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The Talking Bird, the Singing Tree and the Golden Water

Andrew Lang

A young sultan named Kosrouschah loved to put on ordinary clothes and walk through the city at night, hoping to find adventures. On the first evening of his reign, he was passing a little house when he heard three sisters talking and laughing. He looked through a crack in the door.

They were each saying who they'd like to marry.

"I would like to marry the Sultan's baker," said the eldest. "Imagine eating that delicious bread every day!"

"I would like the Sultan's head cook," said the second. "Think of all those stews!"

The youngest sister was the most beautiful and had the most sense. "I'd like to marry the Sultan himself," she said.

The Sultan was so amused that the next morning he sent for all three. They stood before him, terribly embarrassed.

"I heard everything you wished for," he said kindly. "And you shall all have your wish." He married the youngest himself, and arranged for the eldest to marry his baker and the second his cook.

That should have been the end of it. But the two older sisters were consumed with jealousy. They couldn't stand that their little sister was now the Sultana and lived in a palace. They plotted together, smiling at her all the while.

When the Sultana was about to have her first baby, the sisters begged to stay with her at the palace, and she was glad to have her family near. A little boy was born, as beautiful as the sun. The sisters placed him in a basket and set it afloat on the palace canal. Then they told the Sultan that the Sultana had had a puppy.

The Sultan was so angry and upset that he could hardly bear to look at her. And the little basket floated down the canal until it came to the gardens, where the royal gardener's master, a kind and respected official called the intendant, fished it out. He and his wife had no children, and they were overjoyed. They named the baby Bahman.

The next year the same thing happened: another baby, another basket, another

lie. The intendant found him too and named him Perviz. In the third year, a baby girl was born, and the intendant found her as well. They named her Parizade.

The Sultan, deceived again and again, finally lost patience. He decided his wife must be punished. The grand vizir and the courtiers begged him to be merciful, for everyone loved the Sultana. In the end the Sultan ordered her to be shut away from the court in a small house beside the great mosque, where she lived quietly for many years, uncomplaining.

Meanwhile, the three children grew up happy and clever. The intendant gave all three the best teachers. Parizade learned everything her brothers did: poetry, history, music, archery, riding. When the intendant retired, he bought a beautiful country house with a vast park, and the three children lived there together. When he died, he had no time to tell them they were royal.

One day, while the brothers were out hunting, an old pilgrim woman knocked at the door. Parizade welcomed her, fed her, and showed her around the house.

"It's beautiful," said the old woman. "But it lacks three things."

"What three things?" cried Parizade.

"The Talking Bird, whose voice draws every other bird in the world to sing with him. The Singing Tree, where every leaf is a song that never stops. And the Golden Water: one drop in a basin and a fountain springs up that never runs dry."

"Where can I find them?"

"Twenty days' ride along the road from your house, towards India," said the old woman. "Ask the first person you meet." And she went away.

When the brothers came home, they found Parizade very quiet. When they pressed her, she told them everything. "I'll go," said Bahman, the elder. "You'll be safe here."

Before he left, Parizade gave him a gift: a knife. "If the blade ever turns bloody, I'll know something has happened to you."

For twenty days, Bahman rode, and on the twentieth he met an old dervish sitting under a tree, with a beard that nearly reached his feet. The old man tried to speak but couldn't be understood through his thick mustache. Bahman took out a pair of scissors and trimmed it. "Why, I'm a new man!" the dervish laughed. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for the Talking Bird, the Singing Tree and the Golden Water."

The dervish's face grew grave. "Many brave men have asked me. None has come back. Please turn around."

But Bahman wouldn't, and finally the dervish gave him a ball. "Throw it ahead of you and follow it. It will stop at the foot of a mountain covered with black stones. Climb to the top, where you'll find the Talking Bird. Voices will shout at you the whole way, insults and threats and mockery. But whatever happens, don't look back. Those black stones are all the people who did."

Bahman threw the ball, and it rolled so fast he could barely keep up. At the mountain, he began to climb. Voices screamed at him from nowhere: "Fool! Stop him! Murder! Thief!" and then, worst of all, a sneering one: "What a handsome young man! Surely the bird was saved just for him!" He kept on. But the voices grew louder, and his knees shook, and at last he turned to run, and in that moment he turned into a black stone.

Back at the house, Parizade looked at the knife and saw drops of blood on the blade. She wept. Perviz said, "It's my turn," and gave her a string of pearls. "If the beads stick together and won't slide, you'll know." He rode off, met the dervish, and fell for the same trap. Halfway up the mountain a voice growled close in his ear, "Stop, rash fellow!" He spun around with his sword drawn. There was no one there, and he was a stone.

That evening, the beads stuck in Parizade's fingers.

She dressed in men's clothes and rode off herself.



On the twentieth day she found the dervish. "You're a woman," he said. "I can tell by your voice." But she wasn't to be talked out of it. When she heard about the voices, she said, "I'll stuff my ears with cotton."

The dervish stared. "In all the years I have sat here, no one has ever thought of that."

At the foot of the mountain, she plugged her ears with cotton and started up. Some of the voices came faintly through. She hardly noticed them. At the top, she walked straight to the cage and took it in her hands. "I've got you," she said. "I'm not letting go."

"Brave lady," said the Talking Bird, "I joined in the shouting only because I wanted to keep my freedom. Now you've won me. I'll serve you faithfully."

"First," said Parizade, "tell me where to find the Golden Water."

It was nearby. She filled her little silver flask. "And the Singing Tree?"

"In that wood. Break a twig and plant it at home, and it will take root."

She did. Then she said, "My brothers are somewhere among these stones. I want them back."

The bird was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Take the pitcher beside my cage. Sprinkle a drop of water on each black stone as you go down."

She did it. Each stone she touched became a man, and some of them were her brothers, who woke as if from a long sleep, and so did all the other knights and travelers who had been trapped there for years. They all thanked her, but she said she wished for no company but her brothers, and they rode home.

At home she hung the Talking Bird's cage in the garden, and at once the whole sky filled with songbirds who came to sing with him. She planted the twig, and it grew into a tree whose leaves sang. She poured the Golden Water into a marble basin, and it rose into a fountain twenty feet high.

Not long after, the Sultan went hunting near their house. The brothers stepped aside to let him pass, but he saw them, and was struck by their good manners. He asked their names. "We are the sons of your late intendant of the gardens," said Bahman. When they hunted together, the brothers showed such skill that he asked them to join his court. They said they must ask their sister first, but they forgot. They forgot again. At last the Sultan gave them three small golden balls to put in their pockets. "They'll clink when you undress," he said, "and remind you."

The princess said, "Ask the Talking Bird what to do."

"You must accept the invitation," said the bird. "And you must invite the Sultan here."

So the Sultan came. Parizade met him in the courtyard, and he was struck by her grace. He walked through the house, then the garden, and nearly lost his voice at the Singing Tree and the Golden Water. "I have never seen anything like this," he said.

The Talking Bird had given Parizade one more instruction: "Serve the Sultan a cucumber stuffed with pearls." She had been astonished, and the cook even more so, but the bird told her where to dig for them under a tree in the garden, and sure enough, there they were. At dinner, the Sultan took a bite and stopped. "Pearls?" he said. "Who ever heard of such a dish? One can't eat pearls."

"Majesty," said the Talking Bird, "is that harder to believe than your having a puppy for a son?"

The Sultan went completely still.

"The Sultana's sisters made up that story," the bird went on. "These are your children, saved from the canal by your intendant and raised as his own."

The Sultan looked at the three young faces, and he knew. "My children," he said, holding out his arms.

Within a day, he had sent for the Sultana. He walked on foot to the little house by the mosque and begged her forgiveness before everyone, and brought her to meet her children. The wicked sisters confessed, and were sent far away from the court, to a place where they could no longer hurt anyone.

That evening the whole family rode into the city together, with the Talking Bird singing in his cage on Parizade's lap, and a cloud of birds following.

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