



The Birds Who Befriended a King

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Arabic

Intermediate
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This is how the Hoopoes came to know the great King Solomon. Once he was far out in the wilderness, for there was no part of his kingdom that Solomon did not visit; he had seen that the great store city was finished to his liking, even Tadmor in the desert, and across the sand, the King's cavalcade made its way, with the camels and the dromedaries and their brodered saddle-cloths bright as flowers, and jewelled bridles flashing as brightly as the sun itself. But the heat smote down on the King's head, and Solomon yearned for shade. As if in answer to his longing, who should appear but a flock of Hoopoes. Being curious by nature, they circled round until they reached the King's camel and kept just overhead, so that they might watch this most famous of all monarchs and perchance overhear some word of wisdom. Thus the little birds cast a grateful shadow over the King for his whole journey and richly repaid they were, for Solomon always polite to the humblest creature in his kingdom, conversed freely with them during the whole time.

When they reached his palace, he thanked them for the service they had done him, and asked what he could do in return. Now the Hoopoes had begun their conversation with Solomon modestly enough; in fact, they had been very surprised that he had spoken to them at all. But he had questioned them so kindly about their ways of living, and their likes and preferences and relations, that they lost their fear of him and they came to this wonderful palace and saw all the servants in their shining robes standing behind the King's throne, and

waiting at his table, and lining the great court-yard, and when they beheld the walls of ivory inlaid with gold and the golden lions guarding the steps and the white peacocks on the silver terraces, it quite turned their heads to think they had journeyed right across the desert with the owner of these riches.

So instead of answering Solomon with thanks on their part and telling him his words of wisdom were rich reward for any shelter they had given, the Hoopoes begged leave to consult together and withdrew to the palace roof where they discussed what they would ask for. Finally they decided they would like golden crowns such as the King himself wore; then they could return to the other birds and reign over them. Thereupon the little birds flew down with a rush and made their request to the King as he walked in his wonderful garden. "What the King has said, the King has said," Solomon replied. "The gift you desire shall be granted; yet, because you rendered me true service, when you wish to get rid of your crowns, you may return and exchange them for wisdom."

"Nay, King," said the Hoopoes. "Well we know that wisdom has brought you great renown, but no one would bow down to you or give attention to your words, unless you wore your golden crown. We shall be able to repeat your wise words profitably now, for all will listen when they see gold crowns on our heads too."

"All the same, return to me without fear or shame, if your crowns do not satisfy," said King Solomon kindly and ordered his goldsmiths to supply the Hoopoes with crowns of the finest gold procurable. Off flew the silly little birds, therefore, with the shining crowns upon their heads, prouder than the peacocks and chattering more loudly than the parrots and macaws. They could scarcely wait to get back to their friends and hear their exclamations. But when the Hoopoes informed their friends they were now Kings of the Bird World, their friends only laughed and said they were quite satisfied with Solomon, and he was the only King they wished or needed. Then they drove the Hoopoes from the trees for their golden crowns were always catching in the branches and the other birds became tired of helping them out. But the Hoopoes decided the other birds were jealous and, rather flattered, gathered round the pools so that they could admire themselves in the water.

Very soon people began to notice the queer antics of the silly little things as they strutted up and down, cocking their heads first this side, then that, and finally a man caught one and discovered the wonderful golden crown it wore. He hurried off with it to a goldsmith who gave him so high a price for it, that the man rushed back to the pool and laid snares for the Hoopoes, who were so taken up with admiring themselves that they walked straight into them.

Then came the saddest time for the Hoopoes. Every one began to hunt them. The poor little birds could not go to the wells and the pools for they were thick with nets, they could not go into the gardens for fowlers lurked behind the flowers, they could not fly up onto the housetops for even there the people had set traps for them. There did not seem a spot on the earth where they could rest, and at last, the wretched little birds flew back to the palace and waited till they beheld the great King Solomon coming along his terrace, listening to his singers as they performed in the cool of the evening.

“Oh, King,” said they, “we have found that golden crowns are vanity; we know not what you do to keep yourself from being chased about and hunted, and so we have come to ask you to remove ours from us.”

“Beloved Hoopoes,” said the King, “a crown that people are expected to bow down to, always sits heavy on the head, and a crown that excites envy, is a net for the feet. The only crown that can be worn with comfort is the crown of service, and that crown should spring up naturally so that no one takes any particular notice of it.”

“Give us that crown of service, oh wise king,” said the poor little Hoopoes very humbly, for they wanted nothing better now than to be taken no notice of.

“May it shelter you even as it sheltered me,” said the great King; and on their heads, the Hoopoes beheld crowns of feathers. But with these crowns came quite a new feeling to the Hoopoes; they no longer wished to rule but to serve. Now the Arabian legend has it, Solomon had a wonderful flying carpet, where he sat on a golden throne with all his attendants round him. Mindful of the Hoopoes’ usefulness, he summoned all the birds to make a flying canopy; the Eagle was placed at their head, but the Hoopoes were placed immediately over Solomon as he sat in the centre of his court. Thus shadowed, Solomon and his friends and servants would rise from the ground and travel across the desert and over sea and land, in cool and comfort.



“King Solomon and the Hoopoe.” Illustration by Maxwell Armfield, published in Wonder Tales of the World by Constance Armfield (1920), Harcourt, Brace and Howe.

One day, however, when they were right out in the wilderness and the sun was beating down with all its might, a ray of sunlight flashed through and struck the King’s face. A hole had appeared in the canopy. Naturally word was passed to the Eagle who flew up at once to see what had happened, and thus perceived one of the Hoopoes was absent from its place, leaving a hole through which the sunbeam entered. The Eagle presented itself before Solomon therefore, and told the amazing news; and Solomon ordered the Eagle to hasten off at once and find the missing Hoopoe who must have soared up and above the heads of all the other birds to make its escape, for no one had seen it go. Off went the Eagle, rising up and up until it was lost to sight in the high skies. But though no one on earth could see the Eagle now, his sight was very keen and presently he beheld a speck winging its way across the distant desert and swooping down, met the missing Hoopoe. ” Where have you been? ” cried the Eagle.

*“Where black marble cuts the air,
In great walls, all shining bare,
Standing by the waterside: There a great queen I espied.
Golden tubs of orange trees
Stand against the walls, but these
Are not half as bright as she,
Sitting in great majesty.
She is called the Queen Balkis
And her land a garden is,
Lying over there, so far, Right across Arabia.”*

The Hoopoe was so excited it broke into verse, because it could not express its feelings any other way ; but the Eagle was terribly angry. The Hoopoe did not seem to mind having deserted Solomon; there it soared and circled, making up poetry about a Queen as if it had done nothing wrong at all! “And in the meantime, what do you think the great and wise King Solomon has been doing?” thundered the Eagle, ” whose noble head you are supposed to shield?”

“Ah, spare me, I beg,” said the little Hoopoe, ” for the sake of no other than our wise and noble King.”

“Spare you for his sake?” said the Eagle, very surprised. ‘What mercy do you deserve? And how can sparing you, help our great King?’

” Nevertheless, I say, spare me for his sake,” repeated the Hoopoe, ” and take me back with you as quickly as you please, for I have a most urgent message to deliver to no other than Solomon himself.”

The Eagle was so surprised at the Hoopoe’s boldness, that he allowed it to accompany him back to the Flying Carpet, and the Hoopoe flew onto the arm of Solomon’s throne. “I found it far across the desert,” said the Eagle. But before the Eagle could say another word, the Hoopoe broke in with

“Oh, great King, beyond your lands

A black marble palace stands

With a wondrous queen therein,

Golden hair and golden skin.

Golden oranges aglow

Stand before her in a row,

Brighter than gold fruit she is,

And her name is Queen Balkis”

“And how did you come to visit her?” said Solomon, very sternly. “Were you not on duty, and know you not the penalty for those who fly from duty?”

” Mercy,” cried the Hoopoe, ” even as you some day must ask for mercy. Yes, great King, I have sinned and I know full well that I deserve dire punishment, but let me tell you the wonders I have seen and give the message that has been given me, ere you crush me with your hand.”

“Why should I hearken to you?” said Solomon.

“Because no less than the King himself hath said, he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise,” returned the Hoopoe. ” Know that I had heard of the wonderful Queen of Sheba from a bird I met at Mecca; and as we flew across Arabia, I looked out and beheld the land of which so much had been told me. Nay, had not I heard the Queen who lived there was richer than even the great King, my master? So I could not resist flying down from

the canopy and having a look. Has not the great King said, 'The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul?'

"Aye, and the way of a fool is right in his own eyes," said Solomon sternly. "Ah, great King, crush me not till I have given the message," cried the Hoopoe, "until you have heard the whole of a story, you cannot judge. Harken to the story of my visit. Fertile and abundant in spices and gums is the land of Sheba, but I could notice little for wonder at the marble palace all jet black which rose from the centre of the kingdom. Yet, as I reached the palace, I ceased to wonder thereat, for seated on a throne of ebony was the most beautiful queen it is possible to imagine, with golden hair rippling over the steps of the throne and fanned by dozens of servants, into a whirling, golden cloud. I asked why they were fanning her and they said because the Queen's crown sat so heavy on her she could not bear the weight of her own hair. I flew in amongst the perfumed tresses, fine as golden rain, and thus I came close to her and heard her whispering to herself that she lacked wisdom and understanding and knew not how to govern her kingdom.

"Mighty Queen Balkis said I, 'Harken to the counsel of a little bird who is servant of the wisest King in the whole world. Well do I know that Solomon knows how to govern his kingdom wisely, for I have worn a crown myself and know how difficult it is to rule. But Solomon relieved me of my crown of gold and gave me this which I wear in comfort. A crown that every one is expected to bow down to, sits heavy on the head; the only crown that can be worn with ease is the crown of service.'

'Oh, wise words,' said the Queen, 'happy bird to know the great King Solomon. Go to your master and ask if his wisdom has taught him kindness, and if he would deign to advise a weak and sorrowful Queen who has scarcely the courage to cross the desert and present herself before the throne of one who has ruled his kingdom so well.'

"And now, what is your answer, oh, Solomon? Am I to return and tell her she may come and learn of your wisdom, or will you crush a little bird in your hand whose only fault is that it is too curious, a fault by the bye, which led me to fly over your head the first time we met one another."

"Be assured," said Solomon. "For that word spoken in season, your sin shall be forgiven. Fly back to the Queen, with this signet ring and tell her where a little bird does not fear to come, a Queen may safely follow. If a Hoopoe can learn wisdom and put it to such profit, shall not a Queen?"

Then the Hoopoe joyfully rose up from the hand of Solomon and flew back to Queen Balkis; and when that wonderful procession safely reached Solomon's palace, and the great Queen Balkis and the long, long train of

camels laden with spices and precious stones and gold and ebony and ivory, knelt before his throne, the little Hoopoe circled in the air above their heads, singing in its glad shrill voice these words that the King so often uttered: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver. As an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise reprover upon an obedient ear!"

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