

"A Woman Trickster"  
Syria

Once there was a very wealthy merchant. He kept a shop. Above the shop's door, he had hung a sign which read, "Men are Smarter than Women."

One day the master blacksmith's daughter passed through that part of the market. She was a beautiful young woman, and also very intelligent. She saw the sign. It annoyed her. She was determined to teach the shopkeeper a lesson. That night she lay awake in her bed, forming a plan.

In the morning she dressed herself in her finest gown, braided her hair, and arranged herself with the greatest art. Then she went to the merchant's store.

"Good morning, O my uncle," she greeted him.

"A morning to bring happiness from Allah," replied the merchant.

"God keep you happy," said the young woman. Then suddenly she burst into tears.

The merchant was astonished. "Please tell me why you are weeping! Speak!"

But the young woman only cried the harder.

The merchant said, "Tell me what you need, only please stop crying. You are making my heart burn like fire! Whatever you want done, I'll do it."

The young woman sighed, "If only that were possible!"

"At least please tell me what you are wishing for", said the man.

At that, the young woman lifted her head and, looking directly into the merchant's eyes, asked, "Do you see any fault in my eyes?"

When she put this question, staring up at him like a doe, the merchant began to feel a little faint. "Allah has not graced the gazelle with more beautiful eyes than yours," he said.

"Then what is wrong with my arms?" she asked, pulling back her sleeves.

When he saw her neatly turned arms, smooth like peeled cucumbers, the merchant asked, "Is crystal or marble finer than this, O Lord?"

With tears still falling down her face, the girl lifted the hem of her gown. "What blemish do you see in my feet?" she asked.

Now the poor man was quite overcome. "My eyes have seen nothing daintier. Only please do not cry," he begged.

Sobbing bitterly, the girl pulled off her headcloth, uncovering hair that hung down in thick ropes, black and shining. "Is anything amiss with my hair, then?" she asked.

"It is perfect," said the merchant. "There is no silk in my store as fine."

Then at last the young woman began to tell him this story. "I am the daughter of a qadi," she said. (*A qadi is a judge in an Islamic court.*) "Whenever a suitor comes to my father to ask for my hand, my father tells him, 'Oh, you would not want my daughter -- she has a very bad temper. Also, her eyes are crossed and her limbs are crippled.' Then of course, the suitors leave -- Who would want to marry such a person? But a woman needs protection, and marriage is her shelter. Now I don't know what to do."

The merchant said, "Tomorrow I myself shall go to your father and ask for your hand in marriage. Whatever he says, I shall reply, 'I am willing,' and 'I do not complain.' Now there is no reason for you to be sad." So the young woman left him.

When the merchant closed his shop and went home that night, sleep fled before him and thoughts of the young woman's beauty filled his mind.

When the day dawned, he smoothed his whiskers and dressed with care, and as soon as it was the proper hour for calling, he hastened to the qadi's house.

When they had exchanged their greetings and were sitting face to face, the merchant said, "I have come seeking kinship with your honor. I ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

The qadi put him off, saying, "Have I a daughter?"

The merchant replied, "I know for certain that you do."

"But she is cross-eyed," said the qadi.

"That does not matter!" cried the merchant.

"She is lame," said the qadi.

"I have no objection!" answered the merchant.

"And some people say she has a very sharp tongue", said the qadi.

"Nonsense!", exclaimed the merchant.

In the end the qadi said, "Can you pay her bride-money? It is ten thousand dinars."

The merchant paused, but remembering just how beautiful the girl was, said, "It is less than she is worth."

And so the qadi finally agreed to the match.

Now the preparations for the wedding began. In the newspaper it was written that a well-born bride would be bound in marriage to a groom of good family.

All that remained was for the bride to be taken from her father's house, to the bridal chamber in her husband's house -- and it was the custom in this land for this to occur on the evening before the marriage, so the women of the groom's house could prepare and help dress the bride for the wedding.

Pacing forward and backward, the merchant awaited the arrival of his bride with impatience.

There was a knocking at his door. It was a porter bent under the weight of a huge covered basket.

"This is from the qadi's house," the porter announced.

"This might be her clothing and other possessions," said the merchant, and he told the man to carry it up the stairs. To himself he thought, "Perhaps I'll take a look and see what she is bringing with her." He raised the cover of the basket, and what do you think he saw? A young woman exactly like the qadi had described was there!

"Who are you?" asked the merchant, in shock.

"Who in the world do you think I am?! I am your bride, the qadi's daughter" the woman replied. "My ridiculous father insisted on sending me here in a basket, so no one would see me, it seems. So this is my fate -- my father and my husband will compete to be the biggest fool."

"How could this be? When you came to my shop, you were a different woman. You were like the full moon!" he cried.

"I have never met you before, and as far as know I have never been to your shop. Well, it really does look like I am marrying a crackpot!", replied the qadi's daughter. With that she motioned to the porter to carry the basket she was in upstairs, and he did so.

The merchant sat thinking. He wondered, "What has happened here? The sweet and beautiful young woman who visited my shop has played a terrible trick on me! Why would she do such a thing?"

The next morning he was back in his shop. He sat with his head in his hands, and in a little while the master blacksmith's daughter came by.

"May your day be glad!" she said.

When he saw who it was, the merchant said, "May Allah not gladden yours! What have I done to you that you should make me fall so low? Tonight I am committed to be married to someone I do not want to marry."

The girl pointed to the sign above the store and said, "Who do you think is smarter now?"

"Is that what prompted your revenge?" asked the man.

"Is that not enough? But if you want me to help you get out of the fix you are in, all you need to do is change your sign." After saying this, she walked off.

Wasting not a minute, the merchant took down his board and wrote in letters of gold, "Men and Women are Smartest when they Think Together."

When the blacksmith's daughter saw the new sign, she smiled. "Now I'll gladly help you," she said. "This is what you need to do: Go to the Gypsy camp on the edge of the town and invite some twenty tinkers to bring their pipes and drums and come to your house in the evening. Tell them it is your wedding and that you want to celebrate with much noise and laughter. Let them wish you well and call you 'cousin.' Of course the qadi would also be your guest at supper. When he asks, 'Who are these rough and noisy folk?', please say, 'Honored uncle, he who denies his origins

has none to boast of. These men are my cousins, for I am of Gypsy stock. But as you know, God has looked kindly on me, praise be to Him.' When he hears this news, he will surely demand a divorce."

The merchant did exactly what the blacksmith's daughter told him to. In the evening as he and the qadi sat together after their meal, a band of Gypsies suddenly burst into the house blowing their pipes, beating their drums, and dancing and singing.

They embraced the merchant and kissed his beard, shouting "God bless your match, O cousin!"

Puzzled by all this movement, the qadi asked, "What does this mean, O my son?"

The merchant said, "You have heard them, uncle. They are my cousins, coming to wish me well. He who disowns his ancestors has something to hide. I am what I am, and now I have a qadi for a father-in-law, praise God!"

The qadi was enraged. "You never told me this before the marriage. I never would have given a daughter of mine to a tribe of Gypsies! You must call off the wedding -- speak the words and I'll stand witness."

"Had you asked me, I should have told you," said the merchant. "I value our kinship far too highly, and I do not wish to cancel the wedding."

"If I pay you back the bride-money, if I refund the expenses of the wedding?" asked the qadi.

But the merchant still refused.

In fear and desperation the qadi finally said, "I shall pay you twice the sum you spent!"

This time the merchant was persuaded.

The qadi took his daughter home, and the merchant slept in peace the whole night through.

The first thing the merchant did when he woke up next morning was to go to the master blacksmith's shop.

"I have come to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage," he said. "I am willing to pay any sum you ask for her marriage settlement. However, I have one condition: I wish to see her first."

"Has it ever happened that a man looked at his bride before the wedding?", the man objected.

"I'll give you a thousand dinars above her price if you let me see her," said the merchant.

Hearing this offer, one of the blacksmiths looked up from his work and said, "Why not, O uncle? Is your daughter lame, that you are afraid to show her to him?"

So the master blacksmith took the merchant home with him. He called to his daughter to bring in coffee.

When she saw who sat with her father, she laughed and asked him the purpose of his visit.

He told her, "To be quite certain that I am not being tricked a second time."

So the notables of the town were assembled, and the wedding of the merchant and the master blacksmith's daughter was celebrated amid great feasting and rejoicing.

The bride and the groom lived in happiness as pure as gold.