

INTRODUCTION

Traditional tales were felt, in the 18th century, to be 'an affront to the rational mind' as the illustrious Iona and Peter Opie remind us in The Classic Fairy Tales (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Nowadays, of course, the work of psychologists makes people more open-minded, sometimes even to the point of agreeing with the famous folklorist Joseph Campbell that the folktale is 'the primer of the picture-language of the soul'.

Never having been through a phase of believing in the complete sovereignty of the intellect at the expense of other sides of humanity, people in the Middle East have for long regarded certain traditional stories as having a real function, and effect on the mind and on the community.

Such a tale is that which is sometimes called 'The Tale of Mushkil Gusha – the Remover of All Difficulties'. It is known in both major

The Tale of Mushkil Gusha

Once upon a time, not a thousand miles from here, there lived a poor old woodcutter, who was a widower, and his little daughter. Every day he used to go into the mountains to cut firewood, which he brought home and tied into bundles. Then he used to have breakfast and walk into the nearest town, where he would sell his wood and rest for a time before returning home.

One day, when he reached home very late, the girl said to him, 'Father, I sometimes wish that we could have some nicer food, and more and different kinds of things to eat.'

'Very well, my child,' said the old man; 'tomorrow I shall get up much earlier than I usually do. I shall go further into the mountains where there is more wood, and I shall bring back a much larger quantity than usual. I will get home earlier and I will be able to bundle the wood sooner, and I will go into town and sell it so that we can have more money and I shall bring you back all kinds of nice things to eat.'

The next morning the woodcutter rose before dawn and went into the mountains. He worked very hard cutting wood and trimming it and made it into a huge bundle which he carried on his back to his little house.



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and minor communities in India and Pakistan, in Central Asia and Iran, in the Near East and even in Africa and the Yemens. It is believed that if this story is recited on Thursday nights, it will in some inexplicable way help the work of the mysterious Mushkil Gusha, Friend of Man.

When he got home, it was still very early. He put his load of wood down, and knocked on the door, saying, 'Daughter, Daughter, open the door, for I am hungry and thirsty and I need a meal before I go to market.'

But the door was locked. The woodcutter was so tired that he lay down and was soon fast asleep beside his bundle. The little girl, having forgotten all about their conversation the night before, was fast asleep in bed. When he woke up a few hours later, the sun was high. The woodcutter knocked on the door again and said, 'Daughter, Daughter, come quickly; I must have a little food and go to market to sell the wood; for it is already much later than my usual time of starting.'

But, having forgotten all about the conversation, the little girl had meanwhile got up, tidied the house, and gone out for a walk. She had locked the door assuming in her forgetfulness that her father was still in the town.

So the woodcutter thought to himself, 'It is now rather late to go into the town, I will therefore return to the mountains and cut another bundle of wood, which I will bring home, and tomorrow I will take a double load to market.'

All that day the old man toiled in the mountains cutting wood and shaping the branches. When he got home with the wood on his shoulders, it was evening.

He put down his burden behind the house, knocked on the door and said, 'Daughter, Daughter, open the door for I am tired and I have eaten nothing all day. I have a




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double bundle of wood which I hope to take to market tomorrow. Tonight I must sleep well so that I will be strong.'

But there was no answer, for the little girl when she came home had felt very sleepy, and had made a meal for herself and gone to bed. She had been rather worried at first that her father was not home, but she decided that he must have arranged to stay in town overnight.

Once again the woodcutter, finding that he could not get into the house, tired, hungry and thirsty, lay down by his bundles of wood and fell fast asleep. He could not keep awake, although he was fearful for what might have happened to the little girl.

Now the woodcutter, because he was so cold and hungry and tired, woke very, very early the next morning: before it was even light.

He sat up, and looked around, but he could not see anything. And then a strange thing happened. The wood- cutter thought he heard a voice saying: 'Hurry, hurry! Leave your wood and come this way. If you need enough, and you want little enough, you shall have delicious food.'

The woodcutter stood up and walked in the direction of the voice. And he walked and he walked; but he found nothing.

By now he was colder and hungrier and more tired than ever, and he was lost. He had been full of hope, but that did not seem to have helped him. Now he felt sad, and he wanted to cry. But he realised that crying would not help him either, so he lay down and fell asleep.

Quite soon he woke up again. It was too cold, and he was too hungry, to sleep. So he decided to tell himself, as if in a story, everything that had happened to him since his little daughter had first said that



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she wanted a different kind of food.

As soon as he had finished his story, he thought he heard another voice, saying, somewhere above him, out of the dawn, 'Old man, what are you doing sitting there?'

'I am telling myself my own story,' said the woodcutter. 'And what is that?' said the voice.

The old man repeated his tale. 'Very well,' said the voice. And then it told the old woodcutter to close his eyes and to mount as it were, a step. 'But I do not see any step,' said the old man. 'Never mind, but do as I say,' said the voice.

The old man did as he was told. As soon as he had closed his eyes, he found that he was standing up and as he raised his right foot he felt that there was something like a step under it. He started to ascend what seemed to be a staircase. Suddenly the whole flight of steps started to move, very fast, and the voice said, 'Do not open your eyes until I tell you to do so.'

In a very short time, the voice told the old man to open his eyes. When he did he found that he was in a place which looked rather like a desert, with the sun beating down on him. He was surrounded by masses and masses of pebbles; pebbles of all colours: red, green, blue and white. But he seemed to be alone. He looked all around him, and could not see anyone, but the voice started to speak again.

'Take up as many of these stones as you can,' said the voice, 'then close your eyes, and walk down the steps once more.'

The woodcutter did as he was told, and he found himself, when he opened his eyes again at the voice's bidding, standing before the door of his own house.

He knocked at the door and his little daughter answered it. She




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asked him where he had been, and he told her, although she could hardly understand what he was saying, it all sounded so confusing.

They went into the house, and the little girl and her father shared the last food which they had, which was a handful of dried dates.

When they had finished, the old man thought that he heard a voice speaking to him again, a voice just like the other one which had told him to climb the stairs.

The voice said, 'Although you may not know it yet, you have been saved by Mushkil Gusha. Remember that Mushkil Gusha is always here. Make sure that every Thursday night you eat some dates and give some to any needy person, and tell the story of Mushkil Gusha. Or give a gift in the name of Mushkil Gusha to someone who will help the needy. Make sure that the story of Mushkil Gusha is never, never forgotten. If you do this, and if this is done by those to whom you tell the story, the people who are in real need will always find their way.'

The woodcutter put all the stones which he had brought back from the desert in a corner of his little house. They looked very much like ordinary stones, and he did not know what to do with them.

The next day he took his two enormous bundles of wood to market, and sold them easily for a high price. When he got home he took his daughter all sorts of delicious kinds of food, which she had never tasted before. And when they had eaten it, the old woodcutter said: 'Now I am going to tell you the whole story of Mushkil Gusha. Mushkil Gusha is "the remover of all difficulties". Our difficulties have been removed through Mushkil Gusha and we must always remember it.'

For nearly a week after that the old man carried on as usual. He went into the mountains, brought back wood, had a meal, took




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the wood to market and sold it. He always found a buyer without difficulty.

Now the next Thursday came, and, as is the way of men, the woodcutter forgot to repeat the tale of Mushkil Gusha.

Late that evening, in the house of the woodcutter's neighbours, the fire had gone out. The neighbours had nothing with which to re-light the fire, and they went to the house of the woodcutter. They said, 'Neighbour, neighbour, please give us a light from those wonderful lamps of yours which we see shining through the window.'

'What lamps?' said the woodcutter.

'Come outside,' said the neighbours, 'and see what we mean.' So the woodcutter went outside and then he saw, sure enough, all kinds of brilliant lights shining through the window from the inside.

He went back to the house, and saw that the light was streaming from the pile of pebbles which he had put in the corner. But the rays of light were cold, and it was not possible to use them to light a fire. So he went out to the neighbours and said, 'Neighbours, I am sorry, I have no fire.' And he banged the door in their faces. They were annoyed and confused, and went back to their house, muttering. They leave our story here.

The woodcutter and his daughter quickly covered up the brilliant lights with every piece of cloth they could find, for fear that anyone would see what a treasure they had. The next morning, when they uncovered the stones, they discovered that they were precious, luminous gems.

They took the jewels, one by one, to neighbouring towns, where they sold them for a huge price. Now the woodcutter decided to build for himself and for his daughter a wonderful palace. They chose a site




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just opposite the castle of the King of their country. In a very short time a marvellous building had come into being.

Now that particular King had a beautiful daughter, and one day when she got up in the morning, she saw a sort of fairy-tale castle just opposite her father's and she was amazed. She asked her servants, 'Who has built this castle? What right have these people to do such a thing so near to our home?'

The servants went away and made enquiries and they came back and told the story, as far as they could collect it, to the Princess.

The Princess called for the little daughter of the wood-cutter, for she was very angry with her, but when the two girls met and talked they soon became fast friends. They started to meet every day and went to swim and play in the stream which had been made for the Princess by her father. A few days after they first met, the Princess took off a beautiful and valuable necklace and hung it up on a tree just beside the stream. She forgot to take it down when they came out of the water, and when she got home she thought it must have been lost.

The Princess thought a little and then decided that the daughter of the woodcutter had stolen her necklace. So she told her father, and he had the woodcutter arrested; he confiscated the castle and declared forfeit everything that the woodcutter had. The old man was thrown into prison, and the daughter was put into an orphanage.

As was the custom in that country, after a period of time the woodcutter was taken from the dungeon and put in the public square, chained to a post, with a sign around his neck. On the sign was written: 'This is what happens to those who steal from Kings'.




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At first people gathered around him, and jeered and threw things at him. He was most unhappy.

But quite soon, as is the way of men, everyone became used to the sight of the old man sitting there by his post, and took very little notice of him. Sometimes people threw him scraps of food, sometimes they did not.

One day he overheard somebody saying that it was Thursday afternoon. Suddenly, the thought came into his mind that it would soon be the evening of Mushkil Gusha, the remover of all difficulties, and that he had forgotten to commemorate him for so many days. No sooner had this thought come into his head, than a charitable man, passing by, threw him a tiny coin. The woodcutter called out: 'Generous friend, you have given me money, which is of no use to me. If, however, your kindness could extend to buying one or two dates and coming and sitting and eating them with me, I would be eternally grateful to you.'

The other man went and bought a few dates. And they sat and ate them together. When they had finished, the woodcutter told the other man the story of Mushkil Gusha. 'I think you must be mad,' said the generous man. But he was a kindly person who himself had many difficulties. When he arrived home after this incident, he found that all his problems had disappeared. And that made him start to think a great deal about Mushkil Gusha. But he leaves our story here.

The very next morning the Princess went back to her bathing-place. As she was about to go into the water, she saw what looked like her necklace down at the bottom of the stream. As she was going to dive in to try to get it back, she happened to sneeze. Her head went up, and she saw that what she had thought was the necklace was only its reflection in the water. It was hanging on the bough of the tree where she had left it such a long time before. Taking the necklace






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down, the Princess ran excitedly to her father and told him what had happened. The King gave orders for the wood- cutter to be released and given a public apology. The little girl was brought back from the orphanage, and everyone lived happily ever after.

These are some of the incidents in the story of Mushkil Gusha. It is a very long tale and it is never ended. It has many forms. Some of them are even not called the story of Mushkil Gusha at all, so people do not recognise it. But it is because of Mushkil Gusha that his story, in whatever form, is remembered by somebody, somewhere in the world, day and night, wherever there are people. As his story had always been recited, so it will always continue to be told.

