

Story Of The King Who Would Be Stronger Than Fate

by Andrew Lang

from *The Brown Fairy Book*

Once upon a time, far away in the east country, there lived a king who loved hunting so much that, when once there was a deer in sight, he was careless of his own safety. Indeed, he often became quite separated from his nobles and attendants, and in fact was particularly fond of lonely adventures. Another of his favourite amusements was to give out that he was not well, and could not be seen; and then, with the knowledge only of his faithful Grand Wazeer, to disguise himself as a pedlar, load a donkey with cheap wares, and travel about. In this way he found out what the common people said about him, and how his judges and governors fulfilled their duties.

One day his queen presented him with a baby daughter as beautiful as the dawn, and the king himself was so happy and delighted that, for a whole week, he forgot to hunt, and spent the time in public and private rejoicing.

Not long afterwards, however, he went out after some deer which were to be found in a far corner of his forests. In the course of the beat his dogs disturbed a beautiful snow-white stag, and directly he saw it the king determined that he would have it at any cost. So he put the spurs to his horse, and followed it as hard as he could gallop. Of course all his attendants followed at the best speed that they could manage; but the king was so splendidly mounted, and the stag was so swift, that, at the end of an hour, the king found that only his favourite hound and himself were in the chase; all the rest were far, far behind and out of sight.

Nothing daunted, however, he went on and on, till he perceived that he was entering a valley with great rocky mountains on all sides, and that his horse was getting very tired and trembled at every stride.

Worse than all evening was already drawing on, and the sun would soon set. In vain had he sent arrow after arrow at the beautiful stag. Every shot fell short, or went wide of the mark; and at last, just as darkness was setting in, he lost sight altogether of the beast. By this time his horse could hardly move from fatigue, his hound staggered panting along beside him, he was far away amongst mountains where he had never been before, and had quite missed his way, and not a human creature or dwelling was in sight.

All this was very discouraging, but the king would not have minded if he had not lost that beautiful stag. That troubled him a good deal, but he never worried over what he could not help, so he got down from his horse, slipped his arm through the bridle, and led the animal along the rough path in hopes of discovering some shepherd's hut, or, at least, a cave or shelter under some rock, where he might pass the night.

Presently he heard the sound of rushing water, and made towards it. He toiled over a steep rocky shoulder of a hill, and there, just below him, was a stream dashing down a precipitous glen, and, almost beneath his feet, twinkling and flickering from the level of the torrent, was a dim light as of a lamp. Towards this light the king with his horse and hound made his way, sliding and stumbling down a steep, stony path. At the bottom the king found a narrow grassy ledge by the brink of the stream, across which the light from a rude lantern in the mouth of a cave shed a broad beam of uncertain light. At the edge of the stream sat an old hermit with a long white beard, who neither spoke nor moved as the king approached, but sat throwing into the stream dry leaves which lay scattered about the ground near him.

'Peace be upon you,' said the king, giving the usual country salutation.

'And upon you peace,' answered the hermit; but still he never looked up, nor stopped what he was doing.

For a minute or two the king stood watching him. He noticed that the hermit threw two leaves in at a time, and watched them attentively. Sometimes both were carried rapidly down by the stream; sometimes only one leaf was carried off, and the other, after whirling slowly round and round on the edge of the current, would come circling back on an eddy to the hermit's feet. At other times both leaves were held in the backward eddy, and failed to reach the main current of the noisy stream.

'What are you doing?' asked the king at last, and the hermit replied that he was reading the fates of men; every one's fate, he said, was settled from the beginning, and, whatever it were, there was no escape from it. The king laughed.

'I care little,' he said, 'what my fate may be; but I should be curious to know the fate of my little daughter.'

'I cannot say,' answered the hermit.

'Do you not know, then?' demanded the king.

'I might know,' returned the hermit, 'but it is not always wisdom to know much.'

But the king was not content with this reply, and began to press the old man to say what he knew, which for a long time he would not do. At last, however, the king urged him so greatly that he said:

'The king's daughter will marry the son of a poor slave-girl called Puruna, who belongs to the king of the land of the north. There is no escaping from Fate.'

The king was wild with anger at hearing these words, but he was also very tired; so he only laughed, and answered that he hoped there

would be a way out of THAT fate anyhow. Then he asked if the hermit could shelter him and his beasts for the night, and the hermit said ‘Yes’; so, very soon the king had watered and tethered his horse, and, after a supper of bread and parched peas, lay down in the cave, with the hound at his feet, and tried to go to sleep. But instead of sleeping he only lay awake and thought of the hermit’s prophecy; and the more he thought of it the angrier he felt, until he gnashed his teeth and declared that it should never, never come true.

Morning came, and the king got up, pale and sulky, and, after learning from the hermit which path to take, was soon mounted and found his way home without much difficulty. Directly he reached his palace he wrote a letter to the king of the land of the north, begging him, as a favour, to sell him his slave girl Puruna and her son, and saying that, if he consented, he would send a messenger to receive them at the river which divided the kingdoms.

For five days he awaited the reply, and hardly slept or ate, but was as cross as could be all the time. On the fifth day his messenger returned with a letter to say that the king of the land of the north would not sell, but he would give, the king the slave girl and her son. The king was overjoyed. He sent for his Grand Wazeer and told him that he was going on one of his lonely expeditions, and that the Wazeer must invent some excuse to account for his absence. Next he disguised himself as an ordinary messenger, mounted a swift camel, and sped away to the place where the slave girl was to be handed over to him. When he got there he gave the messengers who brought her a letter of thanks and a handsome present for their master and rewards for themselves; and then without delay he took the poor woman and her tiny baby-boy up on to his camel and rode off to a wild desert.

After riding for a day and a night, almost without stopping, he came to a great cave where he made the woman dismount, and, taking her and the baby into the cave, he drew his sword and with one blow chopped her head off. But although his anger made him cruel enough for

anything so dreadful, the king felt that he could not turn his great sword on the helpless baby, who he was sure must soon die in this solitary place without its mother; so he left it in the cave where it was, and, mounting his camel, rode home as fast as he could.

Now, in a small village in his kingdom there lived an old widow who had no children or relations of any kind. She made her living mostly by selling the milk of a flock of goats; but she was very, very poor, and not very strong, and often used to wonder how she would live if she got too weak or ill to attend to her goats. Every morning she drove the goats out into the desert to graze on the shrubs and bushes which grew there, and every evening they came home of themselves to be milked and to be shut up safely for the night.

One evening the old woman was astonished to find that her very best nanny-goat returned without a drop of milk. She thought that some naughty boy or girl was playing a trick upon her and had caught the goat on its way home and stolen all the milk. But when evening after evening the goat remained almost dry she determined to find out who the thief was. So the next day she followed the goats at a distance and watched them while they grazed. At length, in the afternoon, the old woman noticed this particular nanny-goat stealing off by herself away from the herd and she at once went after her. On and on the goat walked for some way, and then disappeared into a cave in the rocks. The old woman followed the goat into the cave and then, what should she see but the animal giving her milk to a little boy-baby, whilst on the ground near by lay the sad remains of the baby's dead mother! Wondering and frightened, the old woman thought at last that this little baby might be a son to her in her old age, and that he would grow up and in time to come be her comfort and support. So she carried home the baby to her hut, and next day she took a spade to the cave and dug a grave where she buried the poor mother.

Years passed by, and the baby grew up into a fine handsome lad, as daring as he was beautiful, and as industrious as he was brave. One

day, when the boy, whom the old woman had named Nur Mahomed, was about seventeen years old, he was coming from his day's work in the fields, when he saw a strange donkey eating the cabbages in the garden which surround their little cottage. Seizing a big stick, he began to beat the intruder and to drive him out of his garden. A neighbour passing by called out to him--'Hi! I say! why are you beating the pedlar's donkey like that?'

'The pedlar should keep him from eating my cabbages,' said Nur Mahomed; 'if he comes this evening here again I'll cut off his tail for him!'

Whereupon he went off indoors, whistling cheerfully. It happened that this neighbour was one of those people who make mischief by talking too much; so, meeting the pedlar in the 'serai,' or inn, that evening, he told him what had occurred, and added: 'Yes; and the young spitfire said that if beating the donkey would not do, he would beat you also, and cut your nose off for a thief!'

A few days later, the pedlar having moved on, two men appeared in the village inquiring who it was who had threatened to ill-treat and to murder an innocent pedlar. They declared that the pedlar, in fear of his life, had complained to the king; and that they had been sent to bring the lawless person who had said these things before the king himself. Of course they soon found out about the donkey eating Nur Mahomed's cabbages, and about the young man's hot words; but although the lad assured them that he had never said anything about murdering anyone, they replied they were ordered to arrest him, and bring him to take his trial before the king. So, in spite of his protests, and the wails of his mother, he was carried off, and in due time brought before the king. Of course Nur Mahomed never guessed that the supposed pedlar happened to have been the king himself, although nobody knew it.

But as he was very angry at what he had been told, he declared that he was going to make an example of this young man, and intended to teach him that even poor travelling pedlars could get justice in HIS country, and be protected from such lawlessness. However, just as he was going to pronounce some very heavy sentence, there was a stir in the court, and up came Nur Mahomed's old mother, weeping and lamenting, and begging to be heard. The king ordered her to speak, and she began to plead for the boy, declaring how good he was, and how he was the support of her old age, and if he were put in prison she would die. The king asked her who she was. She replied that she was his mother.

'His mother?' said the king; 'you are too old, surely, to have so young a son!'

Then the old woman, in her fright and distress, confessed the whole story of how she found the baby, and how she rescued and brought him up, and ended by beseeching the king for mercy.

It is easy to guess how, as the story came out, the king looked blacker and blacker, and more and more grim, until at last he was half fainting with rage and astonishment. This, then, was the baby he had left to die, after cruelly murdering his mother! Surely fate might have spared him this! He wished he had sufficient excuse to put the boy to death, for the old hermit's prophecy came back to him as strongly as ever; and yet the young man had done nothing bad enough to deserve such a punishment. Everyone would call him a tyrant if he were to give such an order--in fact, he dared not try it!

At length he collected himself enough to say:--'If this young man will enlist in my army I will let him off. We have need of such as him, and a little discipline will do him good.' Still the old woman pleaded that she could not live without her son, and was nearly as terrified at the idea of his becoming a soldier as she was at the thought of his being put in prison. But at length the king--determined to get the youth into

his clutches--pacified her by promising her a pension large enough to keep her in comfort; and Nur Mahomed, to his own great delight, was duly enrolled in the king's army.

As a soldier Nur Mahomed seemed to be in luck. He was rather surprised, but much pleased, to find that he was always one of those chosen when any difficult or dangerous enterprise was afoot; and, although he had the narrowest escapes on some occasions, still, the very desperateness of the situations in which he found himself gave him special chances of displaying his courage. And as he was also modest and generous, he became a favourite with his officers and his comrades.

Thus it was not very surprising that, before very long, he became enrolled amongst the picked men of the king's bodyguard. The fact is, that the king had hoped to have got him killed in some fight or another; but, seeing that, on the contrary, he throve on hard knocks, he was now determined to try more direct and desperate methods.

One day, soon after Nur Mahomed had entered the bodyguard, he was selected to be one of the soldiers told off to escort the king through the city. The procession was marching on quite smoothly, when a man, armed with a dagger, rushed out of an alley straight towards the king. Nur Mahomed, who was the nearest of the guards, threw himself in the way, and received the stab that had been apparently intended for the king. Luckily the blow was a hurried one, and the dagger glanced on his breastbone, so that, although he received a severe wound, his youth and strength quickly got the better of it. The king was, of course, obliged to take some notice of this brave deed, and as a reward made him one of his own attendants.

After this the strange adventures the young man passed through were endless. Officers of the bodyguard were often sent on all sorts of secret and difficult errands, and such errands had a curious way of becoming necessary when Nur Mahomed was on duty. Once, while he

was taking a journey, a foot-bridge gave way under him; once he was attacked by armed robbers; a rock rolled down upon him in a mountain pass; a heavy stone coping fell from a roof at his feet in a narrow city alley. Altogether, Nur Mahomed began to think that, somewhere or other, he had made an enemy; but he was light-hearted, and the thought did not much trouble him. He escaped somehow every time, and felt amused rather than anxious about the next adventure.

It was the custom of that city that the officer for the day of the palace guards should receive all his food direct from the king's kitchen. One day, when Nur Mahomed's turn came to be on duty, he was just sitting down to a delicious stew that had been sent in from the palace, when one of those gaunt, hungry dogs, which, in eastern countries, run about the streets, poked his nose in at the open guard-room door, and looked at Nur Mahomed with mouth watering and nostrils working. The kind-hearted young man picked out a lump of meat, went to the door, and threw it outside to him. The dog pounced upon it, and gulped it down greedily, and was just turning to go, when it staggered, fell, rolled over, and died. Nur Mahomed, who had been lazily watching him, stood still for a moment, then he came back whistling softly. He gathered up the rest of his dinner and carefully wrapped it up to carry away and bury somewhere; and then he sent back the empty plates.

How furious the king was when, at the next morning's durbar, Nur Mahomed appeared before him fresh, alert and smiling as usual. He was determined, however, to try once more, and bidding the young man come into his presence that evening, gave orders that he was to carry a secret despatch to the governor of a distant province. 'Make your preparations at once,' added he, 'and be ready to start in the morning. I myself will deliver you the papers at the last moment.'

Now this province was four or five days' journey from the palace, and the governor of it was the most faithful servant the king had. He could be silent as the grave, and prided himself on his obedience. Whilst he

was an old and tried servant of the king's, his wife had been almost a mother to the young princess ever since the queen had died some years before. It happened that, a little before this time, the princess had been sent away for her health to another remote province; and whilst she was there her old friend, the governor's wife, had begged her to come and stay with them as soon as she could.

The princess accepted gladly, and was actually staying in the governor's house at the very time when the king made up his mind to send Nur Mahomed there with the mysterious despatch.

According to orders Nur Mahomed presented himself early the next morning at the king's private apartments. His best horse was saddled, food placed in his saddle-bag, and with some money tied up in his waist-band, he was ready to start. The king handed over to him a sealed packet, desiring him to give it himself only into the hands of the governor, and to no one else. Nur Mahomed hid it carefully in his turban, swung himself into the saddle, and five minutes later rode out of the city gates, and set out on his long journey.

The weather was very hot; but Nur Mahomed thought that the sooner his precious letter was delivered the better; so that, by dint of riding most of each night and resting only in the hottest part of the day, he found himself, by noon on the third day, approaching the town which was his final destination.

Not a soul was to be seen anywhere; and Nur Mahomed, stiff, dry, thirsty, and tired, looked longingly over the wall into the gardens, and marked the fountains, the green grass, the shady apricot orchards, and giant mulberry trees, and wished he were there.

At length he reached the castle gates, and was at once admitted, as he was in the uniform of the king's bodyguard. The governor was resting, the soldier said, and could not see him until the evening. So Nur Mahomed handed over his horse to an attendant, and wandered

down into the lovely gardens he had seen from the road, and sat down in the shade to rest himself. He flung himself on his back and watched the birds twittering and chattering in the trees above him. Through the branches he could see great patches of sky where the kites wheeled and circled incessantly, with shrill whistling cried. Bees buzzed over the flowers with a soothing sound, and in a few minutes Nur Mahomed was fast asleep.

Every day, through the heat of the afternoon, the governor, and his wife also, used to lie down for two or three hours in their own rooms, and so, for the matter of that, did most people in the palace. But the princess, like many other girls, was restless, and preferred to wander about the garden, rather than rest on a pile of soft cushions. What a torment her stout old attendants and servants sometime thought her when she insisted on staying awake, and making them chatter or do something, when they could hardly keep their eyes open! Sometimes, however, the princess would pretend to go to sleep, and then, after all her women had gladly followed her example, she would get up and go out by herself, her veil hanging loosely about her. If she was discovered her old hostess scolded her severely; but the princess only laughed, and did the same thing next time.

This very afternoon the princess had left all her women asleep, and, after trying in vain to amuse herself indoors, she had slipped out into the great garden, and rambled about in all her favourite nooks and corners, feeling quite safe as there was not a creature to be seen. Suddenly, on turning a corner, she stopped in surprise, for before her lay a man fast asleep! In her hurry she had almost tripped over him. But there he was, a young man, tanned and dusty with travel, in the uniform of an officer of the king's guard. One of the few faults of this lovely princess was a devouring curiosity, and she lived such an idle life that she had plenty of time to be curious. Out of one of the folds of this young man's turban there peeped the corner of a letter! She wondered what the letter was--whom it was for! She drew her veil a little closer, and stole across on tip-toe and caught hold of the corner

of the letter. Then she pulled it a little, and just a little more! A great big seal came into view, which she saw to be her father's, and at the sight of it she paused for a minute half ashamed of what she was doing. But the pleasure of taking a letter which was not meant for her was more than she could resist, and in another moment it was in her hand. All at once she remembered that it would be death to this poor officer if he lost the letter, and that at all hazards she must put it back again. But this was not so easy; and, moreover, the letter in her hand burnt her with longing to read it, and see what was inside. She examined the seal. It was sticky with being exposed to the hot sun, and with a very little effort it parted from the paper. The letter was open and she read it! And this was what was written:

‘Behead the messenger who brings this letter secretly and at once. Ask no questions.’

The girl grew pale. What a shame! she thought. SHE would not let a handsome young fellow like that be beheaded; but how to prevent it was not quite clear at the moment. Some plan must be invented, and she wished to lock herself in where no one could interrupt her, as might easily happen in the garden. So she crept softly to her room, and took a piece of paper and wrote upon it: ‘Marry the messenger who brings this letter to the princess openly at once. Ask no questions.’ And even contrived to work the seals off the original letter and to fix them to this, so that no one could tell, unless they examined it closely, that it had ever been opened. Then she slipped back, shaking with fear and excitement, to where the young officer still lay asleep, thrust the letter into the fold so his turban, and hurried back to her room. It was done!

Late in the afternoon Nur Mahomed woke, and, making sure that the precious despatch was still safe, went off to get ready for his audience with the governor. As soon as he was ushered into his presence he took the letter from his turban and placed it in the governor's hands according to orders. When he had read it the governor was certainly a

little astonished; but he was told in the letter to ‘ask no questions,’ and he knew how to obey orders. He sent for his wife and told her to get the princess ready to be married at once.

‘Nonsense!’ said his wife, ‘what in the world do you mean?’

‘These are the king’s commands,’ he answered; ‘go and do as I bid you. The letter says “at once,” and “ask no questions.” The marriage, therefore, must take place this evening.’

In vain did his wife urge every objection; the more she argued, the more determined was her husband. ‘I know how to obey orders,’ he said, ‘and these are as plain as the nose on my face!’ So the princess was summoned, and, somewhat to their surprise, she seemed to take the news very calmly; next Nur Mahomed was informed, and he was greatly startled, but of course he could but be delighted at the great and unexpected honour which he thought the king had done him. Then all the castle was turned upside down; and when the news spread in the town, THAT was turned upside down too. Everybody ran everywhere, and tried to do everything at once; and, in the middle of it all, the old governor went about with his hair standing on end, muttering something about ‘obeying orders.’

And so the marriage was celebrated, and there was a great feast in the castle, and another in the soldiers’ barracks, and illuminations all over the town and in the beautiful gardens. And all the people declared that such a wonderful sight had never been seen, and talked about it to the ends of their lives.

The next day the governor despatched the princess and her bridegroom to the king, with a troop of horsemen, splendidly dressed, and he sent a mounted messenger on before them, with a letter giving the account of the marriage to the king.

When the king got the governor's letter, he grew so red in the face that everyone thought he was going to have apoplexy. They were all very anxious to know what had happened, but he rushed off and locked himself into a room, where he raved and raved until he was tired. Then, after awhile, he began to think he had better make the best of it, especially as the old governor had been clever enough to send him back his letter, and the king was pretty sure that this was in the princess's handwriting. He was fond of his daughter, and though she had behaved badly, he did not wish to cut HER head off, and he did not want people to know the truth because it would make him look foolish. In fact, the more he considered the matter, the more he felt that he would be wise to put a good face on it, and to let people suppose that he had really brought about the marriage of his own free will.

So, when the young couple arrived, the king received them with all state, and gave his son-in-law a province to govern. Nur Mahomed soon proved himself as able and honourable a governor as he was a brave soldier; and, when the old king died, he became king in his place, and reigned long and happily.

Nur Mahomed's old mother lived for a long time in her 'son's' palace, and died in peace. The princess, his wife, although she had got her husband by a trick, found that she could not trick HIM, and so she never tried, but busied herself in teaching her children and scolding her maids. As for the old hermit, no trace of him was ever discovered; but the cave is there, and the leaves lie thick in front of it unto this day.

[Told the writer by an Indian.]