

"The 'Pink Pearl' Prince"

Iran

Once upon a time there lived a merchant in Persia. He had three daughters: Razia, Fawzia, and Nazneen. The merchant loved them very much. One day he called them and told them, "Your love stops me from staying away from you even for a day, but the call of Allah beckons me to visit the holy land of Mecca. I seek your permission."

The girls, noticing their father's keen urge to make the holy pilgrimage, said, "Go, by all means, our beloved father. Have no fears about us."

They asked him to bring them presents from the holy land.

Razia asked for a pair of diamond ear-rings.

Fawzia wanted a diamond pin to hold her headscarf in place.

Nazneen asked for a pink pearl which she said she needed badly. She added that if he failed to get it for her, she would not let him enter his home.

The merchant was somewhat dismayed to hear Nazneen press her demand so emphatically, but since she was the pampered youngster, he brushed aside the roughness of her demand.

The merchant set off on his journey. After travelling many days he reached the holy city of Mecca. He participated in the religious rituals, and then set about shopping for his daughters. He bought the diamond ear-rings for Razia, and a diamond pin for Fawzia. But try as he may, he couldn't find the pink pearl for Nazneen.

Some pilgrims were to return by boat from Basrah to their various destinations. So the merchant also embarked on a ship to Persia. But somehow the ship would not sail. The wind would not blow. The crew tried and tried but the ship wouldn't budge an inch.

At last the captain announced to the passengers, "Brethren, whoever has made a promise, must fulfil it. Otherwise we shall not be able to sail at all."

The merchant remembered that he hadn't bought the pink pearl for Nazneen. So he left the ship and began once again to search for it. While he was searching here and there frantically, he met a man who told him: "That which you want to buy is not a thing, but the son of the king."

The merchant made straight to the palace where the "Pink Pearl" dwelt. He sought the prince's audience and told him the whole story.

"I will not come myself to Persia, good merchant," the "Pink Pearl" told him, "but take these three boxes to your daughter."

The merchant took the boxes and embarked once again on the ship.

This time the ship started well and sailed majestically on the open seas. The merchant soon arrived at his home.

The three girls greeted their father warmly. The merchant gave the diamond earrings to Razia, the diamond pin to Fawzia, and held out the three boxes to Nazneen.

The merchant hadn't forgotten the trouble that Nazneen's demand had put him to and he told her gruffly: "You were the cause of a lot of difficulties. Take these boxes and be gone. I don't want to see your face again."

With tears in her eyes, Nazneen left home. She walked for miles together. At last she reached an open plain. She sat down, and decided to open the boxes.

She opened the first box -- and to her surprise, a palace rose up in front of her in a split second.

She opened the second box -- and a retinue of maidservants came out of it and escorted her into the palace. Everything was breathtakingly beautiful. She spent the whole day exploring the palace, and wondering at the miracle that had happened to her.

She decided to wait a bit before opening the third box. First she wanted to enjoy in a leisurely manner the good things she had already received.

The next morning, she opened the third box. When she did so, in front of her arose a beautiful bridge. Over the bridge came a handsome youth riding a splendid horse. He moved regally and gracefully towards the palace. The maid-servants rushed to open the gates of the palace.

He greeted Nazneen and said, "Do not shut the lid of the third box while I am on the bridge, for if you do so I shall die."

Nazneen promised that indeed she would never shut the lid of the third box while he was on the bridge.

The two drank deeply of each other's beauty and love.

Meanwhile, Razia and Fawzia were becoming restless about Nazneen, their younger sister. "We must seek her," they decided, and they set out to look for her. They walked one whole day, and they were exhausted.

When the sun set, they noticed a palace in the distance -- it was none other than Nazneen's. They thought they had better rest there for the night. When they knocked at the gate, the maid-servants allowed them in. Nazneen heard familiar voices and rushed down.

When Nazneen saw her sisters, she hugged and kissed them excitedly and took them upstairs. The two sisters were astonished to find their little sister grown so rich, living in a palace, attended by a retinue of maid-servants, and possessing all the luxuries one could dream of.

"O Nazneen," they said, "Looking for you, we are so tired. Let us take a bath to refresh ourselves and have a good night's rest."

The bath-attendants prepared a lavish bath for them with scented waters. Delicious food was served to them at dinner. They slept the night on silken sheets on soft beds.

The next morning, fully refreshed, Fawzia went around the palace, seeing every nook of it. When she reached the top floor, she saw the three boxes. The first two boxes were shut, and the third box was open. She looked into the open box, saw nothing, and closed it.

Razia also looked around the palace and was amazed to find how rich their sister had become.

Loaded with presents, the two sisters took leave of Nazneen and went home.

Nazneen did not see the "Pink Pearl" prince for some days. She went to where the three boxes were kept. To her dismay, she saw that the third box had been closed. She opened it, hoping to see the bridge and her prince. But nothing was there. She realised the box had somehow been shut and she panicked because she remembered that the prince had said that if this box would be shut while he was on the bridge, he would die.

She ran out of the palace, not knowing where she was going. She ran and ran, until finally, exhausted, she sat under a tree by the side of the road.

Two birds, perched on the tree, were twittering. One said, "The oil of the hair of the demon who sits at the foot of this tree will be good for the 'Pink Pearl' prince."

The other rejoined, "If you understand, then do what is needed."

Nazneen understood them since she knew bird-language. She at once killed the demon and took the oil from his hair.

Then, posing as a doctor, she began to call aloud, "I am a healer of all troubles."

Soon she came upon a palace. It turned out to be the palace of "Pink Pearl" prince.

The prince's mother, hearing the voice of the healer, rushed down, called the doctor in, and took her straight to where her son was lying in a coma, almost dead to all appearances.

Nazneen rubbed the prince with the oil. And lo and behold, her beloved prince came back to life. The royal parents of the prince were happy beyond limit to see their son alive after all.

"What can we give you as a reward for saving our son?" they asked the young woman.

"Only a betrothal ring and a necklace," she replied. Receiving these gifts from the grateful parents of the prince, she sped back to where she was keeping the three boxes.

She opened the third box again -- and thank goodness!, the bridge was there again, and the prince was on his horse, riding over the bridge.

Nazneen took out the ring and put it on her finger, and wore the necklace round her neck.

When he arrived at the palace, and saw the ring on Nazneen's finger, and the necklace around her neck, he asked her, "From where did you get these?"

"From your kind father and mother," she replied, and she narrated the whole episode.

Nazneen and the "Pink Pearl" prince were formally betrothed. Their marriage was an occasion for great pageantry and pomp. And they lived happily ever after.