

The Enchanted Cat

Baroness Orczy

Hungarian

Advanced
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In the far East, somewhere on the borders of Persia, there was once an extensive kingdom, over which ruled the good Sultan Abu Hafiz. The land was rich and fruitful; the trade prosperous; the people happy.

Yes! almost everybody in the kingdom was happy and gay, the only sorrowful person being the Sultan himself, and he was sadly wretched. He would walk on the terraces of his magnificent palace, and look over the fair gardens, but he never smiled, not even at the lovely goldfish that peered at him from out the crystal basins of the diminutive fountains.

The good Sultan, Abu Hafiz, had never been known to smile since the day when they brought home the beautiful Sultana Arizade dead. She had gone out walking one day, accompanied by her women, when at the very gate of the palace garden a great monster had bounded across her path, which so frightened the Sultana that she swooned away, and never recovered consciousness again. The faithful servants did all they could to restore their beloved mistress to life, but in vain—the sweet lady was dead; and they had to return to their lord bearing the dead body of his beautiful wife.

The Sultan rent his clothes, and tore his beard in his despair. He ordered his Court to go into mourning, and then for months no one ever saw his face. After a while, however, the affairs of State, and other matters of importance, claimed his attention, and he appeared again. He was just as good and kind as ever, and listened

to the claims of his poorest subjects with the same patience as formerly, but he was no longer merry, and even his little son never saw him smile.

At last, his melancholy growing deeper and deeper, his subjects began to fear that grief would eventually kill him, so his Ministers held council as to what could be done to rouse the Sultan from his apathy, and it was decided that the Grand Vizier, Ben Achmed, should approach his master on the subject of a second marriage.

Accordingly, Ben Achmed, seeing the Sultan one day more self-absorbed than ever, threw himself at his feet, and said:—

“Your Majesty, pardon the liberty an old and faithful subject is taking with you, but it is time that your mourning should cease. Your perpetual sadness causes all your people to lose heart, and really affects your entire nation. Laughter is banished from your kingdom; even trade is at a standstill. It is your solemn duty to rouse yourself from your grief; therefore, I, in the name of all your people, pray you most humbly to marry again some very beautiful Princess, who will cheer your Majesty and heal your sorrow.”

Needless to say that, at first, the Sultan refused to listen to such a proposition, but at last his sense of duty to his people prevailed, and he consented to marry again, provided a Princess could be found as beautiful and as virtuous as the dead Sultana. Then the Vizier despatched ambassadors to countries near and distant, in order to discover a lady worthy of becoming Abu Hafiz’s wife. At length one of the ambassadors, who had travelled very far, saw a Princess who was famous alike for her beauty, her wealth, and her accomplishments. She was the widow of a young Prince who had been killed in battle, and she was in every way fitted to share the throne of Abu Hafiz, and be a second mother to his son.

To this match, however, there existed an impediment. The Princess had a son whom she would not leave. The ambassador, however, wrote such a glowing account of her exquisite beauty, her enchanting voice, her wisdom and goodness, that at last the Sultan decided to formally ask her to become his wife. He despatched a thousand messengers bearing costly presents, and a guard of honour composed of three hundred of the finest and bravest young noblemen in the land, with orders to bring the Princess and her son and all her retinue back to his kingdom. Arrangements were made in the palace for a grand wedding, the city was gaily decorated, and a feast prepared to welcome the wonderful Princess.

The Sultan sent his Vizier to the city gate, and he himself received her on the steps of the grand entrance to the palace. The Princess was certainly all that the ambassador had painted her; a more stately and beautiful lady could hardly have been imagined. Abu Hafiz was quite charmed, and, taking her hand, he led her to the banqueting hall, where he placed her near him on his throne of gold. Her conversation pleased him even more than her beauty, for her voice was sweet, and she talked ably and with sense upon in many subjects.

For three days the festivities were kept up, during which time all descriptions of gorgeous spectacles, of the most lavish splendour, were displayed before the new Sultana. The guests returned to their homes at the end of the festivities, and life at the palace resumed its normal course.

Insensibly the new Sultana took the place of the good lady who had met with such an untimely end. She exercised boundless influence over the good Sultan, Abu Hafiz, over his court, and his entire kingdom.

The new Sultana was very proud, and although very generous, her good acts did not win the love of the people among whom she had so recently taken up her abode. When the fascination that her beauty excited had diminished, the people noticed that their new queen was gradually using her influence to supplant, in favour of her own boy, her husband's son in his rights to the throne. The rightful heir was now a handsome young Prince, and both court and people felt that he would emulate his father's justice and wisdom.

The Sultana and her son were very jealous of his popularity, and many were the plots they hatched together to try and injure him, unknown to Abu Hafiz. This was well nigh impossible, as the young Prince was always with his father, and continually surrounded by a faithful and devoted body guard. At last the Sultan, who was now getting quite old, became tired of the cares and responsibilities of his State, so he called his wife and his son to him one day, and told them that he had fully made up his mind to abdicate in favour of his young heir, and hoped the latter would soon marry a Princess as good and beautiful as his mother had been, and become a wise and just ruler, as he had always endeavoured to be.

This did not suit the Sultana's plans at all. If the young Prince Al Hafiz once gained the throne, the difficulties of doing away with him would become almost insurmountable.

That night she and her son Ben Haroun held a long consultation as to what had best be done. Prince Al Hafiz had already chosen a bride, a sweet lady, at his father's court, and whom he had loved for some time. The

Sultan had consented to their union, and in three days they were to be married.

After the wedding, Abu Hafiz would formally resign the crown to his son, and retire with his wife and stepson into private life. This was a very serious state of things. The Sultana and Ben Haroun resolved to strike a sudden and decisive blow, and that very night, when every one in the palace was asleep, they went out and consulted the celebrated magician, Abraduz, who had come over from the far East in the Sultana's retinue.

They found him in his cavern brewing magic potions in curiously shaped goblets. A tall peaked cap was on his head, and his beard was so long that it swept the ground round him where he sat.

Without even looking up he said to the Sultana—

“I know what you want, and why you are here to-night; you want to destroy the young prince, Al Hafiz. I cannot do it; magic cannot kill, though it can do many things.”

“You must help me,” the Sultana said, her eyes glistening with rage; “for if magic cannot kill, my sharp dagger can, and unless you do as I bid you.”

“I am not afraid,” the old man said, “but I will help you, because you have all been good to me, and because I know that the young prince hates all magicians, and when once Sultan, he will probably expel them from his country. But kill him I cannot; I have not the power. However, I have a potion here, which, if you put one drop on the prince's threshold, will, the moment he treads on it, change him into a black cat. A cat is easily destroyed. But remember, on the night of every new moon my power ceases, and the prince will resume his human form for six hours. Therefore, lay your plans carefully, for the cat once dead, no one can ever know who was instrumental in his destruction.”

Saying which, the old magician seized a long wand, and drawing a magic circle round a skull, into which he had poured some dark liquid, he began his incantation, the Sultana and the Prince watching him with eager curiosity. He murmured strange words, and mixed curious ingredients with his potion, some frog's legs, and skins of spotted snakes, a shark's tooth, and unicorn's horn. When he had finished, he picked up the skull and handed it to the Sultana, who carried her precious burden back with her to the palace.

It was yet night, and no one was about in the Palace, and the Sultana unable to contain her impatience, stole on

tiptoe to Prince Al Hafiz's door. Two faithful negroes lay on the step, to prevent any one having access to their master. These were, however, fast asleep. The Sultana cautiously, but rapidly, poured some of the contents of the skull on the threshold, and fled back to her own chamber.

The next day every one in the Palace was profoundly agitated, and anxious, for the young Prince Al Hafiz had disappeared, as though the earth had engulfed him. His two negro attendants strongly asserted that no one had crossed the threshold of his apartments. They saw him come out of his room, and then something occurred which neither of them could exactly describe. The young Prince absolutely seemed to vanish, and not a trace could be found of him anywhere. Search was made throughout the entire kingdom, but it was useless, the young heir had disappeared. His beautiful young bride, and the good Sultan, nearly went mad with grief, nothing could console them, and the Palace became more gloomy than it had been after the death of the first Sultana.

The only joy the poor old Sultan knew in all this trouble was the affection of a strange and beautiful Angora cat, which had haunted the Palace ever since the disappearance of the young Prince. It would sit for hours on his knee, and look at him with great and almost reproachful eyes, and the Sultan would stroke its soft fur, and somehow its eyes would remind him of his lost son.

Naturally the Sultana was not content for matters to remain as they were; the night of the new moon was rapidly approaching, and pussy must be got rid of before then. But this was a very difficult matter, for the Sultan would not allow the cat out of his sight. It sat on his knee most of the day, and slept on the foot of his bed at night.

One night, however, everything seemed to favour the Sultana's plans, it was a very hot and dark night, and the Sultan had been persuaded to take a sleeping draught to cure him from the restless nights he had been spending since the disappearance of his son. The Sultana waited till everything was quiet in the Palace, and then went quietly to her lord's bedside, and threw a thick cloth over the cat's head as it lay curled up asleep. Poor pussy! it tried to struggle, knowing in whose hands it had fallen, but the wicked Sultana hurried with it to the window which overlooked the terrace, and beyond that the lake, and taking hold of the cat's paws hurled it as far as her strength could send it towards the lake.

She heard a cry and a splash, but did not dare look out, and crept noiselessly to bed. The next morning she got

up happy, knowing that at last her hated stepson was out of her way for ever, when going down the marble steps of the terrace whom should she see but pussy sitting drying his still wet fur in the sun, and grinning at her triumphantly. She did not dare express any surprise, and eagerly waited to hear an explanation of the event.

The young Princess, who had been betrothed to Al Hafiz, had been out bathing with her attendants in the lake that night, when suddenly they saw poor pussy dropping apparently from nowhere, and seemingly not relishing his rapid descent. In a moment they had formed a circle, and picked puss up in their arms, just as he fell with a splash into the lake. He got a ducking, which no cat relishes, but still he was unhurt, and, when the sun rose, they deposited him on the terrace, where it took him hours to restore his fur to its original sleek condition.

The Sultana was quite unable to conceal her rage when she heard this account, and from that moment never attempted to hide her antipathy to the black cat, and it required all the Sultan's watchful care to prevent her murdering his pet, even before his eyes. The night for the new moon was now drawing very near, and plan after plan did the Sultana and her stepson concoct, but every time they failed, for pussy was so cunning that it always managed to evade its enemies, and sought protection with the Sultan or the young Princess.

At last the very night had come. The moon would rise in a few hours, and something must be done at once. Fortune favoured the Sultana; her lord was closeted with his Grand Vizier, discussing affairs of State, and pussy was roaming about the palace seeking for the young Princess, who had gone out for a midnight ramble. Prince Ben Haroun went to the lake and caught a beautiful young trout, which he left fastened to his line, then he and the Sultana hid behind the pillars of the terrace and waited.

Presently pussy came out. He thought he sniffed the delicious smell of freshly caught trout, and stepped cautiously on the terrace to see if he had not been deceived. There, sure enough, on the marble steps, lay the silvery fish. Pussy found it quite irresistible, and ventured a little nearer. The trout appeared to go back at this, and, as pussy again approached, the trout again drew off.

This was very odd. The fish was certainly very tempting, but would it be safe to venture so near those mysterious pillars? Pussy pondered for one moment, then made one spring at the trout. Alas! in an instant he was seized, a cloth thrown over his head, and, worse than all, felt a heavy stone was adjusted round his neck,

and he was being carried towards the lake. Struggles, scratches, bites, were useless; he was absolutely at the mercy of his enemies, and not a soul was in sight. He heard his wicked stepmother say, "Quick, the lake is not far; quick, before the moon rises. I can see a light towards the east."

And then all his hopes sank, for the cloth was taken from his head, and he saw the Sultana's wicked eyes glaring at him, while Ben Haroun prepared to hurl him into the water. Poor pussy was so small and so defenceless, his struggles were useless; he felt, indeed, his end had come. . . . At that very moment, the thin, pale crescent of the new moon emerged from the clouds in the east, and a second later Ben Haroun was wrestling with his brother Al Hafiz, while the Sultana had fled in terror. Al Hafiz felt the strength of a giant in him, and with little difficulty he overpowered and made a prisoner of Ben Haroun.

When the Sultan heard the story of his wife's and stepson's villainy, he was beside himself with rage, and ordered that both should be expelled his domains, and forbidden to return on penalty of death. As for the wicked old magician, he was hanged the next morning, and I think, dear little readers, that he well deserved it.

The good old Sultan was now so happy to have found his son, whom he had believed dead, that he quite forgot all his past troubles. There was a gorgeous wedding in the Palace for the young couple, and I have no doubt that if we were to go to that distant kingdom on the borders of Persia we should find the Sultan Abu Hafiz, the young Prince Al Hafiz and his wife, and probably also the Vizier, Ben Achmed, living happy and prosperous, even to this day.

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