

Becket and the Princess

By Gianluca Milani

Once upon a time in a land far to the east there lived a king and the king had a beautiful daughter. She was so beautiful that every day there was a long line of suitors in front of the castle door waiting to call on the princess. The king felt that none of the suitors was right for his daughter and he was reluctant to give her away, so he thought and thought of a way to pick out a good man for the princess. Eventually he decided. One day, in front of a huge crowd of suitors, the king proclaimed that the princess would marry the person that brought to the king: a talking dog, a solid-gold pumpkin, and the beard of Sasmandir the snake. Now Sasmandir was a ferocious giant cobra that lived in the great deserts of Naad and no one believed in a talking dog or a golden pumpkin so the suitors left in dismay when they heard the news. All left except for one man; Becket.

Becket was a clever fellow in his early twenties and he was apprenticed to a carpenter. Becket thought to himself, “The Princess is worth the risks of the journey; if anyone can find all those things then I can.” The next day Becket set off into the desert of Naad with a wooden club, a knife, food, and water. He walked through the desert and the scorching sun for days and days. Finally he saw an oasis. He ran to the precious water and stooped to take a drink. After he had quenched his thirst he heard a voice, “Psst, over here!” Becket looked around and saw a dog in the bushes. Becket ran over to the dog and gave it a pat on the head. “Hi! I’m Alkab.” Becket jumped back in surprise at hearing a dog talk. So this was the talking dog! “Will you come with me?” said Becket awkwardly. “If you can free me from the snake.” Alkab continued, “Dozens of years ago I was a princess, but then I offended Sasmandir the cobra, so he turned me into a dog. Fortunately, he didn’t take my speech away. Now I am prisoner to him as no one can escape the invisible magical walls that surround this oasis. You can enter, but you can’t leave” Becket asked, “So there is no way to escape this place?” Alkab replied, “Only if the spell is broken. No one has ever been able to stand up to his magic” Becket told Alkab about the king’s decree and how he wanted to marry the princess. Just as they finished speaking they heard a scraping sound in the distance. “Quick.” Alkab said, “Here comes the snake himself, quick hide!” Becket and Alkab hastily hid behind a tree. Minutes later a twenty-foot snake slithered into view. “That’s him.” whispered Alkab. Sasmandir disappeared into a hole in the ground. “That’s his lair where he keeps all his potions and riches.” Alkab said. “I think I know how to kill him.” said Becket and he told Alkab his plan.

That night, Becket and Alkab crept into the hole as quietly as they could and entered into a long, dark hall with torches and shelves full of bottles on the walls. At the other end of the hall Sasmandir was snoring louder than a growling lion. The two invaders slowly crept up to the bed and were about to attack the coiled-up snake when he awoke. "Who dares enter my chamber?" Sasmandir hissed. The giant snake opened its mouth and was about to eat both Alkab and Becket when Becket desperately grabbed the nearest potions he could reach and threw them down the great cobra's mouth. In stages, Sasmandir began to change shape: first he turned into an elephant, trumpeting wildly. Then a roaring lion, then a braying donkey, then a giraffe, next a sparrow then a buzzing fly! In the process, Sasmandir ran around the room breaking everything and nearly flattening Becket and Alkab. All this happened within half a minute. Lastly, Sasmandir turned into a trout, but before the next potion could change Sasmandir into a monkey, Alkab gulped down Sasmandir in one bite! Becket, faint with surprise at the animal show, turned in even greater surprise to see Alkab disappear and a beautiful woman spring up in the dog's place. "You see," said Alkab, "Now that Sasmandir is dead, the spell is broken and I am human again." As Becket could not get Sasmandir's beard and as there was no talking dog anymore, there was no reason for Becket to return to his own people. Instead, he went to Alkab's country (the invisible walls around the oasis disappeared when Sasmandir died so the two could leave). Alkab was recognized by the elders of the city as the lost princess from years ago and was welcomed to rule the city (the old king had just died and had left no heir). Alkab was rightfully crowned Queen of her country and after some years, she married Becket. They lived happily ever after as king and queen.