

*MOHAMMED WITH THE MAGIC FINGER*

ONCE upon a time, there lived a woman who had a son and a daughter. One morning she said to them: 'I have heard of a town where there is no such thing as death: let us go and dwell there.' So she broke up her house, and went away with her son and daughter.

When she reached the city, the first thing she did was to look about and see if there was any churchyard, and when she found none, she exclaimed, 'This is a delightful spot. We will stay here for ever.'

By-and-by, her son grew to be a man, and he took for a wife a girl who had been born in the town. But after a little while he grew restless, and went away on his travels, leaving his mother, his wife, and his sister behind him.

He had not been gone many weeks when one evening his mother said, 'I am not well, my head aches dreadfully.'

'What did you say?' inquired her daughter-in-law.

'My head feels ready to split,' replied the old woman.

The daughter-in-law asked no more questions, but left the house, and went in haste to some butchers in the next street.

'I have got a woman to sell; what will you give me for her?' said she.

The butchers answered that they must see the woman first, and they all returned together.

Then the butchers took the woman and told her they must kill her.

‘But why?’ she asked.

‘Because,’ they said, ‘it is always our custom that when persons are ill and complain of their head they should be killed at once. It is a much better way than leaving them to die a natural death.’

‘Very well,’ replied the woman. ‘But leave, I pray you, my lungs and my liver untouched, till my son comes back. Then give both to him.’

But the men took them out at once, and gave them to the daughter-in-law, saying: ‘Put away these things till your husband returns.’ And the daughter-in-law took them, and hid them in a secret place.

When the old woman’s daughter, who had been in the woods, heard that her mother had been killed while she was out, she was filled with fright, and ran away as fast as she could. At last she reached a lonely spot far from the town, where she thought she was safe, and sat down on a stone, and wept bitterly. As she was sitting, sobbing, a man passed by.

‘What is the matter, little girl? Answer me! I will be your friend.’

‘Ah, sir, they have killed my mother; my brother is far away, and I have nobody.’

‘Will you come with me?’ asked the man.

‘Thankfully,’ said she, and he led her down, down, under the earth, till they reached a great city. Then he married her, and in course of time she had a son. And the baby was known throughout the city as ‘Mohammed with the magic finger,’ because, whenever he stuck out his little finger, he was able to see anything that was happening for as far as two days’ distance.

By-and-by, as the boy was growing bigger, his uncle returned from his long journey, and went straight to his wife.

‘Where are my mother and sister?’ he asked; but his wife answered: ‘Have something to eat first, and then I will tell you.’

But he replied: 'How can I eat till I know what has become of them ?'

Then she fetched, from the upper chamber, a box full of money, which she laid before him, saying, 'That is the price of your mother. She sold well.'

'What do you mean ?' he gasped.

'Oh, your mother complained one day that her head was aching, so I got in two butchers and they agreed to take her. However, I have got her lungs and liver hidden, till you came back, in a safe place.'

'And my sister ?'

'Well, while the people were chopping up your mother she ran away, and I heard no more of her.'

'Give me my mother's liver and lungs,' said the young man. And she gave them to him. Then he put them in his pocket, and went away, saying: 'I can stay no longer in this horrible town. I go to seek my sister.'

Now, one day, the little boy stretched out his finger and said to his mother, 'My uncle is coming !'

'Where is he ?' she asked.

'He is still two days' journey off: looking for us ; but he will soon be here.' And in two days, as the boy had foretold, the uncle had found the hole in the earth, and arrived at the gate of the city. All his money was spent, and not knowing where his sister lived, he began to beg of all the people he saw.

'Here comes my uncle,' called out the little boy.

'Where ?' asked his mother.

'Here at the house door ;' and the woman ran out and embraced him, and wept over him. When they could both speak, he said: 'My sister, were you by when they killed my mother ?'

'I was absent when they slew her,' replied she, 'and as I could do nothing, I ran away. But you, my brother, how did you get here ?'

'By chance,' he said, 'after I had wandered far ; but I did not know I should find you !'

'My little boy told me you were coming,' she explained, 'when you were yet two days distant ; he alone of all men has that great gift.'

But she did not tell him that her husband could change himself into a serpent, a dog, or a monster, when-



ever he pleased. He was a very rich man, and possessed large herds of camels, goats, sheep, cattle, horses and asses ; all the best of their kind. And the next morning, the sister said : 'Dear brother, go and watch our sheep, and when you are thirsty, drink their milk !'

'Very well,' answered he, and he went.

Soon after, she said again, 'Dear brother, go and watch our goats.'

'But why? I like tending sheep better!'

'Oh, it is much nicer to be a goatherd,' she said; so he took the goats out.

When he was gone, she said to her husband, 'You must kill my brother, for I cannot have him living here with me.'

'But, my dear, why should I? He has done me no harm.'

'I wish you to kill him,' she answered, 'or if not I will leave.'

'Oh, all right, then,' said he; 'to-morrow I will change myself into a serpent, and hide myself in the date barrel; and when he comes to fetch dates I will sting him in the hand.'

'That will do very well,' said she.

When the sun was up next day, she called to her brother, 'Go and mind the goats.'

'Yes, of course,' he replied; but the little boy called out: 'Uncle, I want to come with you.'

'Delighted,' said the uncle, and they started together.

After they had got out of sight of the house the boy said to him, 'Dear uncle, my father is going to kill you. He has changed himself into a serpent, and has hidden himself in the date barrel. My mother has told him to do it.'

'And what am I to do?' asked the uncle.

'I will tell you. When we bring the goats back to the house, and my mother says to you, "I am sure you must be hungry: get a few dates out of the cask," just say to me, "I am not feeling very well, Mohammed, you go and get them for me."

So, when they reached the house the sister came out to meet them, saying, 'Dear brother, you must certainly be hungry: go and get a few dates.'

But he answered, 'I am not feeling very well. Mohammed, you go and get them for me.'

'Of course I will,' replied the little boy, and ran at once to the cask.

'No, no,' his mother called after him; 'come here directly! Let your uncle fetch them himself!'

But the boy would not listen, and crying out to her, 'I would rather get them,' thrust his hand into the date cask.

Instead of the fruit, it struck against something cold and slimy, and he whispered softly, 'Keep still; it is I, your son!'

Then he picked up his dates and went away to his uncle.

'Here they are, dear uncle; eat as many as you want.' And his uncle ate them.

When he saw that the uncle did not mean to come near the cask, the serpent crawled out and regained his proper shape.

'I am thankful I did not kill him,' he said to his wife; 'for, after all, he is my brother-in-law, and it would have been a great sin!'

'Either you kill him or I leave you,' said she.

'Well, well!' sighed the man, 'to-morrow I will do it.'

The woman let that night go by without doing anything further, but at daybreak she said to her brother, 'Get up, brother; it is time to take the goats to pasture!'

'All right,' cried he.

'I will come with you, uncle,' called out the little boy.

'Yes, come along,' replied he.

But the mother ran up, saying, 'The child must not go out in this cold or he will be ill;' to which he only answered, 'Nonsense! I am going, so it is no use your talking! I am going! I am! I am!'

'Then go!' she said.

And so they started, driving the goats in front of them.

When they reached the pasture the boy said to his uncle : ' Dear uncle, this night my father means to kill you. While we are away he will creep into your room and hide in the straw. Directly we get home my mother will say to you, " Take that straw and give it to the sheep," and, if you do, he will bite you.'

' Then what am I to do ? ' asked the man.

' Oh, do not be afraid, dear uncle ! I will kill my father myself.'

' All right,' replied the uncle.

As they drove back the goats towards the house, the sister cried : ' Be quick, dear brother, go and get me some straw for the sheep.'

' Let me go,' said the boy.

' You are not big enough ; your uncle will get it,' replied she.

' We will both get it,' answered the boy ; ' come, uncle, let us go and fetch that straw ! '

' All right,' replied the uncle, and they went to the door of the room.

' It seems very dark,' said the boy ; ' I must go and get a light ; ' and when he came back with one, he set fire to the straw, and the serpent was burnt.

Then the mother broke into sobs and tears. ' Oh, you wretched boy ! What have you done ? Your father was in that straw, and you have killed him ! '

' Now, how was I to know that my father was lying in that straw, instead of in the kitchen ? ' said the boy.

But his mother only wept the more, and sobbed out, ' From this day you have no father. You must do without him as best you can ! '

' Why did you marry a serpent ? ' asked the boy. ' I thought he was a man ! How did he learn those odd tricks ? '

As the sun rose, she woke her brother, and said, ' Go and take the goats to pasture ! '

‘I will come too,’ said the little boy.

‘Go then !’ said his mother, and they went together.

On the way the boy began : ‘ Dear uncle, this night my mother means to kill both of us, by poisoning us with the bones of the serpent, which she will grind to powder and sprinkle in our food.’

‘ And what are we to do ?’ asked the uncle.

‘ I will kill *her*, dear uncle. I do not want either a father or a mother like that !’

When they came home in the evening they saw the woman preparing supper, and secretly scattering the powdered bones of the serpent on one side of the dish. On the other, where she meant to eat herself, there was no poison.

And the boy whispered to his uncle, ‘ Dear uncle, be sure you eat from the same side of the dish as I do !’

‘ All right,’ said the uncle.

So they all three sat down to the table, but before they helped themselves the boy said, ‘ I am thirsty, mother ; will you get me some milk ?’

‘ Very well,’ said she, ‘ but you had better begin your supper.’

And when she came back with the milk they were both eating busily.

‘ Sit down and have something too,’ said the boy, and she sat down and helped herself from the dish, but at the very first moment she sank dead upon the ground.

‘ She has got what she meant for us,’ observed the boy ; ‘ and now we will sell all the sheep and cattle.’

So the sheep and cattle were sold, and the uncle and nephew took the money and went to see the world.

For ten days they travelled through the desert, and then they came to a place where the road parted in two.

‘ Uncle !’ said the boy.

‘ Well, what is it ?’ replied he.

‘ You see these two roads ? You must take one, and I the other ; for the time has come when we must part.’

But the uncle cried, 'No, no, my boy, we will keep together always.'

'Alas! that cannot be,' said the boy; 'so tell me which way you will go.'

'I will go to the west,' said the uncle.

'One word before I leave you,' continued the boy. 'Beware of any man who has red hair and blue eyes. Take no service under him.'

'All right,' replied the uncle, and they parted.

For three days the man wandered on without any food, till he was very hungry. Then, when he was almost fainting, a stranger met him and said, 'Will you work for me?'

'By contract?' asked the man.

'Yes, by contract,' replied the stranger, 'and whichever of us breaks it, shall have a strip of skin taken from his body.'

'All right,' replied the man; 'what shall I have to do?'

'Every day you must take the sheep out to pasture, and carry my old mother on your shoulders, taking great care her feet shall never touch the ground. And, besides that, you must catch, every evening, seven singing birds for my seven sons.'

'That is easily done,' said the man.

Then they went back together, and the stranger said, 'Here are your sheep; and now stoop down, and let my mother climb on your back.'

'Very good,' answered Mohammed's uncle.

The new shepherd did as he was told, and returned in the evening with the old woman on his back, and the seven singing birds in his pocket, which he gave to the seven boys, when they came to meet him. So the days passed, each one exactly like the other.

At last, one night, he began to weep, and cried: 'Oh, what have I done, that I should have to perform such hateful tasks?'

And his nephew Mohammed saw him from afar, and thought to himself, ' My uncle is in trouble—I must go and help him ; ' and the next morning he went to his master and said : ' Dear master, I must go to my



uncle, and I wish to send him here instead of myself, while I serve under his master. And that you may know it is he and no other man, I will give him my staff, and put my mantle on him.'

' All right,' said the master.

Mohammed set out on his journey, and in two days he arrived at the place where his uncle was standing with the old woman on his back, trying to catch the birds as they flew past. And Mohammed touched him on the arm, and spoke: 'Dear uncle, did I not warn you never to take service under any blue-eyed red-haired man?'

'But what could I do?' asked the uncle. 'I was hungry, and he passed, and we signed a contract.'

'Give the contract to me!' said the young man.

'Here it is,' replied the uncle, holding it out.

'Now,' continued Mohammed, 'let the old woman get down from your back.'

'Oh no, I mustn't do that!' cried he.

But the nephew paid no attention, and went on talking: 'Do not worry yourself about the future. I see my way out of it all. And, first, you must take my stick and my mantle, and leave this place. After two days' journey, straight before you, you will come to some tents which are inhabited by shepherds. Go in there, and wait.'

'All right!' answered the uncle.

Then Mohammed with the Magic Finger picked up a stick and struck the old woman with it, saying, 'Get down, and look after the sheep; I want to go to sleep.'

'Oh, certainly!' replied she.

So Mohammed lay down comfortably under a tree and slept till evening. Towards sunset he woke up and said to the old woman: 'Where are the singing birds which you have got to catch?'

'You never told me anything about that,' replied she.

'Oh, didn't I?' he answered. 'Well, it is part of your business, and if you don't do it, I shall just kill you.'

'Of course I will catch them!' cried she in a hurry, and ran about the bushes after the birds, till thorns pierced her foot, and she shrieked from pain and exclaimed, 'Oh dear, how unlucky I am! and how

abominably this man is treating me ! ' However, at last she managed to catch the seven birds, and brought them to Mohammed, saying, ' Here they are ! '

‘ Then now we will go back to the house,’ said he.

When they had gone some way he turned to her sharply :

‘ Be quick and drive the sheep home, for I do not know where their fold is.’ And she drove them before her. By-and-by the young man spoke :

‘ Look here, old hag ; if you say anything to your son about my having struck you, or about my not being the old shepherd, I'll kill you ! ’

‘ Oh, no, of course I won't say anything ! ’

When they got back, the son said to his mother : ‘ That is a good shepherd I've got, isn't he ? ’

‘ Oh, a splendid shepherd ! ’ answered she. ‘ Why, look how fat the sheep are, and how much milk they give ! ’

‘ Yes, indeed ! ’ replied the son, as he rose to get supper for his mother and the shepherd.

In the time of Mohammed's uncle, the shepherd had had nothing to eat but the scraps left by the old woman ; but the new shepherd was not going to be content with that.

‘ You will not touch the food till I have had as much as I want,’ whispered he.

‘ Very good ! ’ replied she. And when he had had enough, he said :

‘ Now, eat ! ’ But she wept, and cried : ‘ That was not written in your contract. You were only to have what I left ! ’

‘ If you say a word more, I will kill you ! ’ said he.

The next day he took the old woman on his back, and drove the sheep in front of him till he was some distance from the house, when he let her fall, and said : ‘ Quick ! go and mind the sheep ! ’

Then he took a ram, and killed it. He lit a fire and broiled some of its flesh, and called to the old woman :

‘Come and eat with me !’ and she came. But instead of letting her eat quietly, he took a large lump of the meat and rammed it down her throat with his crook, so that she died. And when he saw she was dead, he said : ‘That is what you have got for tormenting my uncle !’ and left her lying where she was, while he went after the singing birds. It took him a long time to catch them ; but at length he had the whole seven hidden in the pockets of his tunic, and then he threw the old woman’s body into some bushes, and drove the sheep before him, back to their fold. And when they drew near the house the seven boys came to meet him, and he gave a bird to each.

‘Why are you weeping ?’ asked the boys, as they took their birds.

‘Because your grandmother is dead !’ And they ran and told their father. Then the man came up and said to Mohammed : ‘What was the matter ? How did she die ?’

And Mohammed answered : ‘I was tending the sheep when she said to me, “Kill me that ram ; I am hungry !” So I killed it, and gave her the meat. But she had no teeth, and it choked her.’

‘But why did you kill the ram, instead of one of the sheep ?’ asked the man.

‘What was I to do ?’ said Mohammed. ‘I had to obey orders !’

‘Well, I must see to her burial !’ said the man ; and the next morning Mohammed drove out the sheep as usual, thinking to himself, ‘Thank goodness I’ve got rid of the old woman ! Now for the boys !’

All day long he looked after the sheep, and towards evening he began to dig some little holes in the ground, out of which he took six scorpions. These he put in his pockets, together with one bird which he caught. After this he drove his flock home.

When he approached the house the boys came out to meet him as before, saying : ‘Give me my bird !’ and he

put a scorpion into the hand of each, and it stung him, and he died. But to the youngest only he gave a bird.

As soon as he saw the boys lying dead on the ground, Mohammed lifted up his voice and cried loudly: 'Help, help! the children are dead!'

And the people came running fast, saying: 'What has happened? How have they died?'

And Mohammed answered: 'It was your own fault! The boys had been accustomed to birds, and in this bitter cold their fingers grew stiff, and could hold nothing, so that the birds flew away, and their spirits flew with them. Only the youngest, who managed to keep tight hold of his bird, is still alive.'

And the father groaned, and said, 'I have borne enough! Bring no more birds, lest I lose the youngest also!'

'All right,' said Mohammed.

As he was driving the sheep out to grass he said to his master: 'Out there is a splendid pasture, and I will keep the sheep there for two or, perhaps, three days, so do not be surprised at our absence.'

'Very good!' said the man; and Mohammed started. For two days he drove them on and on, till he reached his uncle, and said to him, 'Dear uncle, take these sheep and look after them. I have killed the old woman and the boys, and the flock I have brought to you!'

Then Mohammed returned to his master; and on the way he took a stone and beat his own head with it till it bled, and bound his hands tight, and began to scream. The master came running and asked, 'What is the matter?'

And Mohammed answered: 'While the sheep were grazing, robbers came and drove them away, and because I tried to prevent them, they struck me on the head and bound my hands. See how bloody I am!'

'What shall we do?' said the master; 'are the animals far off?

‘So far that you are not likely ever to see them again,’ replied Mohammed. ‘This is the fourth day since the robbers came down. How should you be able to overtake them?’

‘Then go and herd the cows!’ said the man.

‘All right!’ replied Mohammed, and for two days he went. But on the third day he drove the cows to his uncle, first cutting off their tails. Only one cow he left behind him.

‘Take these cows, dear uncle,’ said he. ‘I am going to teach that man a lesson.’

‘Well, I suppose you know your own business best,’ said the uncle. ‘And certainly he almost worried me to death.’

So Mohammed returned to his master, carrying the cows’ tails tied up in a bundle on his back. When he came to the sea-shore, he stuck all the tails in the sand, and went and buried the one cow, whose tail he had not cut off, up to her neck, leaving the tail projecting. After he had got everything ready, he began to shriek and scream as before, till his master and all the other servants came running to see what was the matter.

‘What in the world has happened?’ they cried.

‘The sea has swallowed up the cows,’ said Mohammed, ‘and nothing remains but their tails. But if you are quick and pull hard, perhaps you may get them out again!’

The master ordered each man instantly to take hold of a tail, but at the first pull they nearly tumbled backwards, and the tails were left in their hands.

‘Stop,’ cried Mohammed, ‘you are doing it all wrong. You have just pulled off their tails, and the cows have sunk to the bottom of the sea.’

‘See if you can do it any better,’ said they; and Mohammed ran to the cow which he had buried in the rough grass, and took hold of her tail and dragged the animal out at once.

‘There ! that is the way to do it !’ said he, ‘I told you you knew nothing about it !’

The men slunk away, much ashamed of themselves ; but the master came up to Mohammed. ‘Get you gone !’ he said, ‘there is nothing more for you to do ! You have killed my mother, you have slain my children, you have stolen my sheep, you have drowned my cows ; I have now no work to give you.’

‘First give me the strip of your skin which belongs to me of right, as you have broken your contract !’

‘That a judge shall decide,’ said the master ; ‘we will go before him.’

‘Yes, we will,’ replied Mohammed. And they went before the judge.

‘What is your case ?’ asked the judge of the master.

‘My lord,’ said the man, bowing low, ‘my shepherd here has robbed me of everything. He has killed my children and my old mother ; he has stolen my sheep, he has drowned my cows in the sea.’

The shepherd answered : ‘He must pay me what he owes me, and then I will go.’

‘Yes, that is the law,’ said the judge.

‘Very well,’ returned the master, ‘let him reckon up how long he has been in my service.’

‘That won’t do,’ replied Mohammed, ‘I want my strip of skin, as we agreed in the contract.’

Seeing there was no help for it, the master cut a bit of skin, and gave it to Mohammed, who went off at once to his uncle.

‘Now we are rich, dear uncle,’ cried he ; ‘we will sell our cows and sheep and go to a new country. This one is no longer the place for us.’

The sheep were soon sold, and the two comrades started on their travels. That night they reached some Bedouin tents, where they had supper with the Arabs. Before they lay down to sleep, Mohammed called the

owner of the tent aside. 'Your greyhound will eat my strip of leather,' he said to the Arab.

'No; do not fear.'

'But supposing he does?'

'Well, then, I will give him to you in exchange,' replied the Arab.

Mohammed waited till everyone was fast asleep, then he rose softly, and tearing the bit of skin in pieces, threw it down before the greyhound, setting up wild shrieks as he did so.

'Oh, master, said I not well that your dog would eat my thong?'

'Be quiet, don't make such a noise, and you shall have the dog.'

So Mohammed put a leash round his neck, and led him away.

In the evening they arrived at the tents of some more Bedouin, and asked for shelter. After supper Mohammed said to the owner of the tent, 'Your ram will kill my greyhound.'

'Oh, no, he won't.'

'And supposing he does?'

'Then you can take him in exchange.'

So in the night Mohammed killed the greyhound, and laid his body across the horns of the ram. Then he set up shrieks and yells, till he roused the Arab, who said: 'Take the ram and go away.'

Mohammed did not need to be told twice, and at sunset he reached another Bedouin encampment. He was received kindly, as usual, and after supper he said to his host: 'Your daughter will kill my ram.'

'Be silent, she will do nothing of the sort; my daughter does not need to steal meat, she has some every day.'

'Very well, I will go to sleep; but if anything happens to my ram I will call out.'

'If my daughter touches anything belonging to my

guest I will kill her,' said the Arab, and went to his bed.

When everybody was asleep, Mohammed got up, killed the ram, and took out his liver, which he broiled on the fire. He placed a piece of it in the girl's hands, and laid some more on her night-dress while she slept and knew nothing about it. After this he began to cry out loudly.

'What is the matter? be silent at once!' called the Arab.

'How can I be silent, when my ram, which I loved like a child, has been slain by your daughter?'

'But my daughter is asleep,' said the Arab.

'Well, go and see if she has not some of the flesh about her.'

'If she has, you may take her in exchange for the ram;' and as they found the flesh exactly as Mohammed had foretold, the Arab gave his daughter a good beating, and then told her to get out of sight, for she was now the property of this stranger.

They wandered in the desert till, at nightfall, they came to a Bedouin encampment, where they were hospitably bidden to enter. Before lying down to sleep, Mohammed said to the owner of the tent: 'Your mare will kill my wife.'

'Certainly not.'

'And if she does?'

'Then you shall take the mare in exchange.'

When everyone was asleep, Mohammed said softly to his wife: 'Maiden, I have got such a clever plan! I am going to bring in the mare and put it at your feet, and I will cut you, just a few little flesh wounds, so that you may be covered with blood, and everybody will suppose you to be dead. But remember that you must not make a sound, or we shall both be lost.'

This was done, and then Mohammed wept and wailed louder than ever.

The Arab hastened to the spot and cried, 'Oh, cease making that terrible noise! Take the mare and go; but carry off the dead girl with you. She can lie quite easily across the mare's back.'

Then Mohammed and his uncle picked up the girl, and, placing her on the mare's back, led it away, being very careful to walk one on each side, so that she might not slip down and hurt herself. After the Arab tents could be seen no longer, the girl sat up on the saddle and looked about her, and as they were all hungry they tied up the mare, and took out some dates to eat. When they had finished, Mohammed said to his uncle: 'Dear uncle, the maiden shall be your wife; I give her to you. But the money we got from the sheep and cows we will divide between us. You shall have two-thirds and I will have one. For you will have a wife, but I never mean to marry. And now, go in peace, for never more will you see me. The bond of bread and salt is at an end between us.'

So they wept, and fell on each other's necks, and asked forgiveness for any wrongs in the past. Then they parted and went their ways.

[*Märchen und Gedichte aus der Stadt Tripolis.* Von Hans Stumme.]