

**THE PRINCE AND THE
TORTOISE
A TALE FROM THE BOOK OF
THE THOUSAND NIGHTS AND
ONE NIGHT**

Превод от френски: Едуард Пауис Матърс, 1923

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It is related that there was once, in the antiquity of time and the passage of the age and of the moment, a powerful sultan whom Allah had blessed with three sons: Ali, the eldest, Hussein, the second, and Muhammad, the youngest. They were all indomitable males and heroic warriors; but the youngest was the most handsome, the bravest and the most generous. Their father loved them equally and, in the justice of his heart, had resolved to leave to each an equal part of his riches and his kingdom.

Also, when they came to marriageable age, the king called his wise and prudent wazir to him, saying, "O wazir, I wish to find wives for my three sons, and have called you to me that you may give me your advice."

The wazir reflected for an hour, and then answered, lifting his head, "O king of time, the matter is delicate, for good and evil chance are not to be told beforehand, and against the decree of destiny there is no provision. I suggest that you take the three princes, armed with their bows and arrows, up to the terrace of the palace, and there, after bandaging their eyes, make them each turn round several times. After that, let them fire their arrows straight ahead of them, and let the houses upon which the arrows fall be visited. Have the owners of the houses brought before you and ask of each his daughter in marriage for the marksman of the arrow which fell upon his house. Thus each of your sons will have a bride chosen by destiny."

"Your advice is excellent, and I shall act upon it!" cried the sultan. As soon as his sons returned from hunting, he told them of the trial which was to be made and led them up, with their bows and quivers, to the terrace of his palace.

The dignitaries of the court followed and watched with breathless interest while the eyes of the young men were bandaged.

The eldest prince was turned about, and then discharged his arrow straight in front of him. It flew through the air with great swiftness and fell upon the dwelling of a most noble lord.

In like manner the second prince's arrow fell upon the terrace of the commander-in-chief of the king's army. But, when Muhammad drew his bow, the arrow fell upon a house whose owner was not known.

The king, with his retinue, set forth to visit the three houses, and found the great lord's daughter and the commander-in-chief's daughter were girls as fair as moons, and that their parents were delighted to marry them to the two princes. But when the king visited the third house, on

which Muhammed's shaft had fallen, he found in it no inhabitant except a large and lonely tortoise.

Therefore, deeming that there could be no thought for a moment of marrying a prince to such an animal, the sultan decided that the test should be made again. The youngest prince mounted again to the terrace and again shot an arrow blindfold, but it fell true upon the house of the large and lonely tortoise.

The king grew angry at this, and cried, "By Allah, your shooting is not fortunate today, my son! Pray for the prophet!"

"Blessing and peace be upon him and upon his companions and those who are faithful to him!" answered Muhammad.

"Now invoke the name of Allah," exclaimed the king, "and shoot a third arrow."

"In the name of the merciful, the compassionate!" exclaimed Muhammad, as he strongly drew his bow and sent a third shaft onto the roof of the house inhabited by the large and lonely tortoise.

When the Sultan saw, beyond any manner of doubt, that destiny favored the tortoise, he decided that his youngest son should remain a bachelor, and said to him, "My son, as this tortoise is not of our race, or our kind, or our religion, it would be better for you not to marry at all until Allah takes us again into his compassion."

But young Muhammad cried in dissent from this, "I swear by the virtues of the prophet (upon whom be prayer and peace!) that the time of my celibacy is over! If the large tortoise is written in my destiny I shall assuredly marry her."

"She is certainly written in your destiny!" cried the astonished sultan. "But it would be a monstrous thing for a human being to wed with a tortoise!"

"I have no predilection for tortoises in general," cried the prince. "It is this particular one whom I wish to marry."

The sultan, who loved his son, made no more objections but, though the weddings of Ali and Hussein were celebrated with great splendor for forty days and forty nights and then felicitously consummated, no one at court, neither his two brothers, nor their wives, nor the wives of the amirs and dignitaries, would accept an invitation to Muhammed's bridal feast, and, instead, they did all in their power to spoil and make it sad.

Poor Muhammad was bitterly humiliated by the mocking smiles and turned backs which everywhere greeted him; but of his marriage night he would say nothing, and only Allah, from whom no secrets are hid, can tell what passed between the two. It is certain, at least, that no one in that kingdom could imagine how a human youth might couple with a tortoise, even though she were as big as a stock jar.

In the time which came after the three weddings, the years and preoccupations of his reign, added to the emotion of his disappointment in Muhammad, bowed the king's back and thinned his bones. He pined away and became yellow. He lost his appetite and, with his appetite, his vision, so that he became almost completely blind.

The three princes, who loved their father dearly, resolved to leave his health no longer in the ignorant and superstitious care of the harem. When they had concerted together, they approached the sultan and kissed his hand, saying, "Dear father, your face is becoming yellow, your appetite is weakening, and your sight is failing you. If these things go on, we shall soon be tearing our garments for grief that we have lost the prop of all our life. Therefore you must listen to our counsel and obey it. We have determined that our wives and not the women of the harem shall henceforth prepare your food, for these last are great experts in the kitchen and by their cookery can give you back appetite which shall furnish strength, strength which will furnish health, and health which will restore your vision."

The sultan was deeply touched by this care on his sons' part. "May Allah shower his blessings upon you!" he said. "But I am afraid that this will be a great nuisance for your wives."

"A nuisance to our wives?" they cried. "They are your slaves and have no more urgent object in life than to prepare the food which will restore you to health. We have agreed that each of them shall prepare a separate dish, and that you shall choose your favorite in appearance, odor, and taste. Thus appetite will come back to you, and your eyes be cured."

"You know better than I do what is for the best," answered the sultan, as he embraced them.

The three princes went joyfully to their wives and bade them prepare the most admirable dish they could, and each said further, to excite a spirit of emulation, "It is essential that our father should prefer the cooking of our house."

After they had given their orders, the two elder brothers were for ever mocking Muhammad and asking him how a tortoise cooked, but he met all their jests with a calm smile.

His wife, the large and lonely tortoise, had only been waiting for such an opportunity to show what she could do. At once she set to work, and her first care was to send a confidential servant to her elder sister-in-law, begging her to send back all the rat and mouse dung which she could collect in her house, that the tortoise, who never employed any other condiment, might use these matters for seasoning the rice dishes which she was preparing for the sultan.

“As Allah lives, I will do no such thing!” said Ali’s wife to herself. “If these things make really good seasoning, let the wretched tortoise find her own. I can make all the use of them that is necessary.” Then aloud to the servant she said, “I regret that I have to refuse your mistress’s request, but I have hardly enough rat and mouse dung for my own requirements.”

When the servant returned with this answer, the tortoise laughed happily, and sent her to Hussein’s wife with a request for all the hens’ and pigeon’s droppings which she had by her. The servant returned from this mission empty handed, with a bitter and disobliging message from the second princess. But when the tortoise had caused the words to be repeated to her, she fell into an ecstasy of contentment and laughed so heartily that she fell over on her backside.

As soon as she was a little recovered, she prepared those meats which she could cook best, covered the dish which held them with a wicker cover, and wrapped the whole in a rose-scented napkin. Then she dispatched her servant with the dish to the sultan, at the same moment as his other two daughters-in-law were sending theirs by slaves.

The time of the meal arrived, and the sultan sat down before the three dishes; but, when he had lifted the lid of that sent by the eldest son’s wife, there rose so foul a steam and odor of rat turds that it might well have asphyxiated an elephant.

The sultan was so disagreeably affected by this stench that he fell head over heels in a swoon, and, when his sons succeeded in bringing him to with rose-water and the use of fans, he sat up and cursed his daughter-in-law heartily.

In a little while he became calmer and consented to try the second dish; but, as soon as it was uncovered, a fetid stink of burnt birds’

droppings took him by the throat and eyes so that he thought that the hour of blindness and death was upon him. It was not until the windows had been thrown open and the dish removed and benzoin burnt with incense to purify the air, that the disgusted old man felt himself strong enough to say, "What harm have I done to your wives, my sons, that they should try to dig me a grave before my time?"

The two elder princes could only answer that the thing passed their understanding; but young Muhammad kissed his father's hand and begged him to forget his previous disappointments in the delight of the third dish.

"What is that, Muhammad?" cried the king in an indignant rage. "Do you mock your old father? When women can prepare such frightful foods, do you expect me to touch the cooking of a tortoise? I can see that you have all sworn to destroy me."

Muhammad went on his knees and swore, by his life and by the verity of the faith, that the third dish would make up for all, and that he himself would eat anything of it which was not to his father's taste. He urged with such fervor and humility that the sultan at last signed to the slave to lift the third cover, and waited with a set jaw, murmuring, "I seek refuge in the protection of Allah!"

But it was the soul of all fine cooking which rose from the dish that the tortoise had prepared. It exquisitely dilated the fans of the old man's heart, it nourished the fans of his lungs, it shook the fans of his nostrils, it brought back lost appetite, it opened his eyes and clarified his vision. He ate for an hour without stopping, then drank an excellent sherbet of musk and pounded snow, and finally gurgled several times from the very bottom of his satisfied stomach.

In great delight he gave thanks to Allah and praised the cooking of the tortoise. Muhammad accepted his congratulations modestly, in order not to excite the jealousy of his brothers. "That is only one of my wife's talents, dear father," he said. "Allah grant that she may some day find a chance really to earn your praises." Then he begged the king to allow his future nourishment to be entirely in the hands of the tortoise, and his delighted father readily agreed to the arrangement, which in a few weeks entirely reestablished his health and eyesight.

To celebrate his cure the sultan gave a great feast, and bade his three sons attend it with their wives. At once the two elder princesses began to

make preparation that they might appear with honor and success before their father-in-law.

The large tortoise also schemed how to whiten her husband's visage before the people by the beauty of her escorting and the elegance of her clothes.

Her first step was to send her confidential servant to Ali's wife with a request for the loan of the big goose which she had in her courtyard, that the tortoise might use it as a fitting steed on which to ride to the festivities. The princess gave so peremptory a refusal that the good tortoise fell over on her backside in the convulsions of laughter which it occasioned her.

Then she sent to the second sister to borrow her large he-goat for the same purpose, and never has the tortoise been so convulsed and dilated with pure joy as was this one when she received a second and much ruder refusal.

The hour of the feast came, and the old queen's women were drawn up in good order at the outside door of the harem to receive the three royal brides. As they waited, a cloud of dust rolled towards them and, when it dissipated, they saw a gigantic goose waddling forward with the speed of the wind, throwing her legs to left and right, beating her wings, and carrying the first princess of the kingdom clinging to her neck in disordered fright. Almost immediately afterwards, a he-goat, rearing and savagely bleating, came up to the entrance also, bearing upon his back the second princess, all stained with dust and dung.

The sultan and his wife were deeply offended by this double exhibition, and the former cried, "See, they are not content with strangling and poisoning me; they wish to mock me before the people!"

The queen received the two women coldly, and an uncomfortable pause was only broken by the arrival of the third princess. The king and his wife were full of apprehension, saying to each other, "If two humans could show so absurdly, what can we expect from a tortoise? There is no power or might save in Allah!" So saying, they waited with caught breath for what might appear.

The first rank of couriers appeared, announcing the arrival of prince Muhammed's wife, and presently four handsome grooms, dressed in brocade and rich tunics with trailing sleeves, led up the palanquin. It was covered with bright-colored silks, and the black men who carried it set it down by the stairs. An unknown princess of bright splendor stepped from it,

and the women, supposing her to be a maid of honor, waited for the alighting of the tortoise. Yet, when the palanquin was borne away, and this delightful vision mounted the steps alone, they recognized her as Muhammed's bride and received her with honor and effusion. The sultan's heart rejoiced to see her grace and nobility, her charming manners and musical movements.

At once the sultan bade his sons and their wives be seated by him and by the queen, and, when they had taken their places, the feast was served.

The first dish was, as usual, a profusion of rice swollen in butter. Before anyone could take a mouthful the beautiful princess lifted the dish and poured all its contents over her hair. Immediately each grain of rice turned to a pearl, and the pearls ran down the long strands of hair and tinkled to the floor in a bright cascade.

Before the company could recover its wits after so admirable a prodigy, she also lifted a large tureen, filled with thick green soup, and poured its contents over her head in the same way. The green soup changed to an infinity of emeralds among her hair, and these fell about her like green rain, to mingle their sea-tints with the pearls upon the floor.

During the delighted confusion which followed, the servants brought other supplies of rice and green soup for the guests to eat, and the two elder princesses, now yellow with jealousy, could not leave well alone. The eldest seized on the dish of rice and the second on the tureen of green soup; both poured the contents of these things upon their heads. But the rice remained rice in the hair of the first, horribly daubing her with butter, and the soup, remaining soup, ran down in a sticky course over the hair and face and garments of the second, for all the world like cow slop.

The sultan was disgusted at these accidents and commanded his two elder daughters-in-law to withdraw from the feast, also he proclaimed that he wished never to see them again, or smell them, or hear of them. Their husbands, therefore, led them away in a great rage, and you may suppose that all four noses trailed very near the ground. So much for them.

When prince Muhammad and his magic princess were left alone with the sultan, he embraced them and took them to his heart, saying, "You alone are my children!" He wrote a will leaving his throne to his youngest son and, calling together his amirs and wazirs, made his intention known to them. Then to the two young people, he said, "I wish you both to stay with me in my palace until the end."

“To hear is to obey,” they answered. “Our father’s desire is upon our heads and before our eyes.”

That she might never again be tempted to resume the appearance of a tortoise and so shock the old sultan, the princess ordered her servant to bring the large and lonely shell which she had left at home that day and, when it was fetched, burnt it without compunction. Ever afterwards she remained in her own delightful form. And glory be to Allah who gave her a faultless body, a marvel to the eyes of men!

The giver showered his blessings upon these two and delighted them with numerous children.

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