

The Golden-Headed Fish

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Armenian

Intermediate
15 min read

Once upon a time there lived in Egypt a king who lost his sight from a bad illness. Of course he was very unhappy, and became more so as months passed, and all the best doctors in the land were unable to cure him. The poor man grew so thin from misery that everyone thought he was going to die, and the prince, his only son, thought so too.

Great was therefore the rejoicing through Egypt when a traveller arrived in a boat down the river Nile, and after questioning the people as to the reason of their downcast looks, declared that he was court physician to the king of a far country, and would, if allowed, examine the eyes of the blind man. He was at once admitted into the royal presence, and after a few minutes of careful study announced that the case, though very serious, was not quite hopeless.

‘Somewhere in the Great Sea,’ he said, ‘there exists a Golden-headed Fish. If you can manage to catch this creature, bring it to me, and I will prepare an ointment from its blood which will restore your sight. For a hundred days I will wait here, but if at the end of that time the fish should still be uncaught, I must return to my own master.’

The next morning the young prince set forth in quest of the fish, taking with him a hundred men, each man carrying a net. Quite a little fleet of boats was awaiting them, and in these they sailed to the middle of the Great Sea. During three months they laboured diligently from sunrise to sunset, but though they caught large multitudes of fishes, not one of them had a golden head.

‘It is quite useless now,’ said the prince on the very last night. ‘Even if we find it this evening, the hundred days will be over in an hour, and long before we could reach the Egyptian capital the doctor will be on his way home. Still, I will go out again, and cast the net once more myself.’ And so he did, and at the very moment that the hundred days were up, he drew in the net with the Golden-headed Fish entangled in its meshes.

‘Success has come, but, as happens often, it is too late,’ murmured the young man, who had studied in the schools of philosophy; ‘but, all the same, put the fish in that vessel full of water, and we will take it back to show my father that we have done what we could.’ But when he drew near the fish it looked up at him with such piteous eyes that he could not make up his mind to condemn it to death. For he knew well that, though the doctors of his own country were ignorant of the secret of the ointment, they would do all in their power to extract something from the fish’s blood. So he picked up the prize of so much labour, and threw it back into the sea, and then began his journey back to the palace. When at last he reached it he found the king in a high fever, caused by his disappointment, and he refused to believe the story told him by his son.

‘Your head shall pay for it ! Your head shall pay for it !’ cried he; and bade the courtiers instantly summon the executioner to the palace.

But of course somebody ran at once to the queen, and told her of the king’s order, and she put common clothes on the prince, and filled his pockets with gold, and hurried him on board a ship which was sailing that night for a distant island.

‘Your father will repent some day, and then he will be thankful to know you are alive,’ said she. ‘But one last counsel will I give you, and that is, take no man into your service who desires to be paid every month.’

The young prince thought this advice rather odd. If the servant had to be paid anyhow, he did not understand what difference it could make whether it was by the year or by the month. However, he had many times proved that his mother was wiser than he, so he promised obedience.

After a voyage of several weeks, he arrived at the island of which his mother had spoken. It was full of hills and woods and flowers, and beautiful white houses stood everywhere in gardens.

‘What a charming spot to live in,’ thought the prince. And he lost no time in buying one of the prettiest of the dwellings.

Then servants came pressing to offer their services; but as they all declared that they must have payment at the end of every month, the young man, who remembered his mother’s words, declined to have anything to say to them. At length, one morning, an Arab appeared and begged that the prince would engage him.

‘And what wages do you ask?’ inquired the prince, when he had questioned the new-come and found him suitable.

‘I do not want money,’ answered the Arab; ‘at the end of a year you can see what my services are worth to you, and can pay me in any way you like.’ And the young man was pleased, and took the Arab for his servant.

Now, although no one would have guessed it from the look of the side of the island where the prince had landed, the other part was a complete desert, owing to the ravages of a horrible monster which came up from the sea, and devoured all the corn and cattle. The governor had sent bands of soldiers to lie in wait for the creature in order to kill it; but, somehow, no one ever happened to be awake at the moment that the ravages were committed. It was in vain that the sleepy soldiers were always punished severely — the same thing invariably occurred next time; and at last heralds were sent throughout the island to offer a great reward to the man who could slay the monster.

As soon as the Arab heard the news, he went straight to the governor’s palace.

‘If my master can succeed in killing the monster, what reward will you give him?’ asked he.

'My daughter and anything besides that he chooses,' answered the governor. But the Arab shook his head.

'Give him your daughter and keep your wealth,' said he; 'but, henceforward, let her share in your gains, whatever they are.'

'It is well,' replied the governor; and ordered a deed to be prepared, which was signed by both of them.

That night the Arab stole down to the shore to watch, but, before he set out, he rubbed himself all over with some oil which made his skin smart so badly that there was no chance of his going to sleep as the soldiers had done. Then he hid himself behind a large rock and waited. By — and — by a swell seemed to rise on the water, and, a few minutes later, a hideous monster — part bird, part beast, and part serpent — stepped noiselessly on to the rocks. It walked stealthily up towards the fields, but the Arab was ready for it, and, as it passed, plunged his dagger into the soft part behind the ear. The creature staggered and gave a loud cry, and then rolled over dead, with its feet in the sea.

The Arab watched for a little while, in order to make sure that there was no life left in his enemy, but as the huge body remained quite still, he quitted his hiding place, and cut off the ears of his foe. These he carried to his master, bidding him show them to the governor, and declare that he himself, and no other, had killed the monster.

'But it was you, and not I, who slew him,' objected the prince.

'Never mind; do as I bid you. I have a reason for it,' answered the Arab. And though the young man did not like taking credit for what he had never done, at length he gave in.

The governor was so delighted at the news that he begged the prince to take his daughter to wife that very day; but the prince refused, saying that all he desired was a ship which would carry him to see the world. Of course this was granted him at once, and when he and his faithful Arab embarked they found, heaped up in the vessel, stores of diamonds and precious stones, which the grateful governor had secretly placed there.

So they sailed, and they sailed, and they sailed; and at length they reached the shores of a great kingdom.

Leaving the prince on board, the Arab went into the town to find out what sort of a place it was. After some hours he returned, saying that he heard that the king's daughter was the most beautiful princess in the world,

and that the prince would do well to ask for her hand.

Nothing loth, the prince listened to this advice, and taking some of the finest necklaces in his hand, he mounted a splendid horse which the Arab had bought for him, and rode up to the palace, closely followed by his faithful attendant.

The strange king happened to be in a good humour, and they were readily admitted to his presence. Laying down his offerings on the steps of the throne, he prayed the king to grant him his daughter in marriage.

The monarch listened to him in silence; but answered, after a pause:

‘Young man, I will give you my daughter to wife, if that is your wish; but first I must tell you that she has already gone through the marriage ceremony with a hundred and ninety young men, and not one of them lived for twelve hours after. So think, while there is yet time.’

The prince did think, and was so frightened that he very nearly went back to his ship without any more words. But just as he was about to withdraw his proposal the Arab whispered:

‘Fear nothing, but take her.’

‘The luck must change some time,’ he said, at last; ‘and who would not risk his head for the hand of such a peerless princess?’

‘As you will,’ replied the king. ‘Then I will give orders that the marriage shall be celebrated to-night.’

And so it was done; and after the ceremony the bride and bridegroom retired to their own apartments to sup by themselves, for such was the custom of the country. The moon shone bright, and the prince walked to the window to look out upon the river and upon the distant hills, when his gaze suddenly fell on a silken shroud neatly laid out on a couch, with his name embroidered in gold thread across the front; for this also was the pleasure of the king.

Horrified at the spectacle, he turned his head away, and this time his glance rested on a group of men, digging busily beneath the window. It was a strange hour for anyone to be at work, and what was the hole for? It was a curious shape, so long and narrow, almost like — Ah! yes, that was what it was! It was his grave that they were

digging !

The shock of the discovery rendered him speechless, yet he stood fascinated and unable to move. At this moment a small black snake darted from the mouth of the princess, who was seated at the table, and wriggled quickly towards him. But the Arab was watching for something of the sort to happen, and seizing the serpent with some pincers that he held in one hand, he cut off its head with a sharp dagger.

The king could hardly believe his eyes when, early the next morning, his new son-in-law craved an audience of his Majesty.

‘What, you ?’ he cried, as the young man entered.

‘Yes, I. Why not ?’ asked the bridegroom, who thought it best to pretend not to know anything that had occurred. ‘You remember, I told you that the luck must turn at last, and so it has. But I came to ask whether you would be so kind as to bid the gardeners fill up a great hole right underneath my window, which spoils the view.’

‘Oh ! certainly, yes; of course it shall be done !’ stammered the king. ‘Is there anything else ?’

‘No, nothing, thank you,’ replied the prince, as he bowed and withdrew.

Now, from the moment that the Arab cut off the snake’s head, the spell, or whatever it was, seemed to have been taken off the princess, and she lived very happily with her husband. The days passed swiftly in hunting in the forests, or sailing on the broad river that flowed past the palace, and when night fell she would sing to her harp, or the prince would tell her tales of his own country.

One evening a man in a strange garb, with a face burnt brown by the sun, arrived at court. He asked to see the bridegroom, and falling on his face announced that he was a messenger sent by the Queen of Egypt, proclaiming him king in succession to his father, who was dead.

‘Her Majesty begs you will set off without delay, and your bride also, as the affairs of the kingdom are somewhat in disorder,’ ended the messenger.

Then the young man hastened to seek an audience of his father-in-law, who was delighted to find that his

daughter's husband was not merely the governor of a province, as he had supposed, but the king of a powerful country. He at once ordered a splendid ship to be made ready, and in a week's time rode down to the harbour, to bid farewell to the young couple.

In spite of her grief for the dead king, the queen was overjoyed to welcome her son home, and commanded the palace to be hung with splendid stuffs to do honour to the bride. The people expected great things from their new sovereign, for they had suffered much from the harsh rule of the old one, and crowds presented themselves every morning with petitions in their hands, which they hoped to persuade the king to grant. Truly, he had enough to keep him busy; but he was very happy for all that, till, one night, the Arab came to him, and begged permission to return to his own land.

Filled with dismay the young man said: 'Leave me ! Do you really wish to leave me ? Sadly the Arab bowed his head.

'No, my master; never could I wish to leave you ! But I have received a summons, and I dare not disobey it.'

The king was silent, trying to choke down the grief he felt at the thought of losing his faithful servant.

'Well, I must not try to keep you,' he faltered out at last. 'That would be a poor return for all that you have done for me ! Everything I have is yours: take what you will, for without you I should long ago have been dead !'

'And without you, I should long ago have been dead,' answered the Arab. 'I am the Golden-headed Fish.'

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