carried the corpse to the house of the Jewish doctor. I knocked, and desired the servant to beg her master to come down as fast as possible and see a sick man whom we had brought for him to cure; and in order to hasten his movements I placed a piece of money in her hand as the doctor’s fee. Directly she had disappeared I dragged the body to the top of the stairs, and then hurried away with my wife back to our house. In descending the stairs the doctor accidentally knocked over the corpse, and finding him dead believed that he himself was the murderer. But now you know the truth set him free, and let me die in his stead.”

The chief of police and the crowd of spectators were lost in astonishment at the strange events to which the death of the hunchback had given rise.

“Loosen the Jewish doctor,” said he to the hangman, “and string up the tailor instead, since he has made confession of his crime. Really, one cannot deny that this is a very singular story, and it deserves to be written in letters of gold.”

The executioner speedily untied the knots which confined the doctor, and was passing the cord round the neck of the tailor, when the Sultan of Kashgar, who had missed his jester, happened to make inquiry of his officers as to what had become of him.

“Sire,” replied they, “the hunchback having drunk more than was good for him, escaped from the palace and was seen wandering about the town, where this morning he was found dead. A man was arrested for having caused his death, and held in custody till a gallows was erected. At the moment that he was about to suffer punishment, first one man arrived, and then another, each accusing themselves of the murder, and this went on for a long time, and at the present instant the chief of police is engaged in questioning a man who declares that he alone is the true assassin.”

The Sultan of Kashgar no sooner heard these words than he ordered an usher to go to the chief of police and to bring all the persons concerned in the hunchback’s death, together with the corpse, that he wished to see once again. The usher hastened on his errand, but was only just in time, for the tailor was positively swinging in the air, when his voice fell upon the silence of the crowd, commanding the hangman to cut down the body. The hangman, recognising the usher as one of the king’s servants, cut down the tailor, and the usher, seeing the man was safe, sought the chief of police and gave him the Sultan’s message. Accordingly, the chief of police at once set out for the palace, taking with him the tailor, the doctor, the purveyor, and the merchant, who bore the dead hunchback on their shoulders.

When the procession reached the palace the chief of police prostrated himself at the feet of the Sultan, and related all that he knew of the matter. The Sultan was so much struck by the circumstances that he ordered his private historian to write down an exact account of what had passed, so that in the years to come the miraculous escape of the four men who had thought themselves murderers might never be forgotten.

The Sultan asked everybody concerned in the hunchback’s affair to tell him their stories. Among others was a prating barber, whose tale of one of his brothers follows.

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