



The Story of the Young King of the Black Isles

A 1001 Nights

Arabic

Intermediate

6 min read

ou must know, sire, that my father was Mahmoud, the king of this country, the Black Isles, so called from the four little mountains which were once islands, while the capital was the place where now the great lake lies. My story will tell you how these changes came about.

My father died when he was sixty-six, and I succeeded him. I married my cousin, whom I loved tenderly, and I thought she loved me too.

But one afternoon, when I was half asleep, and was being fanned by two of her maids, I heard one say to the other, "What a pity it is that our mistress no longer loves our master! I believe she would like to kill him if she could, for she is an enchantress."

I soon found by watching that they were right, and when I mortally wounded a favourite slave of hers for a great crime, she begged that she might build a palace in the garden, where she wept and bewailed him for two years.

At last I begged her to cease grieving for him, for although he could not speak or move, by her enchantments she just kept him alive. She turned upon me in a rage, and said over me some magic words, and I instantly

became as you see me now, half man and half marble.

Then this wicked enchantress changed the capital, which was a very populous and flourishing city, into the lake and desert plain you saw. The fish of four colours which are in it are the different races who lived in the town; the four hills are the four islands which give the name to my kingdom. All this the enchantress told me to add to my troubles. And this is not all. Every day she comes and beats me with a whip of buffalo hide.

When the young king had finished his sad story he burst once more into tears, and the Sultan was much moved.

“Tell me,” he cried, “where is this wicked woman, and where is the miserable object of her affection, whom she just manages to keep alive?”

“Where she lives I do not know,” answered the unhappy prince, “but she goes every day at sunrise to see if the slave can yet speak to her, after she has beaten me.”

“Unfortunate king,” said the Sultan, “I will do what I can to avenge you.”

So he consulted with the young king over the best way to bring this about, and they agreed their plan should be put in effect the next day. The Sultan then rested, and the young king gave himself up to happy hopes of release. The next day the Sultan arose, and then went to the palace in the garden where the black slave was. He drew his sword and destroyed the little life that remained in him, and then threw the body down a well. He then lay down on the couch where the slave had been, and waited for the enchantress.

She went first to the young king, whom she beat with a hundred blows.

Then she came to the room where she thought her wounded slave was, but where the Sultan really lay.

She came near his couch and said, “Are you better to-day, my dear slave? Speak but one word to me.”

“How can I be better,” answered the Sultan, imitating the language of the Ethiopians, “when I can never sleep for the cries and groans of your husband?”

“What joy to hear you speak!” answered the queen. “Do you wish him to regain his proper shape?”

“Yes,” said the Sultan; “hasten to set him at liberty, so that I may no longer hear his cries.”

The queen at once went out and took a cup of water, and said over it some words that made it boil as if it were on the fire. Then she threw it over the prince, who at once regained his own form. He was filled with joy, but the enchantress said, "Hasten away from this place and never come back, lest I kill you."

So he hid himself to see the end of the Sultan's plan.

The enchantress went back to the Palace of Tears and said, "Now I have done what you wished."

"What you have done," said the Sultan, "is not enough to cure me. Every day at midnight all the people whom you have changed into fish lift their heads out of the lake and cry for vengeance. Go quickly, and give them their proper shape."

The enchantress hurried away and said some words over the lake.

The fish then became men, women, and children, and the houses and shops were once more filled. The Sultan's suite, who had encamped by the lake, were not a little astonished to see themselves in the middle of a large and beautiful town.

As soon as she had disenchanted it the queen went back to the palace.

"Are you quite well now?" she said.

"Come near," said the Sultan. "Nearer still."

She obeyed. Then he sprang up, and with one blow of his sword he cut her in two.

Then he went and found the prince.

"Rejoice," he said, "your cruel enemy is dead."

The prince thanked him again and again.

"And now," said the Sultan. "I will go back to my capital, which I am glad to find is so near yours."

"So near mine!" said the King of the Black Isles.

“Do you know it is a whole year’s journey from here? You came here in a few hours because it was enchanted. But I will accompany you on your journey.”

“It will give me much pleasure if you will escort me,” said the Sultan, “and as I have no children, I will make you my heir.”

The Sultan and the prince set out together, the Sultan laden with rich presents from the King of the Black Isles.

The day after he reached his capital the Sultan assembled his court and told them all that had befallen him, and told them how he intended to adopt the young king as his heir.

Then he gave each man presents in proportion to his rank.

As for the fisherman, as he was the first cause of the deliverance of the young prince, the Sultan gave him much money, and made him and his family happy for the rest of their days.

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