

The Amir who Became a Weaver

Once upon a time there was an Amir who used to go through the streets of his capital city disguised as a traveller, listening to what his people thought, in order to help them. If he found there was great suffering in any family he would leave some money at their door, and do good by stealth in every way he could.

One evening, with his faithful Vizir beside him, he was sitting in a café drinking tea with some merchants, when one said:

'May Allah give everlasting life to our noble Amir, but his existence must indeed be devoid of any interest, when he has no trade but that of being an Amir.'

'Why do you think that?' the disguised monarch wanted to know, with a glance at his Vizir.

'Just think of it, nothing but meetings of the Council, affairs of State, great feasts and visits from foreigners who want something; His Majesty's life must be sometimes quite boring,' continued the merchant, and the others in the room agreed.

'What do you think the Amir should do about it?' asked the Vizir, trying to control his temper.

'Why, learn a trade, of course!' said the merchant, and the others all laughed. 'But seriously, if he could become interested in something which he could do with his hands, his life would be much more interesting, I assure you.'

'You are right,' said the Amir, 'a man should have a trade at his finger-tips, in case he might be in need

of it one day, even if he be of royal blood.' And he smiled as he sipped his green tea, for a thought was forming in his mind.

When they returned to the Palace that night the Vizir said:

'O, Fountain of Knowledge and Well of Wisdom, if you wish me to take action against that man and his companions who spoke so carelessly of their ruler, let me go now, and I shall have them in prison before day-break.' His eyes were bright with anger, and his beard wagged like a goat's as he spoke.

But the Amir raised his hand in admonition.

'No, my dear Vizir, stay your wrath, for my outspoken subjects have indeed given me something to think about. Tomorrow summon to the Court all the coppersmiths, carpet-makers, potters, dyers and other tradesmen, so that I may choose one of their crafts and learn it. The merchant was right, I need to do something with my hands.'

Next day all the craftsmen were assembled, and the Amir watched each one at his own specific trade, until he saw the beautiful workmanship for which the city was famous in those days. After looking at everything very carefully, the Amir decided to become proficient in the art of the weaver. So the finest weaver in all the land was sent to the Palace each day to teach the Amir, until he had completely mastered the art.

Whenever he needed to have a fresh outlook on a problem, or relax completely after arguments with his ministers, the Amir would work at his loom until he had forgotten all the cares of the day.

He had one especial design of which he was very fond, a colourful flower border which he wove to perfection, and he made several small silk squares of this motif which he presented to the Queen and her ladies as a mark of favour.

One day, when the Amir and the Vizir were wan-

dering (disguised as merchants) down a particularly dark street, two men who had been following them suddenly pounced, and brought both the Amir and his minister to the ground. They dragged them into a sinister-looking house nearby, with darkened shutters, and tied them up inside one of the rooms.

'What a lucky chance' said one evil robber to the other, as they examined the gold in the two purses stolen from their prisoners. 'We can buy ourselves some new clothes with this and be taken for gentlemen. But what shall we do with these men?'

'Let us alone', said the Vizir, thinking quickly. 'We have done you no harm. We are weavers, coming from Samarkand to weave tapestries at the Court of the Amir. If you kill us, you will lose a lot of money. You wouldn't like to do that, would you?'

'How is that?' asked the first robber, greedy for more gold. 'Explain at once, or you will feel my dagger!'

'My companion here', continued the Vizir calmly, 'is so skilled in weaving that he can command a thousand gold pieces for a handkerchief.'

'What!' cried the second robber, 'Then weave one, and we shall take it and sell it in the city.' And they untied the Amir, giving him back his small hand loom which he had been carrying with him.

The handkerchief which the Amir now proceeded to make took three days. When it was finished, it was the most beautiful piece of work that the Amir had ever done, and he gave it to the robbers with these words:

'This is worthy of the Queen herself—take it to the Palace and offer it to one of the ladies of the Court for Her Majesty, and you can command a thousand gold pieces for it . . . I swear upon my life!'

While one robber went off to sell the handkerchief, the other watched that the two prisoners did not escape. Wearing new clothes, and posing as a foreign

merchant with silk goods of inestimable value, the first robber gained access to the outer door of the Harem, and sent in the handkerchief to be shown to the Queen.

No sooner had Her Majesty set eyes on the design which had been created by the Amir himself, and examined the craftsmanship, than she knew it was the work of her husband. She, and she alone, knew that the Amir was missing, for in case the country should be taken over by enemies, the news of the ruler's disappearance was known by none other.

'Who brings this handkerchief?' she asked her lady-in-waiting.

'Your Majesty, it is a foreign merchant who is asking a thousand pieces of gold for it. He says he has brought it from a far country.'

'Buy it, give him what he asks, but have him secretly followed,' ordered the Queen, 'and bring me back complete directions of the place at which he is staying. Also, ask him if he can bring any more like this.'

The go-between did as she was told. When the robber received the gold pieces without any haggling on the part of the Harem woman, he went back to his associate as fast as his legs would carry him.

'Brother, we are in luck,' said he, 'for they gave me the money right away, and asked if we had any more like it, so we can get this fellow to weave more.'

'Excellent,' said the other rogue, 'We will get him to make another ten of these, and then we can kill him.'

As soon as the Queen received the information from the Chief Spy regarding the whereabouts of the robbers' house, she sent for the Captain of the Guard, and told him all she knew.

'Thus,' she finished, 'it is obvious your soldiers must storm that house, for no doubt the Amir is held

prisoner there. Pray Allah you will find him in good health!

'To hear is to obey, your Majesty,' barked the Captain of the Guard, and gathering his troops, set out for the place at once.

While the Amir was beginning to weave the second handkerchief, the two robbers were counting their gold, and so it was a complete surprise to them when the soldiers burst into the house half an hour later. The Amir was never more pleased to see his soldiers in all his life, and led the way back to the Palace with a joyful tread.

Alas, the two robbers, for all their fine clothes, had their heads struck from their shoulders, and their store of gold was distributed among the poor.

Happily reunited with his Queen, and praising her for her cleverness in understanding the meaning of the cryptic message he had woven into the handkerchief, the Amir ruminated:

'Yes, indeed, it is perfectly true that everyone should learn a trade, for little does he know when he might have need of it, even if he be an Amir!'

The Tailor and the Deev

Once upon a time there was a handsome young tailor, who came from Kandahar, and who wanted to go to sea, as he had spent nearly all his life at home. At the time of which I speak, he took passage in a fine ship, which was taking fine carpets to India, when a great storm sprang up and the ship was wrecked. When the tailor, whose name was Hamid, opened his eyes in the morning after the storm, he found himself cast up on a small island which appeared to be uninhabited by humans, although there were hundreds of sea-birds nesting on the rocks. Being very hungry, Hamid ate several of the eggs and then set off on a tour of the island. As far as he could see, there was nothing but a bare rock-strewn landscape, and after cutting his feet, he decided to give up the search. In a rocky pool beside him, he started to dig with his fingers, as he thought he saw something glittering, and took out what appeared to be a large shell. With his scissors, which had been saved because they were hanging on a leather thong at his waist, he levered the shell open, and to his surprise he saw inside a very small creature the size of his thumb and growing bigger every moment. The shell dropped from his fingers, there was a roaring noise in his ears, and a huge Deev stood before him. It looked like a skeleton, dressed in some sort of white transparent material.

'How dare you rouse me from my age-long rest? In that shell I have slept for a thousand years!' howled the Deev, in a voice like a dozen fiends wailing