

Loving Laili

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Indian

Intermediate

24 min read

Once there was a king called King Dantal, who had a great many rupees and soldiers and horses. He had also an only son called Prince Majnun, who was a handsome boy with white teeth, red lips, blue eyes, red cheeks, red hair, and a white skin. This boy was very fond of playing with the Wazir's son, Husain Mahamat, in King Dantal's garden, which was very large and full of delicious fruits, and flowers, and trees. They used to take their little knives there and cut the fruits and eat them. King Dantal had a teacher for them to teach them to read and write.

One day, when they were grown two fine young men, Prince Majnun said to his father, "Husain Mahamat and I should like to go and hunt." His father said they might go, so they got ready their horses and all else they wanted for their hunting, and went to the Phalana country, hunting all the way, but they only found jackals and birds.

The Raja of the Phalana country was called Munsuk Raja, and he had a daughter named Laili, who was very beautiful; she had brown eyes and black hair.

One night, some time before Prince Majnun came to her father's kingdom, as she slept, Khuda sent to her an angel in the form of a man who told her that she should marry Prince Majnun and no one else, and that this was Khuda's command to her. When Laili woke she told her father of the angel's visit to her as she slept; but her father paid no attention to her story. From that time she began repeating, "Majnun, Majnun; I want

Majnun,” and would say nothing else. Even as she sat and ate her food she kept saying, “Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun.” Her father used to get quite vexed with her. “Who is this Majnun? who ever heard of this Majnun?” he would say.

“He is the man I am to marry,” said Laili. “Khuda has ordered me to marry no one but Majnun.” And she was half mad.

Meanwhile, Majnun and Husain Mahamat came to hunt in the Phalana country; and as they were riding about, Laili came out on her horse to eat the air, and rode behind them. All the time she kept saying, “Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun.” The prince heard her, and turned round. “Who is calling me?” he asked. At this Laili looked at him, and the moment she saw him she fell deeply in love with him, and she said to herself, “I am sure that is the Prince Majnun that Khuda says I am to marry.” And she went home to her father and said, “Father, I wish to marry the prince who has come to your kingdom; for I know he is the Prince Majnun I am to marry.”

“Very well, you shall have him for your husband,” said Munsuk Raja. “We will ask him to-morrow.” Laili consented to wait, although she was very impatient. As it happened, the prince left the Phalana kingdom that night, and when Laili heard he was gone, she went quite mad. She would not listen to a word her father, or her mother, or her servants said to her, but went off into the jungle, and wandered from jungle to jungle, till she got farther and farther away from her own country. All the time she kept saying, “Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun;” and so she wandered about for twelve years.

At the end of the twelve years she met a fakir—he was really an angel, but she did not know this—who asked her, “Why do you always say, ‘Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun?’” She answered, “I am the daughter of the king of the Phalana country, and I want to find Prince Majnun; tell me where his kingdom is.”

“I think you will never get there,” said the fakir, “for it is very far from hence, and you have to cross many rivers to reach it.” But Laili said she did not care; she must see Prince Majnun. “Well,” said the fakir, “when you come to the Bhagirathi river you will see a big fish, a Rohu; and you must get him to carry you to Prince Majnun’s country, or you will never reach it.”

She went on and on, and at last she came to the Bhagirathi river. There was a great big fish called the Rohu fish. It was yawning just as she got up to it, and she instantly jumped down its throat into its stomach. All the time she kept saying, “Majnun, Majnun.” At this the Rohu fish was greatly alarmed and swam down the river as fast as he could. By degrees he got tired and went slower, and a crow came and perched on his back, and said

“Caw, caw.” “Oh, Mr. Crow,” said the poor fish “do see what is in my stomach that makes such a noise.”

“Very well,” said the crow, “open your mouth wide, and I’ll fly down and see.”

So the Rohu opened his jaws and the crow flew down, but he came up again very quickly. “You have a Rakshas in your stomach,” said the crow, and he flew away.

This news did not comfort the poor Rohu, and he swam on and on till he came to Prince Majnun’s country.

There he stopped. And a jackal came down to the river to drink. “Oh, jackal,” said the Rohu “do tell me what I have inside me.”

“How can I tell?” said the jackal. “I cannot see unless I go inside you.” So the Rohu opened his mouth wide, and the jackal jumped down his throat; but he came up very quickly, looking much frightened and saying, “You have a Rakshas in your stomach, and if I don’t run away quickly, I am afraid it will eat me.” So off he ran. After the jackal came an enormous snake. “Oh,” says the fish, “do tell me what I have in my stomach, for it rattles about so, and keeps saying, ‘Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun.’”

The snake said, “Open your mouth wide, and I’ll go down and see what it is.” The snake went down: when he returned he said, “You have a Rakshas in your stomach, but if you will let me cut you open, it will come out of you.” “If you do that, I shall die,” said the Rohu. “Oh, no,” said the snake, “you will not, for I will give you a medicine that will make you quite well again.” So the fish agreed, and the snake got a knife and cut him open, and out jumped Laili.

She was now very old. Twelve years she had wandered about the jungle, and for twelve years she had lived inside her Rohu; and she was no longer beautiful, and had lost her teeth. The snake took her on his back and carried her into the country, and there he put her down, and she wandered on and on till she got to Majnun’s court-house, where King Majnun was sitting. There some men heard her crying, “Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun,” and they asked her what she wanted. “I want King Majnun,” she said.

So they went in and said to Prince Majnun, "An old woman outside says she wants you." "I cannot leave this place," said he; "send her in here." They brought her in and the prince asked her what she wanted. "I want to marry you," she answered. "Twenty-four years ago you came to my father the Phalana Raja's country, and I wanted to marry you then; but you went away without marrying me. Then I went mad, and I have wandered about all these years looking for you." Prince Majnun said, "Very good."

"Pray to Khuda," said Laili, "to make us both young again, and then we shall be married." So the prince prayed to Khuda, and Khuda said to him, "Touch Laili's clothes and they will catch fire, and when they are on fire, she and you will become young again." When he touched Laili's clothes they caught fire, and she and he became young again. And there were great feasts, and they were married, and travelled to the Phalana country to see her father and mother.

Now Laili's father and mother had wept so much for their daughter that they had become quite blind, and her father kept always repeating, "Laili, Laili, Laili." When Laili saw their blindness, she prayed to Khuda to restore their sight to them, which he did. As soon as the father and mother saw Laili, they hugged her and kissed her, and then they had the wedding all over again amid great rejoicings. Prince Majnun and Laili stayed with Munsuk Raja and his wife for three years, and then they returned to King Dantal, and lived happily for some time with him. They used to go out hunting, and they often went from country to country to eat the air and amuse themselves.

One day Prince Majnun said to Laili, "Let us go through this jungle." "No, no," said Laili; "if we go through this jungle, some harm will happen to me." But Prince Majnun laughed, and went into the jungle. And as they were going through it, Khuda thought, "I should like to know how much Prince Majnun loves his wife. Would he be very sorry if she died? And would he marry another wife? I will see." So he sent one of his angels in the form of a fakir into the jungle; and the angel went up to Laili, and threw some powder in her face, and instantly she fell to the ground a heap of ashes.

Prince Majnun was in great sorrow and grief when he saw his dear Laili turned into a little heap of ashes; and he went straight home to his father, and for a long, long time he would not be comforted. After a great many years he grew more cheerful and happy, and began to go again into his father's beautiful garden with Husain Mahamat. King Dantal wished his son to marry again. "I will only have Laili for my wife; I will not marry any other woman," said Prince Majnun.

"How can you marry Laili? Laili is dead. She will never come back to you," said the father. "Then I'll not have any wife at all," said Prince Majnun.

Meanwhile Laili was living in the jungle where her husband had left her a little heap of ashes. As soon as Majnun had gone, the fakir had taken her ashes and made them quite clean, and then he had mixed clay and water with the ashes, and made the figure of a woman with them, and so Laili regained her human form, and Khuda sent life into it. But Laili had become once more a hideous old woman, with a long, long nose, and teeth like tusks; just such an old woman, excepting her teeth, as she had been when she came out of the Rohu fish; and she lived in the jungle, and neither ate nor drank, and she kept on saying, "Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun."

At last the angel who had come as a fakir and thrown the powder at her, said to Khuda, "Of what use is it that this woman should sit in the jungle crying, crying for ever, 'Majnun, Majnun; I want Majnun,' and eating and drinking nothing? Let me take her to Prince Majnun." "Well," said Khuda, "you may do so; but tell her that she must not speak to Majnun if he is afraid of her when he sees her; and that if he is afraid when he sees her, she will become a little white dog the next day. Then she must go to the palace, and she will only regain her human shape when Prince Majnun loves her, feeds her with his own food, and lets her sleep in his bed."

So the angel came to Laili again as a fakir and carried her to King Dantal's garden. "Now," he said, "it is Khuda's command that you stay here till Prince Majnun comes to walk in the garden, and then you may show yourself to him. But you must not speak to him, if he is afraid of you; and should he be afraid of you, you will the next day become a little white dog." He then told her what she must do as a little dog to regain her human form.

Laili stayed in the garden, hidden in the tall grass, till Prince Majnun and Husain Mahamat came to walk in the garden. King Dantal was now a very old man, and Husain Mahamat, though he was really only as old as Prince Majnun, looked a great deal older than the prince, who had been made quite young again when he married

Laili.

As Prince Majnun and the Wazir's son walked in the garden, they gathered the fruit as they had done as little children, only they bit the fruit with their teeth; they did not cut it. While Majnun was busy eating a fruit in this way, and was talking to Husain Mahamat, he turned towards him and saw Laili walking behind the Wazir's son.

"Oh, look, look!" he cried, "see what is following you; it is a Rakshas or a demon, and I am sure it is going to eat us." Laili looked at him beseechingly with all her eyes, and trembled with age and eagerness; but this only frightened Majnun the more. "It is a Rakshas, a Rakshas!" he cried, and he ran quickly to the palace with the Wazir's son; and as they ran away, Laili disappeared into the jungle. They ran to King Dantal, and Majnun told him there was a Rakshas or a demon in the garden that had come to eat them.

"What nonsense," said his father. "Fancy two grown men being so frightened by an old ayah or a fakir! And if it had been a Rakshas, it would not have eaten you." Indeed King Dantal did not believe Majnun had seen anything at all, till Husain Mahamat said the prince was speaking the exact truth. They had the garden searched for the terrible old woman, but found nothing, and King Dantal told his son he was very silly to be so much frightened. However, Prince Majnun would not walk in the garden any more.

The next day Laili turned into a pretty little dog; and in this shape she came into the palace, where Prince Majnun soon became very fond of her. She followed him everywhere, went with him when he was out hunting, and helped him to catch his game, and Prince Majnun fed her with milk, or bread, or anything else he was eating, and at night the little dog slept in his bed.

But one night the little dog disappeared, and in its stead there lay the little old woman who had frightened him so much in the garden; and now Prince Majnun was quite sure she was a Rakshas, or a demon, or some such horrible thing come to eat him; and in his terror he cried out, "What do you want? Oh, do not eat me; do not eat me!" Poor Laili answered, "Don't you know me? I am your wife Laili, and I want to marry you. Don't you remember how you would go through that jungle, though I begged and begged you not to go, for I told you that harm would happen to me, and then a fakir came and threw powder in my face, and I became a heap of ashes. But Khuda gave me my life again, and brought me here, after I had stayed a long, long while in the jungle crying for you, and now I am obliged to be a little dog; but if you will marry me, I shall not be a little dog any more." Majnun, however, said "How can I marry an old woman like you? how can you be Laili? I am sure you

are a Rakshas or a demon come to eat me,” and he was in great terror.

In the morning the old woman had turned into the little dog, and the prince went to his father and told him all that had happened. “An old woman! an old woman! always an old woman!” said his father. “You do nothing but think of old women. How can a strong man like you be so easily frightened?” However, when he saw that his son was really in great terror, and that he really believed the old woman would come back at night, he advised him to say to her, “I will marry you if you can make yourself a young girl again. How can I marry such an old woman as you are?”

That night as he lay trembling in bed the little old woman lay there in place of the dog, crying “Majnun, Majnun, I want to marry you. I have loved you all these long, long years. When I was in my father’s kingdom a young girl, I knew of you, though you knew nothing of me, and we should have been married then if you had not gone away so suddenly, and for long, long years I followed you.”

“Well,” said Majnun, “if you can make yourself a young girl again, I will marry you.”

Laili said, “Oh, that is quite easy. Khuda will make me a young girl again. In two days’ time you must go into the garden, and there you will see a beautiful fruit. You must gather it and bring it into your room and cut it open yourself very gently, and you must not open it when your father or anybody else is with you, but when you are quite alone; for I shall be in the fruit quite naked, without any clothes at all on.” In the morning Laili took her little dog’s form, and disappeared in the garden.

Prince Majnun told all this to his father, who told him to do all the old woman had bidden him. In two days’ time he and the Wazir’s son walked in the garden, and there they saw a large, lovely red fruit. “Oh!” said the Prince, “I wonder shall I find my wife in that fruit.” Husain Mahamat wanted him to gather it and see, but he would not till he had told his father, who said, “That must be the fruit; go and gather it.” So Majnun went back and broke the fruit off its stalk; and he said to his father, “Come with me to my room while I open it; I am afraid to open it alone, for perhaps I shall find a Rakshas in it that will eat me.”

“No,” said King Dantal; “remember, Laili will be naked; you must go alone and do not be afraid if, after all, a Rakshas is in the fruit, for I will stay outside the door, and you have only to call me with a loud voice, and I will come to you, so the Rakshas will not be able to eat you.”

Then Majnun took the fruit and began to cut it open tremblingly, for he shook with fear; and when he had cut

it, out stepped Laili, young and far more beautiful than she had ever been. At the sight of her extreme beauty, Majnun fell backwards fainting on the floor.

Laili took off his turban and wound it all round herself like a sari (for she had no clothes at all on), and then she called King Dantal, and said to him sadly, "Why has Majnun fallen down like this? Why will he not speak to me? He never used to be afraid of me; and he has seen me so many, many times."

King Dantal answered, "It is because you are so beautiful. You are far, far more beautiful than you ever were. But he will be very happy directly." Then the King got some water, and they bathed Majnun's face and gave him some to drink, and he sat up again.

Then Laili said, "Why did you faint? Did you not see I am Laili?"

"Oh!" said Prince Majnun, "I see you are Laili come back to me, but your eyes have grown so wonderfully beautiful, that I fainted when I saw them." Then they were all very happy, and King Dantal had all the drums in the place beaten, and had all the musical instruments played on, and they made a grand wedding-feast, and gave presents to the servants, and rice and quantities of rupees to the fakirs.

After some time had passed very happily, Prince Majnun and his wife went out to eat the air. They rode on the same horse, and had only a groom with them. They came to another kingdom, to a beautiful garden. "We must go into that garden and see it," said Majnun.

"No, no," said Laili; "it belongs to a bad Raja, Chumman Basa, a very wicked man." But Majnun insisted on going in, and in spite of all Laili could say, he got off the horse to look at the flowers. Now, as he was looking at the flowers, Laili saw Chumman Basa coming towards them, and she read in his eyes that he meant to kill her husband and seize her. So she said to Majnun, "Come, come, let us go; do not go near that bad man. I see in his eyes, and I feel in my heart, that he will kill you to seize me."

“What nonsense,” said Majnun. “I believe he is a very good Raja.

Anyhow, I am so near to him that I could not get away.”

“Well,” said Laili, “it is better that you should be killed than I, for if I were to be killed a second time, Khuda would not give me my life again; but I can bring you to life if you are killed.” Now Chumman Basa had come quite near, and seemed very pleasant, so thought Prince Majnun; but when he was speaking to Majnun, he drew his scimitar and cut off the prince’s head at one blow.

Laili sat quite still on her horse, and as the Raja came towards her she said, “Why did you kill my husband?”

“Because I want to take you,” he answered.

“You cannot,” said Laili.

“Yes, I can,” said the Raja.

“Take me, then,” said Laili to Chumman Basa; so he came quite close and put out his hand to take hers to lift her off her horse. But she put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a tiny knife, only as long as her hand was broad, and this knife unfolded itself in one instant till it was such a length! and then Laili made a great sweep with her arm and her long, long knife, and off came Chumman Basa’s head at one touch.

Then Laili slipped down off her horse, and she went to Majnun’s dead body, and she cut her little finger inside her hand straight down from the top of her nail to her palm, and out of this gushed blood like healing medicine. Then she put Majnun’s head on his shoulders, and smeared her healing blood all over the wound, and Majnun woke up and said, “What a delightful sleep I have had! Why, I feel as if I had slept for years!” Then he got up and saw the Raja’s dead body by Laili’s horse.

“What’s that?” said Majnun.

“That is the wicked Raja who killed you to seize me, just as I said he would.”

“Who killed him?” asked Majnun.

“I did,” answered Laili, “and it was I who brought you to life.”

“Do bring the poor man to life if you know how to do so,” said Majnun.

“No,” said Laili, “for he is a wicked man, and will try to do you harm.” But Majnun asked her for such a long time, and so earnestly to bring the wicked Raja to life, that at least she said, “Jump up on the horse, then, and go far away with the groom.”

“What will you do,” said Majnun, “if I leave you? I cannot leave you.”

“I will take care of myself,” said Laili; “but this man is so wicked, he may kill you again if you are near him.” So Majnun got up on the horse, and he and the groom went a long way off and waited for Laili. Then she set the wicked Raja’s head straight on his shoulders, and she squeezed the wound in her finger till a little blood-medicine came out of it. Then she smeared this over the place where her knife had passed, and just as she saw the Raja opening his eyes, she began to run, and she ran, and ran so fast, that she outran the Raja, who tried to catch her; and she sprang up on the horse behind her husband, and they rode so fast, so fast, till they reached King Dantal’s palace.

There Prince Majnun told everything to his father, who was horrified and angry. “How lucky for you that you have such a wife,” he said. “Why did you not do what she told you? But for her, you would be now dead.” Then he made a great feast out of gratitude for his son’s safety, and gave many, many rupees to the fakirs. And he made so much of Laili. He loved her dearly; he could not do enough for her. Then he built a splendid palace for her and his son, with a great deal of ground about it, and lovely gardens, and gave them great wealth, and heaps of servants to wait on them. But he would not allow any but their servants to enter their gardens and palace, and he would not allow Majnun to go out of them, nor Laili; “for,” said King Dantal, “Laili is so beautiful, that perhaps some one may kill my son to take her away.”

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