

## Love is Sweeter than Salt

(translation source: <http://afghanliterature.blogspot.com/2009/12/sweeter-than-salt.html>)

Once there was a rich and powerful king who had seven daughters. One day he summoned all his daughters. The King turned to his eldest daughter. "How much do you love me?" he asked.

"Dear father, to me you are sweeter than sugar," she answered without hesitation.

The king was very pleased and put the same question to each of his daughters in turn. The second daughter answered, "As sweet as honey". The third, "As sweet as molasses". The fourth, "As sweet as brown sugar". The fifth, "As sweet as sherbet". And the sixth, "As sweet as the sweetest halwa sweet". The king, much flattered by these replies, now turned to his youngest daughter, "And how sweet am I to you?" he asked. The youngest daughter thought for a while, then answered, "Respected father, you are sweeter to me than salt".

The king was furious with his youngest daughter, and all her sisters reproached her, "You should be ashamed of yourself for insulting our father" they said. "Couldn't you have compared your love to something other than salt? Ask for his forgiveness immediately and apologize for what you have said" they advised her.

"But what I said is true. To me my father is sweeter than salt" replied the innocent little princess. Hearing this, the king grew even more annoyed. He stamped his foot and ordered his youngest daughter to leave the palace at once, vowing never to set eyes on her again. When the princess left the palace, she had nowhere to go. She wandered sadly through the city but was unable to find a place to lie down and rest. So, she continued to walk until she came to a forest. Tired and lonely, she lay down to sleep on a bed of leaves, and here in the forest she made her home, living on fruit that she picked from the trees.

Time passed away, and one day, as the princess was walking through the forest, she came upon an old woman who was sitting on the bank of a river grinding corn. The princess sat down quietly beside her. "Who are you, my child?" asked the old woman, surprised to find a stranger sitting beside her. Hearing these kind words, the princess was reminded of her sorrow and began to weep. The old woman stopped grinding the corn and embraced the young girl. "Who are you?" she asked once again. "Where have you come from and where are you going?".

"Mother" replied the princess, "I'm a poor defenseless girl with no one in the world to help me except God. As I was wandering through the forest I saw you, so I came and sat down beside you. I have nowhere to go so if you will allow me, I shall be your servant."

"My child," answered the old woman, "I have only one son in this world. We are poor but content. He cuts wood in the forest, loads it on a donkey, and takes it to the city. There he sells it in the bazaar. With the money he receives, he buys corn, and I grind the corn to make bread for our two daily meals. You are welcome to stay with us and be my daughter".

That evening, when the old woman's son returned home, he was surprised to see a young girl sitting with his mother. "Who is she?" he asked. "She is a stranger to these parts and has no one in the world to care for her, so I have made her my daughter" replied the mother. The young man

was delighted to have such a beautiful companion. "God willing, you will live with us in comfort" he said addressing the princess: "The only difficult work is chopping wood and I do that myself. You can stay at home with my mother and help her with the housework".

"Of course, I shall help in the house but I shall also go with you into the forest to chop wood" replied the princess.

"Chopping wood is not easy!" protested the young man.

"If I am to stay here, I must be given my fair share of work" she insisted.

So, the princess settled down to her new life with the old woman and her son. Every morning she would accompany the young man to the forest to chop wood. The son was very happy because he could not have found more beautiful companion. The princess had also grown very fond of him. They would talk for hours, and the days passed quickly. One day the princess had gone to the forest as usual and was attempting to cut one of the lower branches of an old, knotted tree when she noticed on the topmost branch two black snakes. The two snakes were sitting talking to one another. She stopped cutting and hid so that she could hear their conversation.

"My friend, tell me something unusual" said one snake to another. "What could be more unusual than this very tree on which we are sitting. Underneath this tree is buried the biggest treasure in the world. There is so much gold, and there are so many precious stones, that even the wealth of two kings would seem small by comparison" replied the other snake. The first snake was amazed. "Is this really true?" he said, and then he added thoughtfully, "But as long as we are alive no one will ever be able to cut down the tree and dig up its roots to lay their hands on the treasure." "You are right," whispered his friend, "but there is one way of destroying us. If someone sets fire to the tree, we shall be helpless, because we ourselves will be burnt to death as well as the tree".

When the princess heard this conversation, she crept away and then ran to her companion. "Make haste. We must return home" she said. "But we haven't cut any wood yet," objected the young man. "Don't worry. We wouldn't be needing any wood. I'll explain it all to you later". They ran home as fast as their legs would carry them and looked for some matches. Once they found some, they went back to the forest and stealthily made their way back to the old, knotted tree. Then the princess asked the young man to put some dried twigs around the tree to kindle a fire. He did not argue, but did exactly as he was told. When the fire began to blaze and bright orange flames licked all the branches, the snakes wriggled from one side to another to escape. The snakes begged the princess to save them. "We promise never to harm you," they pleaded. But the princess did not listen, for she knew that they could not be trusted, and soon the flames enveloped them.

"We deserve to die, it's our fault" said one snake to another. "If we had guarded our secret, instead of opening our mouths, we would still be alive today." With those words, the two black snakes were burnt to death, and in next to no time the tree was reduced to cinders.

When the ashes had cooled, the princess and the woodcutter started digging. They first pulled up the roots of the tree, and then dug deeper. After digging for a long time, they discovered twenty chests. "What are these?" asked the young man. "Be quiet and load them on the donkey" replied

the princess. The chests were so heavy that they had to make several trips to transport them to the house. The princess took some of the chests, while the woodcutter stayed behind to guard the others and wait for her return. In this way they managed to take them all home. "Daughter, what are these?" asked the old woman. "Open them and you will see for yourself" replied the princess. When they opened the chests, they were astonished to see gold, diamonds and all kinds of precious stones. The princess took a large diamond from one of the chests and said to the woodcutter, "Go to the bazaar in the city, sell this diamond, and buy food for us all".

The woodcutter set off happily for the city. when he reached the city, he went to the first jeweler in the bazaar and showed him the diamond. The jeweler looked at it, shook his head regretfully and gave it back. "I cannot buy this," he said "it is too valuable. Go to the biggest jeweler in the city; perhaps he may be able to help you".

The woodcutter visited many jewelers' shops in the bazaar but no one could afford to buy his diamond. Finally, he entered the last shop, which was the biggest of them all. The jeweler gasped when he saw the sparkling stone. "I'm afraid I cannot afford to pay for this beautiful diamond" he said "but you can take my entire shop and all its contents in exchange for it". The woodcutter agreed. So, the jeweler took the diamond and handed over the keys to his shop. After collecting some money from the till, the woodcutter locked up the shop, bought a plentiful supply of food, and returned home. "How much did you sell the diamond for?" asked the princess, when he arrived home laden with food. Whereupon the young man recounted what had happened and how he had acquired a jeweler's shop in exchange for the diamond.

Next morning the princess gave the woodcutter more instructions. "Go to the bazaar," she said "and buy a fine horse for yourself and fine clothes for all of us". The young man went to the city again and bought the finest thoroughbred horse that he could find. Then he bought some expensive cloth for his mother and the princess, and some cloth for himself. He waited at the tailor's shop until the clothes were ready and then he rode home with them. Next day the princess sent the young man in search of forty laborers to build her a magnificent palace in the middle of the forest. The laborers arrived and work started on the palace. It was such a splendid building that it took two years to complete. In the meantime, the old woman arranged the marriage of the young princess and her son. The young man's business had prospered in the city and his name had become well known all over the kingdom. He was renowned for his wealth and honesty and for his generosity to the poor and needy.

Many years passed. One day it so happened that the king went out hunting with his vizier and his guards in that same forest. They had spent the whole day hunting but had failed to shoot any game. They had lost their way and were feeling hungry and exhausted when they came across a magnificent palace. "Who owns this palace?" inquired the king to his companions. "I've heard of this palace," replied one of the king's guards. "It belongs to the biggest jeweller in the city, a man renowned for his wealth and generosity." Hearing this, the king called aside his vizier, "Go and inform them that I shall be their guest tonight. We shall see for ourselves how generous he is and how he entertains his guests." The vizier took the message to the palace. When the princess

heard that her father would be their guest that night, she sent word to her husband to return home at once and ordered her servants to prepare a huge banquet.

The jeweler hurried home to greet his new guests. The king and the vizier were ushered into the banqueting hall; the other members of the king's retinue were lavishly entertained in the hujra. As soon as the king and the vizier were seated, the dinner was served. On one tray the servants brought pilau rice, sweet saffron rice, chicken, lamb, halwa and sherbet. On a separate tray they brought maize bread, spinach, and yogurt. The princess ordered that all the rich food dishes should be excellently cooked, but she had given instructions that they should contain no salt. Salt was only to be used in the simple dishes of spinach and maize bread.

After tasting various dishes, the king and the vizier pushed aside the flamboyant dishes and ate only the food containing salt. When they finished eating the jeweler asked them politely, 'Did you enjoy your meal in our humble house?' 'The food was excellent' they both replied. 'But it had one serious fault,' added the king. 'There was no salt in it, and without salt, food has no taste. Therefore, we both preferred the simple spinach and maize bread which contained salt'. At that moment the young princess entered the room. 'Respected father,' she said 'you are sweeter to me than salt is to food'. The king was astonished to see his daughter, and both the jeweler and the vizier were puzzled by the princesses' words.

"Tell me, daughter, how did you come here?" asked the king. The princess gave the king a full account of everything that had happened to her since she had left the royal palace. Then she explained, "I gave special orders that salt should not be put in your food, because you don't like salt". The king bent his head in shame. "My daughter, I beg you not to reproach me. What you said about your love being sweeter than salt is true and I ask for your forgiveness".

The king embraced her daughter. After escorting the princess and her husband back to his kingdom, the king entrusted the care of his realm to his new son-in-law and they all lived happily ever after.