

Madschun

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Turkish

Intermediate

13 min read

Once upon a time there lived, in a small cottage among some hills, a woman with her son, and, to her great grief, the young man, though hardly more than twenty years of age, had not as much hair on his head as a baby. But, old as he looked, the youth was very idle, and whatever trade his mother put him to he refused to work, and in a few days always came home again.

On a fine summer morning he was lying as usual half asleep in the little garden in front of the cottage when the sultan's daughter came riding by, followed by a number of gaily dressed ladies. The youth lazily raised himself on his elbow to look at her, and that one glance changed his whole nature.

'I will marry her and nobody else,' he thought. And jumping up, he went to find his mother.

'You must go at once to the sultan, and tell him that I want his daughter for my wife,' he said.

'WHAT?' shouted the old woman, shrinking back into a corner, for nothing but sudden madness could explain such an amazing errand.

'Don't you understand? You must go at once to the sultan and tell him that I want his daughter for my wife,' repeated the youth impatiently.

‘But — but, do you know what you are saying?’ stammered the mother. ‘You will learn no trade, and have only the five gold pieces left you by your father, and can you really expect that the sultan would give his daughter to a penniless bald-pate like you?’

‘That is my affair; do as I bid you.’ And neither day nor night did her son cease tormenting her, till, in despair, she put on her best clothes, and wrapped her veil about her, and went over the hill to the palace.

It was the day that the sultan set apart for hearing the complaints and petitions of his people, so the woman found no difficulty in gaining admission to his presence.

‘Do not think me mad, O Excellency,’ she began, ‘though I know I must seem like it. But I have a son who, since his eyes have rested on the veiled face of the princess, has not left me in peace day or night till I consented to come to the palace, and to ask your Excellency for your daughter’s hand. It was in vain I answered that my head might pay the forfeit of my boldness, he would listen to nothing. Therefore am I here; do with me even as you will!’

Now the sultan always loved anything out of the common, and this situation was new indeed. So, instead of ordering the trembling creature to be flogged or cast into prison, as some other sovereigns might have done, he merely said: ‘Bid your son come hither.’

The old woman stared in astonishment at such a reply. But when the sultan repeated his words even more gently than before, and did not look in anywise angered, she took courage, and bowing again she hastened homeward.

‘Well, how have you sped?’ asked her son eagerly as she crossed the threshold.

‘You are to go up to the palace without delay, and speak to the sultan himself,’ replied the mother. And when he heard the good news, his face lightened up so wonderfully that his mother thought what a pity it was that he had no hair, as then he would be quite handsome.

‘Ah, the lightning will not fly more swiftly,’ cried he. And in another instant he was out of her sight.

When the sultan beheld the bald head of his daughter’s wooer, he no longer felt in the mood for joking, and

resolved that he must somehow or other shake himself free of such an unwelcome lover. But as he had summoned the young man to the palace, he could hardly dismiss him without a reason, so he hastily said:

‘I hear you wish to marry my daughter? Well and good. But the man who is to be her husband must first collect all the birds in the world, and bring them into the gardens of the palace; for hitherto no birds have made their homes in the trees.’

The young man was filled with despair at the sultan’s words. How was he to snare all these birds? and even if he did succeed in catching them it would take years to carry them to the palace! Still, he was too proud to let the sultan think that he had given up the princess without a struggle, so he took a road that led past the palace and walked on, not noticing whither he went.

In this manner a week slipped by, and at length he found himself crossing a desert with great rocks scattered here and there. In the shadow cast by one of these was seated a holy man or dervish, as he was called, who motioned to the youth to sit beside him.

‘Something is troubling you, my son,’ said the holy man; ‘tell me what it is, as I may be able to help you.’

‘O, my father,’ answered the youth, ‘I wish to marry the princess of my country; but the sultan refuses to give her to me unless I can collect all the birds in the world and bring them into his garden. And how can I, or any other man, do that?’

‘Do not despair,’ replied the dervish, ‘it is not so difficult as it sounds. Two days’ journey from here, in the path of the setting sun, there stands a cypress tree, larger than any other cypress that grows upon the earth. Sit down where the shadow is darkest, close to the trunk, and keep very still. By-and-by you will hear a mighty rushing of wings, and all the birds in the world will come and nestle in the branches. Be careful not to make a sound till everything is quiet again, and then say “Madschun!” At that the birds will be forced to remain where they are — not one can move from its perch; and you will be able to place them all over your head and arms and body, and in this way you must carry them to the sultan.’

With a glad heart the young man thanked the dervish, and paid such close heed to his directions that, a few days later, a strange figure covered with soft feathers walked into the presence of the sultan. The princess’s father was filled with surprise, for never had he seen such a sight before. Oh! how lovely were those little

bodies, and bright frightened eyes ! Soon a gentle stirring was heard, and what a multitude of wings unfolded themselves: blue wings, yellow wings, red wings, green wings. And when the young man whispered 'Go,' they first flew in circles round the sultan's head, and then disappeared through the open window, to choose homes in the garden.

'I have done your bidding, O Sultan, and now give me the princess,' said the youth. And the sultan answered hurriedly:

'Yes ! oh, yes ! you have pleased me well! Only one thing remains to turn you into a husband that any girl might desire. That head of yours, you know — it is so very bald ! Get it covered with nice thick curly hair, and then I will give you my daughter. You are so clever that I am sure this will give you no trouble at all.'

Silently the young man listened to the sultan's words, and silently he sat in his mother's kitchen for many days to come, till, one morning, the news reached him that the sultan had betrothed his daughter to the son of the wizar, and that the wedding was to be celebrated without delay in the palace. With that he arose in wrath, and made his way quickly and secretly to a side door, used only by the workmen who kept the building in repair, and, unseen by anyone, he made his way into the mosque, and then entered the palace by a gallery which opened straight into the great hall. Here the bride and bridegroom and two or three friends were assembled, waiting for the appearance of the sultan for the contract to be signed.

'Madschun !' whispered the youth from above. And instantly everyone remained rooted to the ground; and some messengers whom the sultan had sent to see that all was ready shared the same fate.

At length, angry and impatient, the sultan went down to behold with his own eyes what had happened, but as nobody could give him any explanation, he bade one of his attendants to fetch a magician, who dwelt near one of the city gates, to remove the spell which had been cast by some evil genius.

'It is your own fault,' said the magician, when he had heard the sultan's story. 'If you had not broken your promise to the young man, your daughter would not have had this ill befall her. Now there is only one remedy, and the bridegroom you have chosen must yield his place to the bald-headed youth.'

Sore though he was in his heart, the sultan knew that the magician was wiser than he, and despatched his most trusted servants to seek out the young man without a moment's delay and bring him to the palace. The youth,

who all this time had been hiding behind a pillar, smiled to himself when he heard these words, and, hastening home, he said to his mother: 'If messengers from the sultan should come here and ask for me, be sure you answer that it is a long while since I went away, and that you cannot tell where I may be, but that if they will give you money enough for your journey, as you are very poor, you will do your best to find me.' Then he hid himself in the loft above, so that he could listen to all that passed.

The next minute someone knocked loudly at the door, and the old woman jumped up and opened it.

'Is your bald-headed son here?' asked the man outside. 'If so, let him come with me, as the sultan wishes to speak with him directly.'

'Alas! sir,' replied the woman, putting a corner of her veil to her eyes, 'he left me long since, and since that day no news of him has reached me.'

'Oh! good lady, can you not guess where he may be? The sultan intends to bestow on him the hand of his daughter, and he is certain to give a large reward to the man who brings him back.'

'He never told me whither he was going,' answered the crone, shaking her head. 'But it is a great honour that the sultan does him, and well worth some trouble. There are places where, perhaps, he may be found, but they are known to me only, and I am a poor woman and have no money for the journey.'

'Oh! that will not stand in the way,' cried the man. 'In this purse are a thousand gold pieces; spend them freely. Tell me where I can find him and you shall have as many more.'

'Very well,' said she, 'it is a bargain; and now farewell, for I must make some preparations; but in a few days at furthest you shall hear from me.'

For nearly a week both the old woman and her son were careful not to leave the house till it was dark, lest they should be seen by any of the neighbours, and as they did not even kindle a fire or light a lantern, every-one supposed that the cottage was deserted. At length, one fine morning, the young man got up early and dressed himself, and put on his best turban, and after a hasty breakfast took the road to the palace.

The huge negro before the door evidently expected him, for without a word he let him pass, and another attendant who was waiting inside conducted him straight into the presence of the sultan, who welcomed him

gladly.

'Ah, my son ! where have you hidden yourself all this time ?' said he. And the bald-headed man answered:

'Oh, Sultan ! Fairly I won your daughter, but you broke your word, and would not give her to me. Then my home grew hateful to me, and I set out to wander through the world ! But now that you have repented of your ill-faith, I have come to claim the wife who is mine of right. Therefore bid your wizer prepare the contract.'

So a fresh, contract was prepared, and at the wish of the new bridegroom was signed by the sultan and the wizer in the chamber where they met. After this was done, the youth begged the sultan to lead him to the princess, and together they entered the big hall, where everyone was standing exactly as they were when the young man had uttered the fatal word.

'Can you remove the spell ?' asked the sultan anxiously.

'I think so,' replied the young man (who, to say the truth, was a little anxious himself), and stepping forward, he cried:

'Let the victims of Madschun be free !'

No sooner were the words uttered than the statues returned to life, and the bride placed her hand joyfully in that of her new bridegroom. As for the old one, he vanished completely, and no one ever knew what became of him.

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