

The Princess and the Golden Ball
An Iraqi Story: Arabic
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Once there was a beautiful princess who lived with her father in a huge palace. Although the princess was very beautiful she was also very selfish and conceited. The princess always got her own way and the king was often disappointed with his daughter. He was worried that she would grow into a selfish woman and that she would not be a good example to his people.

One day the princess was playing in the gardens of the palace. She was playing with her favourite possession in the whole world, a golden ball. The princess loved the golden ball because it was so shiny and she could see her reflection upon its surface. She also loved the ball because it was so valuable.

The princess threw the ball high into the air where the sun made it sparkle against the blue sky. Higher and higher she threw the golden ball. So high that she imagined the golden ball was a second sun; a sun belonging to her and her alone.

The golden ball went so high up into the air that it really did begin to look like a sun, and the reflections dazzled the princess who had to close her eyes. The ball landed some way away and began to roll towards the lake in the shadows of the giant Nakla trees.

The princess let out a cry and ran towards the golden ball with her arms outstretched. But she was too late. The ball rolled into the lake and sank beneath the surface out of sight. The princess collapsed onto the ground and began to cry. She cried so hard that her tears fell into the lake making a sound like raindrops. Little ripples stretched across the surface of the lake and still the princess cried and cried.

Then a small voice came out of nowhere. 'Why are you crying, princess?' The princess looked all around but she could not see a single person near the lake. Again the small voice asked, 'why are you crying, my princess?'

When she looked down she saw a small frog sitting on the edge of the lake with wide eyes and little webbed feet.

'I have lost my golden ball and now I will never get it back.'

'Where have you lost it, princess?' said the little frog. 'I can help you find it if it will stop your tears.'

The princess wiped her tears away. Perhaps this little frog can help me, she thought.

'It is at the bottom of the lake where I cannot reach.'

The little frog looked at the princess and smiled. 'I can fetch it for you, princess. I will dive to the bottom of the lake and I will bring back your golden ball for you.'

The princess was delighted by the news and also smiled, but before the frog jumped into the water she wanted the princess to make him a promise.

'I will promise you anything if you will bring me back my golden ball,' said the princess.

'I want you to take me with you back to the palace and be my friend. If you promise to do this then I will dive to the bottom of the lake and find your golden ball.'

The princess agreed right away and so the little frog jumped into the lake and swam all the way to the bottom where he took the golden ball in his mouth. The ball was very heavy and the little frog struggled to get back to the surface. Eventually he appeared on the edge of the lake and dropped the ball onto the grass at the princesses' feet.

The princess took the ball and held it to her chest and laughed with glee. Then she ran towards the palace, leaving the frog behind.

'Wait for me,' cried the little frog. 'You promised to take me with you!'

But the princess ignored the frog, forgetting all about her promise. All she could think about was how happy she was that she had her golden ball. And she knew it would be dinner time at the palace and she was hungry. The princess only ever thought about herself and the poor frog was left alone on the edge of the lake.

Later that evening the princess and the king were sitting down to dinner in the palace. The princess did not spare a thought for the frog, or for the promise she had made him.

Then there was a knock at the palace door. A moment later the frog hopped into the dining hall and jumped up on to the table next to the princess. The princess was horrified and cried out, 'go away you disgusting frog!' But the king silenced his daughter and asked the frog what he was doing inside the palace. The frog told the king all about the promise the princess had made to him. The king was very angry with his daughter and commanded her to keep her promise to the frog.

'We must always do as we promise, daughter.'

'But he is just a frog and I am a princess,' she said, almost in tears once again.

'That does not matter. You must do as you said you would do.'

The king made the princess serve the frog a small plate of food which the little frog hungrily gobbled down.

The princess was angry at her father and even angrier at the frog. She thought it wrong that a frog should be inside the palace, eating at her table with the king. But the king paid no attention to his daughter's foul mood.

Eventually the princess had had enough of the little frog and stood to go to bed. She bid her father goodnight and made to leave, but the frog reminded the princess of her promise to stay with him and be his friend. The king agreed that the princess must take the little frog to bed with her so that he might sleep on her pillow.

'I will not do it!' exclaimed the princess. But the king insisted his daughter keep her promise.

Although she did not want to, the princess knew that she must do as her father instructed. She placed her hand on the table and the little frog jumped into her palm. Then she went up to her bedroom.

Once away from the king, the princess was very mean to the little frog. She threw him onto her bed and told him that he was an ugly creature, and that he was very impudent to assume he could sleep on the pillow of a princess.

She got ready for bed and pulled the covers up close around her, ignoring the little frog who was sitting on the edge of her pillow.

'Why do you hate me so?' asked the frog. I did as you asked and rescued your golden ball from the bottom of the lake. All I asked in return was for you to keep your promise to be my friend.'

The frog lowered his head and tears escaped from his sad, wide eyes as he began to cry. 'I have been living by the lake for many years and all I wanted was to have your company. It is not a good life to be all alone with nobody to talk to.'

The princess was very moved by the frog's tears and her heart began to soften. Although she was a princess, and she had everything a young woman might want, she was an only child with no brothers or sisters to play with. The princess had grown up alone in the palace and she often wished that she was able to share her time with others. Often she would hear the young children playing on the other side of the palace walls and she was envious of their laughter and games.

The princess and the frog talked into the night and soon the princess forgot altogether that he was a frog and thought of him in a kind way. She shared stories her father had told her as a baby, and the frog enjoyed listening very much.

Towards dawn both the frog and the princess were very tired. The princess realised that she was happy to have a friend to talk to, and she regretted being so mean to the little frog. Just

as they were both about to fall asleep, the princess leaned forwards and kissed the frog on the lips.

Instantly there was a blinding flash of silver light. The princess closed her eyes in shock. When she opened them a handsome prince stood before her and the little frog had vanished altogether.

‘You have set me free with your kindness, princess,’ said the handsome prince. ‘You kept your promise and you befriended me even though I was just a frog.’

The very next morning the prince asked the king for his daughter’s hand in marriage. The king agreed at once and the young couple were wed in the palace grounds next to the lake, beneath the shadows of the Nakla trees.

From that day forwards the princess was a changed person. She knew how important it was to keep a promise, and she treated her people with kindness and respect no matter how rich or how poor they were.