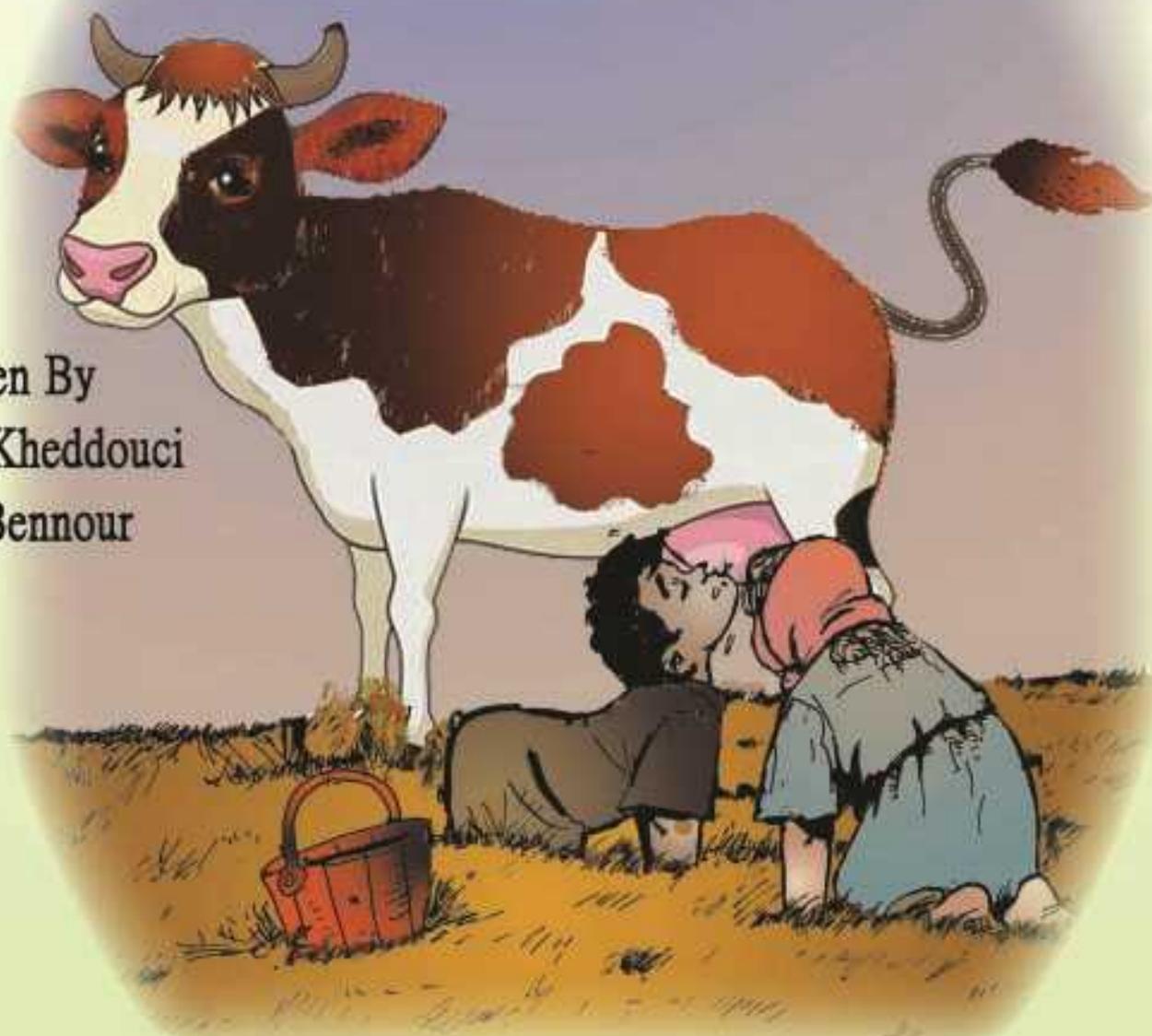


THE COW OF THE ORPHANS



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It is a folk story of the Algerian heritage. The events are heartbreaking, made the back-to-back generation shed tears. It is about the misfortune of two children, a boy and a girl, after the death of their mother who bequeathed a single cow to them. Yet, the sadness left room to happiness, and the orphan girl became the wife of the queen. How did it happen? What occurred to her brother when he drank the water of a magic river?

THE COW OF THE ORPHANS

A long time ago, in a hut there lived a family made up of a father, a mother, and their two children, Zarif and Murjana. They owned a cow, providing them plenty of milk. The cow would entertain Zarif and Murjana by caress and licking their heads as though they were her calves, which made the progeny very joyful...

As the years went by, the two children grew up, and they became very attached to the cow. Every day, they would stick around the cow, catering for the fodder and the grass of the ruminant...

Yet, the days had in store unhappy things, and the destiny would shake up the quiet living of the family, spoiling, on the rebound, the life of Zarif and Murjana.

Unexpectedly, the mother fell sick, got weaker and bedridden, and was thus torn up by aches.

What made her grieve more acutely, were the tears of her two children and the sorrow of her husband. Murjana would sit by her mother's bedside, cooling her body temperature,



putting a cloth dowsed with cold water on her forehead. As to Zarif, he had only to shed tears, feeling for his ill mother.

The mother hugged her son and daughter, clenched the hand of her husband, saying:

- Take care of Zarif and Murjana... Please, don't sell the cow...

However, the fever got the better of her, and she consequently died, leaving her two children lonely and heartbroken...

So, mourning stormed in unasked-for. Then misery, bitterness and streams of tears followed her death...

In broad daylight, the hut looked sadly grim and was plunged into pitch black, the hearts of the dwellers bleeding out of distress. The two children seemed like two little birds bereft of their mother, seeking her thus in the heart of their father. The three grievors were enshrouded in a black mourning; even the cow sensed the decease of the mother, so that her udders dried up in consolation.

Many weeks later, the father thought about getting married a second time, but he hesitated a bit as the first wife was still alive in his heart and memory. On the other hand, he worried about who will rear his two children and do housework.

At last, the father remarried, thinking well of his action. The second wide gave birth to a girl whom he called Asluja. As time passed, anger and conflict crept upon the hut. Zarif and Murjana spent their days abandoned and starving. In the night, they would sleep on the floor or in the hay beside their cow. The latter gazed at them

lovingly and caringly, let them suck her udders, and so they grew up steadily and got healthy with rubicund cheeks.

The stepmother got confused about Zarif and Murjana, for they turned strongly-built and became more beautiful despite the fact she had neglected them, whereas her daughter Asluja looked scrawny and pallid in spite of the great care she had enjoyed in terms of food, clothing and affection.

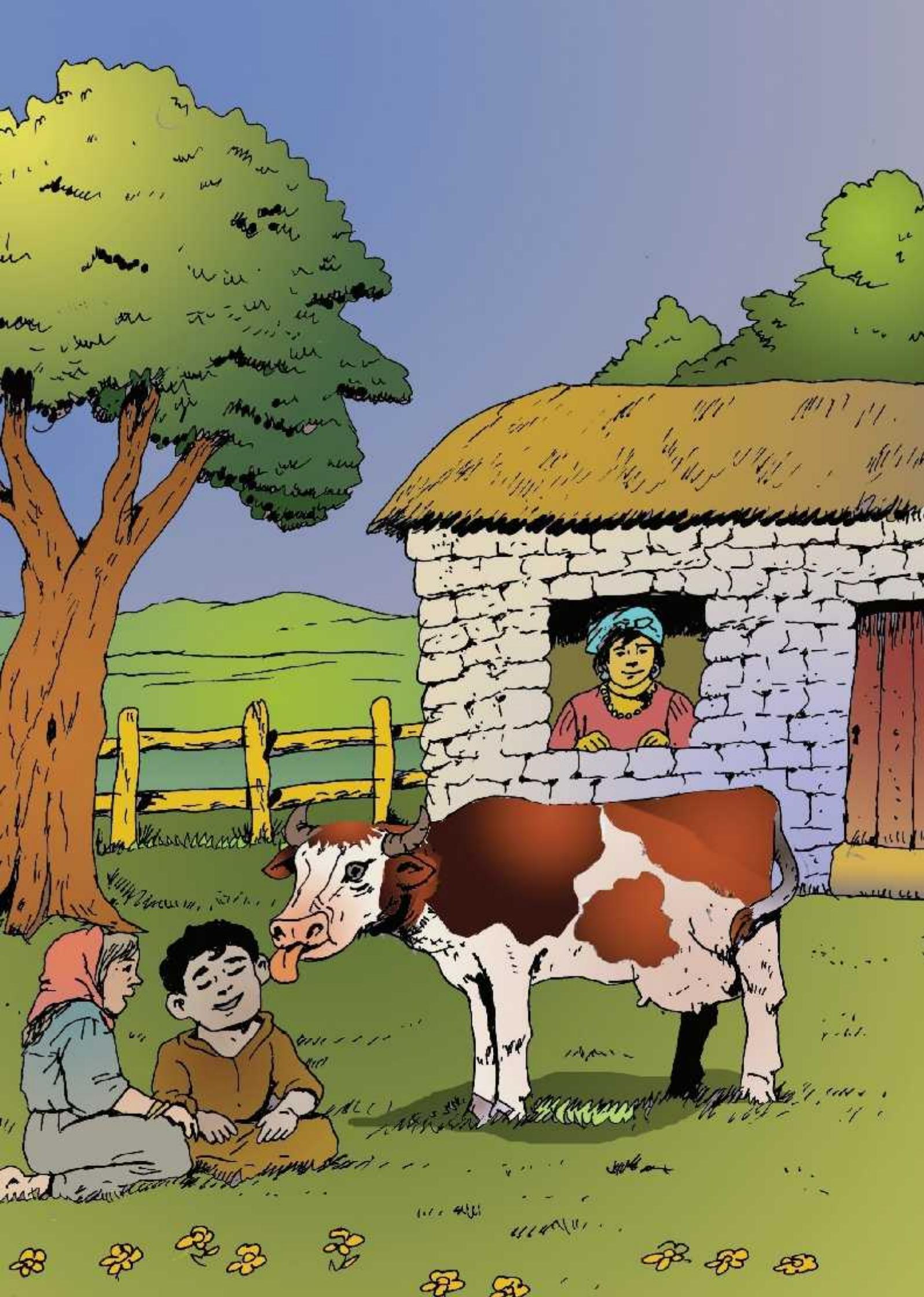
One day, the stepmother told her daughter Asluja:

- Go with Zarif and Murjana to the meadow to look how they earn their living and where they get their food from?

Like her mother, Asluja was equally spiteful and jealous towards Zarif and Murjana. The tiny heart of Asluja caught fire of envy and its smoke went up to blacken her face and becloud her sight.

So, Asluja obeyed her mother and strolled out spying on her stepbrother and stepsister.

At midday, Asluja was shocked when she glimpsed the cow moving closer toward Zarif and Murjana; letting them suck her udders like two twins, as if the cow were their real mother! The strange scene left Asluja flabbergasted.



Asluja tried to imitate them, as she approached the cow, but no sooner had she put her lips on the udders than the cow kicked her straight into the right eye...

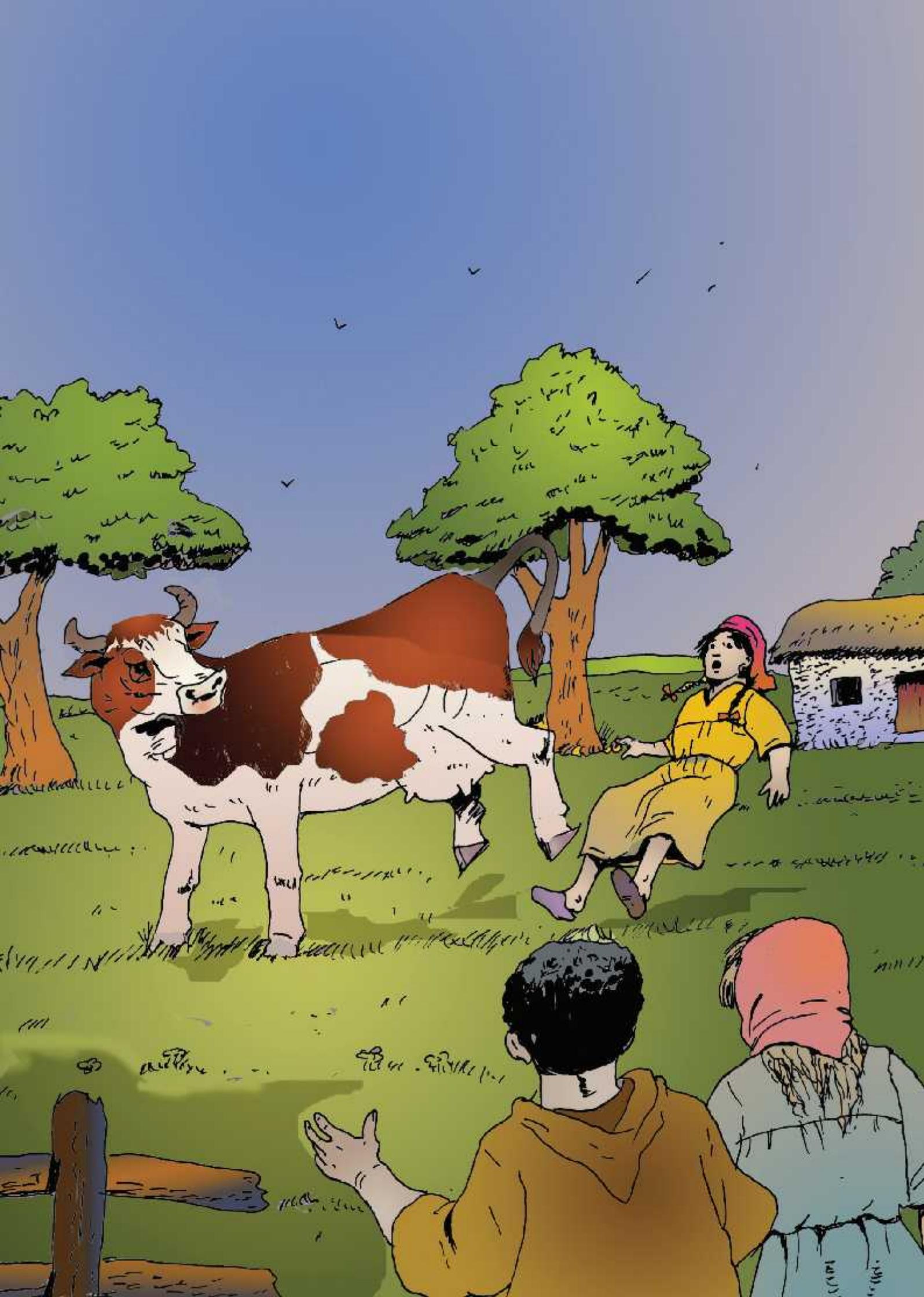
Asluja came back to her mother saddened, the right eye swollen and the left one weeping hard. Her mother was infuriated when she knew the cause. Consequently, she punished Zarif and Murjana and was determined to get rid of the culpable cow (the *surrogate mother* of the two orphans!)

In the evening, the mother of Asluja said:

- We don't need that cow, my honey!

Taken aback, he retorted angrily:

- What have you said, silly woman? Are you crazy? Have you forgotten milk and cheese we get from our cow?



Yet, she told him shamelessly:

- Just sell the cow and buy for us a donkey to ride! I hate that annoying cow! I don't want to see her again around our hut!

The couple slept quarrelling.

Over time, the weak *sheikh* caved to his wife's persistent wishes...

When dawn broke, the husband donned his white *jellaba* and then he threw his long brown burnoose all over it. He headed for the stable, his two hands quavering. He took a rope and reluctantly looped it around the two horns of the cow...

Along the way to the livestock suq, the cow felt sad for parting with the two orphans, as though she knew her impending fate.

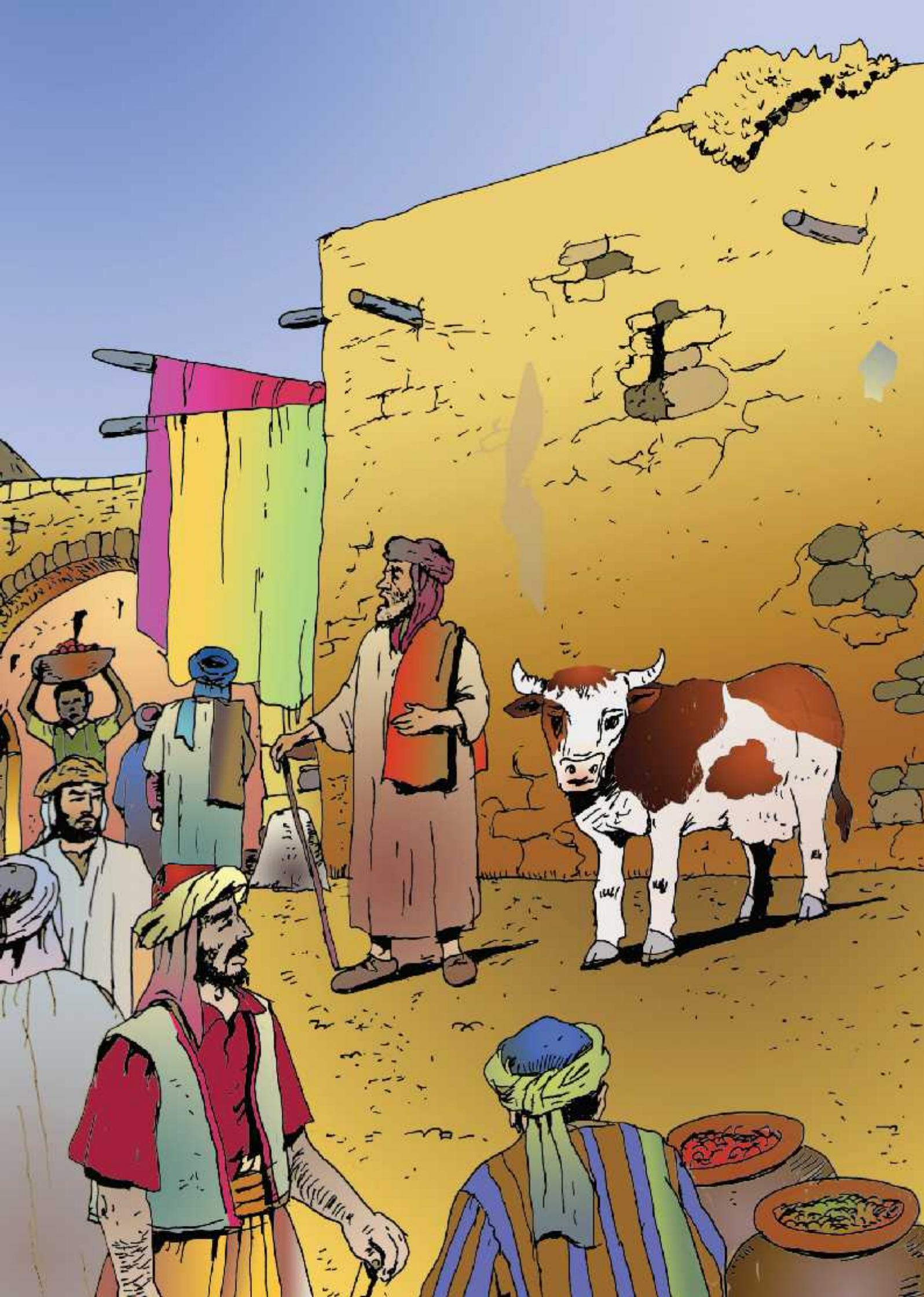
The sun rose above the melancholic horizon. As usual, Murjana and Zarif dashed out to stable for the morning's milk, but unfortunately they did not find her there. The *treasure* they had inherited from their deceased mother was missing; they felt losing their mother for the second time. When they knew the truth, the two orphans shed heavy tears...

On his way to the weekly suq, their father was complaining to the cow about his naughty second wife: "We quarreled for long hours till she at last overwhelmed me. The women! ...Truly, it has been said: *all the illnesses are curable, save the stupidity!* I wish I married the kindhearted Dawya, the daughter of al-Meddah."

Dragging all these worries along with the poor cow, he finally reached the weekly-held suq. There, farmers and sellers met together, the rich men dealt with the poor men, the prince greeted the peasants, the humble and the bragger. The people were carrying baskets of different fruit and vegetables. Also, there had been exhibited in the suq clay utensils crafted by rural women, pots they had ornamented with various shapes and patterns and colors akin to the splendid earth. At the suq's gate, he began to shout aloud:

- Who will buy the cow of the orphans? Who will buy the cow of the orphans?...

However, nobody wanted to come close to the heritage of the orphans... But one butcher approached him and bought the cow. The sheikh trudged back home very unhappy, feeling for his two motherless children, Zarif and Murjana, whom he found in the stable still grieving for the loss of their cow. They shot their father strange gazes conveying culpability and interrogation...



In the evening, the sheikh lay down on his bed, burdened with weariness and sleeplessness. In his dream, his deceased wife visited him, her eyes filled with tears, lamenting: “*What a shame! You lost the humble treasure I passed on my two children! Now, I ask you to run to the butcher, get back the cow’s udders and put them on my grave!*”

The sheikh woke up terrified before dawn. He wore his jellaba and went out on the sly. He rushed to the butcher’s house, waiting him at the doorstep.

The butcher got up. The dog was barking. He found the sheikh outdoors, shivering with cold, and he was surprised to see him by his house, wondering why the man had come up before the daybreak. The sheikh touched the butcher’s garment, kissing his hands devotedly, begged for the cow’s udders! Although the demand seemed very weird, the stone-hearted butcher felt for the sheikh and met his request...

The sheikh stashed the udders inside the hood of his burnoose, from which oozed out milk mixed with some blood. He dashed to the cemetery where the grave of his dead first wife was dug. There, he *greeted* her and apologized for having sold the cow of the orphans. He deposited the udders on her grave and then walked back home...

Still, the Zarif and Murjana lived harsh days, as they missed their cow forever. The starvation got the better of them, for their

stepmother scarcely gave them victuals, so that their features looked pale and their bodies became skinny...

One day, they desired to pay a visit to their mother's grave in order to plead their hard living. They reached the village's cemetery famished and panting out of thirst. But once there, they were staggered, as two small reed ribs had grown over their mother's tomb; one rib secreting milk, the other producing honey. Besides, two nearby towering palm trees had pushed with date-crammed boughs.

The two orphans were happy to hug their mother's tomb, as if they heard her voice coming out beneath earth. They lived back her warm and tender embraces, even wept till they wetted the soil.

Zarif and Murjana quenched their thirst by milk and honey, and then ate dates to satiety. Then, they gazed up at the two lofty palm trees, trimmings of which resembled the horns of a cow. The two orphans kept on calling on their dead mother helplessly.

The two children came back to the graveyard many times. So, they got accustomed to heading for their mother's grave, so that their faces turned buoyant and their bodies put on some weight in a healthy way. The stepmother envied them again hatefully, and she even asked her daughter Asluja to track their steps for more clues about the sudden flamboyancy of the two orphans.

One afternoon, Zarif and Murjana arrived at their mother's grave. They started to shake the trunks of the two palm trees to make the delicious dates fall down. They also drank milk through the reed ribs, unaware that their stepsister Asluja was spying on them from behind the enclosure, finding out the hidden secret. When Zarif and Murjana walked away, Asluja stepped closer to the miraculous tomb, took a sip of milk and put one date under her lower lip, before she dashed away to the hut where her mother was expected the news.

The mother of Asluja spent the night pondering over the two reed ribs and the two palm trees; yet, she exhausted herself for nothing! In the morning, she overheard an itinerant herbalist coming through the neighborhood. She hurried to the makeshift door and asked the peddler:

- Have you got something to cut a palm tree and a reed with?

The peddler's forehead got soaked in sweat, as he replied:

- Tar poured over reed and palm trees kills their roots and transforms them into *miswaq* and incense.

She was so blithe that she bought enough tar to rub out the two palm trees. She quickly reached to the cemetery, still panting, carrying tar in her hands and loathing in her heart. No sooner had she arrived at the site of the two reed ribs and the two palms trees than she unearthed the roots to daub them with tar. When she returned to the hut, she kept

to herself, feeling a bit guilty. Her hollow eyes spewed clues of deception and wrongdoing.

The gray-haired sheikh came back from work all tired, back-ached and seeing things rather faintly. His wife did not let him take a rest, yelling angrily:

- Take them away from me! I hate them!

The sheikh queried his irritated wife:

- To whom are you hinting at?

She responded barefacedly:

- Zarif and Murjana who poked the eye of our daughter Asluja!

Early in the morning, the sheikh readied his son Zarif and his daughter Murjana to leave the cursed shed. They headed for the woods their eyes welling up. At the end of a tortuous path near the foot of the mountain, the downhearted sheikh handed his two children bread and a bundle full of their clothes and blankets. He then bade them farewell somewhat unwillingly. The sheikh walked back home very crestfallen, even drenching his trail with bucketfuls tears of parting...

The two abandoned orphans, Zarif and Murjana, crossed vales, mountains and jungles, not knowing the right direction to follow. The long walk enfeebled their knees, dried up their throats, and drained their guts out of hunger. Dog-tired, they almost starved to death. Yet, they miraculously made out a flowing river. Was it a mirage?



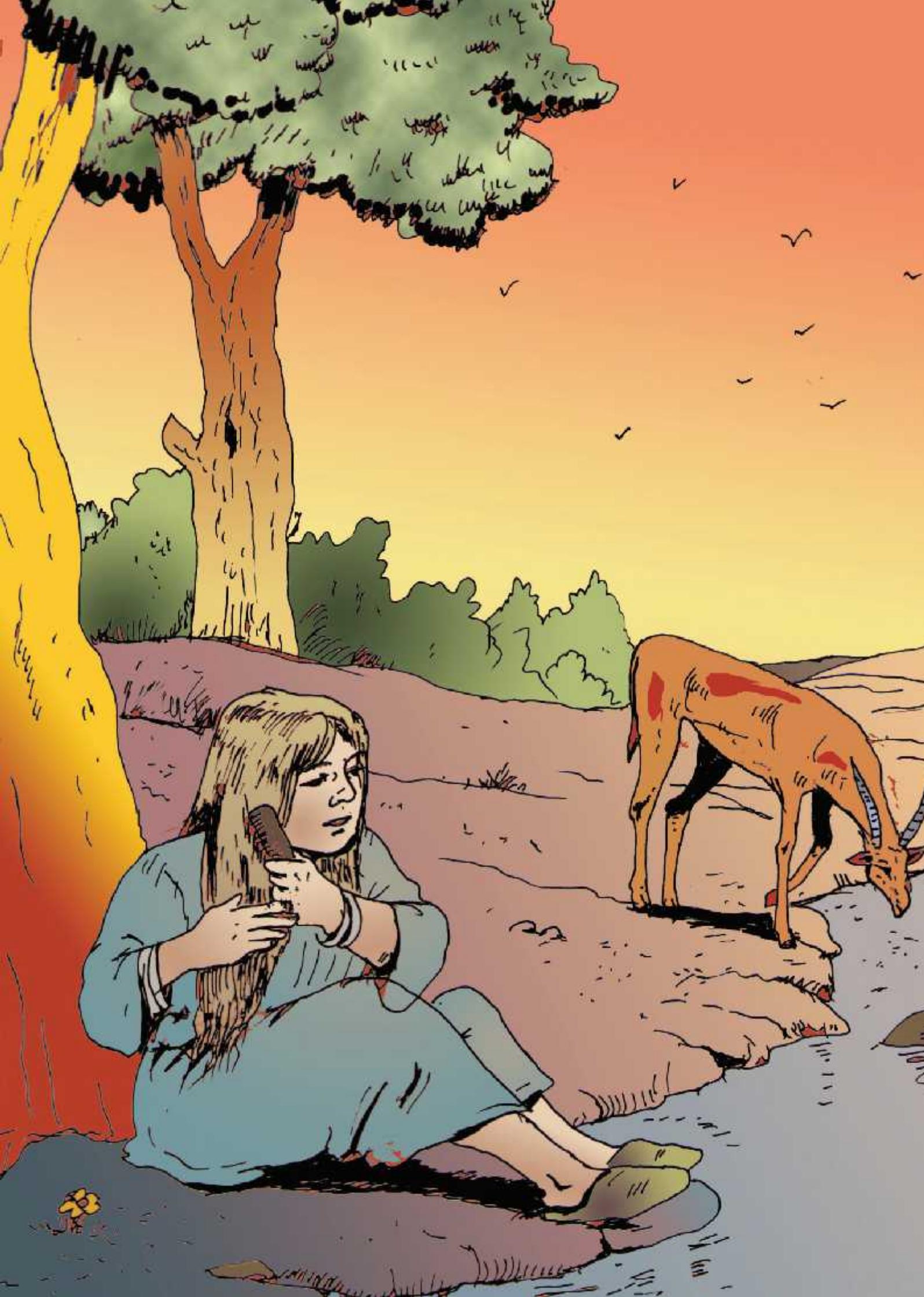
When they reached the riverbank, Murjana noticed a magic liquid intermingled with water. She remembered the tale of the magic river which purified the bodies from sins and transformed those who drank its water to gazelles!

Her brother Zarif hurried down to the river, crouched down, and as he was on the fringe of drinking water, his sister Murjana prevented him from lapping the water with great difficulty.

Then, they resumed their walk.

All of a sudden, Zarif stopped walking and told his sister that he had lost his necklace in the river; actually, the necklace was a souvenir of their deceased mother. Murjana allowed him to go back to the river in search of the necklace, but she reminded him of not swallowing the water. So, Zarif raced back to the river. Once there, he could no longer hold back his thirst when he saw the fresh water streaming between the boulders; he drank like fish! And then the miracle did come about; Zarif metamorphosed into a creature looking like a gazelle! Murjana was shocked and confused when she perceived her brother transformed into an animal!

Murjana sat down under a tree combing her hair, while the gazelle-boy in front of her was drinking more water, unaware what had occurred to him!



A long strand of Murjana's blond hair fell down to the river, the currents swept it along downstream for quite a long distance till it was picked by hands of the country's king...

A while ago, the king was in a hunting journey along with his soldiers in the jungle. At midday, he wanted to take a bath in the tepid waters of the river before he lunched. He sat by the river, immersed his hand in the water and let the limpid liquid flow through his fingers, and there a long blond strand got trapped between his fingers. The sun glittered on the blond strand, and the king was already bewitched by it. He scrutinized the golden strand and knew well that it might have come from a beautiful girl. The king kept quiet as he mounted his horse. His court soon joined him, waiting for his orders. He then said:

- This hair stems from upriver. I would like to see the girl whose hair came into my hands as soon as possible!

After a moment, the soldiers marched upstream on both sides of the river I search of the owner of the golden hair. Along their way upstream of the river's source, they ran across many women washing clothes before pegging them on nearby shrubs. They also saw girls bathing in the river, so frightened to be caught almost naked by the imperial soldiers. After one week of painstaking tracking and thorough scouting, spent comparing the golden hair with every hair of women and girls they bumped into, the soldiers came back disappointedly empty-handed.

The king grieved over the failure of the mission even though he was the only man calling the shots in his kingdom...

As days flew by, the king took care of his subjects but he did not overlook the golden hair, which he hid well in his secret box....

The scene looked eerie: the girl Murjana ambled along through the woods and her brother Zarif, the boy-gazelle, followed her from behind. She was at a loss. It happened that she made out an ancient hut amidst several trees. She instantly scudded towards it for a glance. It turned out that the hut belonged to a kind old woman eking out a living by selling herbs and spices to the peddler, who would come over every morning. She would call out: *“Your medicine comes from your diet. Only barter, no coins!”*

The old woman welcomed Murjana and even provided her with enough food and fresh water. Yet, asked the girl:

- Where is your brother?

When Murjana and her brother the boy-gazelle were finished with meal to satiety, she told the old woman her whole story. The compassionate hostess said:

- From now on, I am your second mother! Thanks God, my years-long-sought dream comes true.

The hamlet lived in prosperity since Murjana and Zarif had stepped in the old woman's hut. So, the rain poured down, the springs

spurted out, the earth turned into lavish green, and the old woman's livelihood got plenteous.

The peddler would come up to the hut to fetch the basket of herbs, inside which he would find gold instead! It had happened this way for several years. The peddler felt so gratified. Nonetheless, as awe had stupefied his mind for a long period of time, he was determined to disclose to the king this unbelievable secret (*herbs turning into gold and summer into spring!*).

The second wife of the sheikh and her daughter Asluja decided to quit the hut for good, but the old man hung back as he hoped for the comeback of his two outcast children, Zarif and Murjana. At last, the three left their hut in ruins to the four winds.

The peddler became a wealthy man, but he had never given up his profession. One day, he made up his mind to pay a visit to the king in his castle. Once arrived there, he begged the guards to let him see the monarch. After many tries, he succeeded to be ushered in.

To begin with, the rich peddler lauded the sovereign's rank:

- Praise and glory to our unrivaled great king!

- Bring it on, man! If you were wronged, I am the fair judge. If you were stripped of your belongings, I am the supreme caretaker of the rights of my subjects... Say anything you got on your chest!

The peddler said, smiling:

- I beg your pardon, Your Majesty...neither! The reason of my coming here is something of phenomenal, if you mind listening to my fantastic story of the golden grass!

The king nodded in agreement. So prompted, the peddler told him the whole story in minute detail, puzzling the ruler. The latter immediately ordered one of his valets to fetch the old woman and the two orphans before nightfall...

The sun sank down. Nonetheless, the appearance of Murjana and her brother the gazelle along with the old woman made up of for the daystar. The guards let them in. The king was subjugated by the beauty of the girl. Her prettiness seeped into the minds akin to wintery waves whipping the seashores. The king produced the golden strand and compared it with the hair of Murjana; they matched well!

- What an amazing coincidence!

The king jubilated, took care of the guests and assigned them an imperial residence for three months the time the gazelle-boy (Zarif) will have recovered.

Also, the king urgently summoned all the physicians and scholars of his kingdom. They soon flocked to the castle by the following morning. The king told them to find out a suitable treatment to the gazelle-boy to get back his human features. They seemed skeptical, as

they glanced at each other. Anyway, they pondered over the king's challenge and then started on their experiences...

Over the days of royal hospitality and Zarif's treatment, the king asked Murjana to marry him. She accepted on the condition of her brother's total healing. The king agreed and then celebrated weeks later a sumptuous wedding...

One day, while the king was away of his castle, a man in rags showed up outside. The time was afternoon, the very moment when the Queen Murjana in her rose robe came out to the terrace to behold the universe and to say goodbye to sinking sun. Her eyes fell upon a beggar who lifted his hand towards her. She had gooseflesh and a weird feeling overwhelmed her. She asked the guards to let him in the courtyard. She then rushed down and approached the vagabond. She recognized him well: he was her own old father! She gave him a warm hug, provided him food and drink, and dressed him with beautiful clothes. He felt better and complacent. She told him about the mishaps and tribulations she had come through and the metamorphosis of her brother, striking thus her father.

As her father was on the brink of leaving the castle, Murjana handed him a closed sack of waffles, forbidding him to open it until he got home, and, most importantly, warned him of divulging the secret to his second wife and his daughter Asluja.

The sheikh returned to his wife and daughter happy, yet confused as to his son Zarif, the gazelle! Without her husband knows, the nosy

wife and Asluja opened the sack and there countless coins of gold flowed out of it, fell down and jingled on the floor, whetting the greed of the two women.

The wife told her gullible husband to fly to the queen to thank her about the sack of waffles! The sheikh obeyed her as usual, as he knew well she had always overcome him.

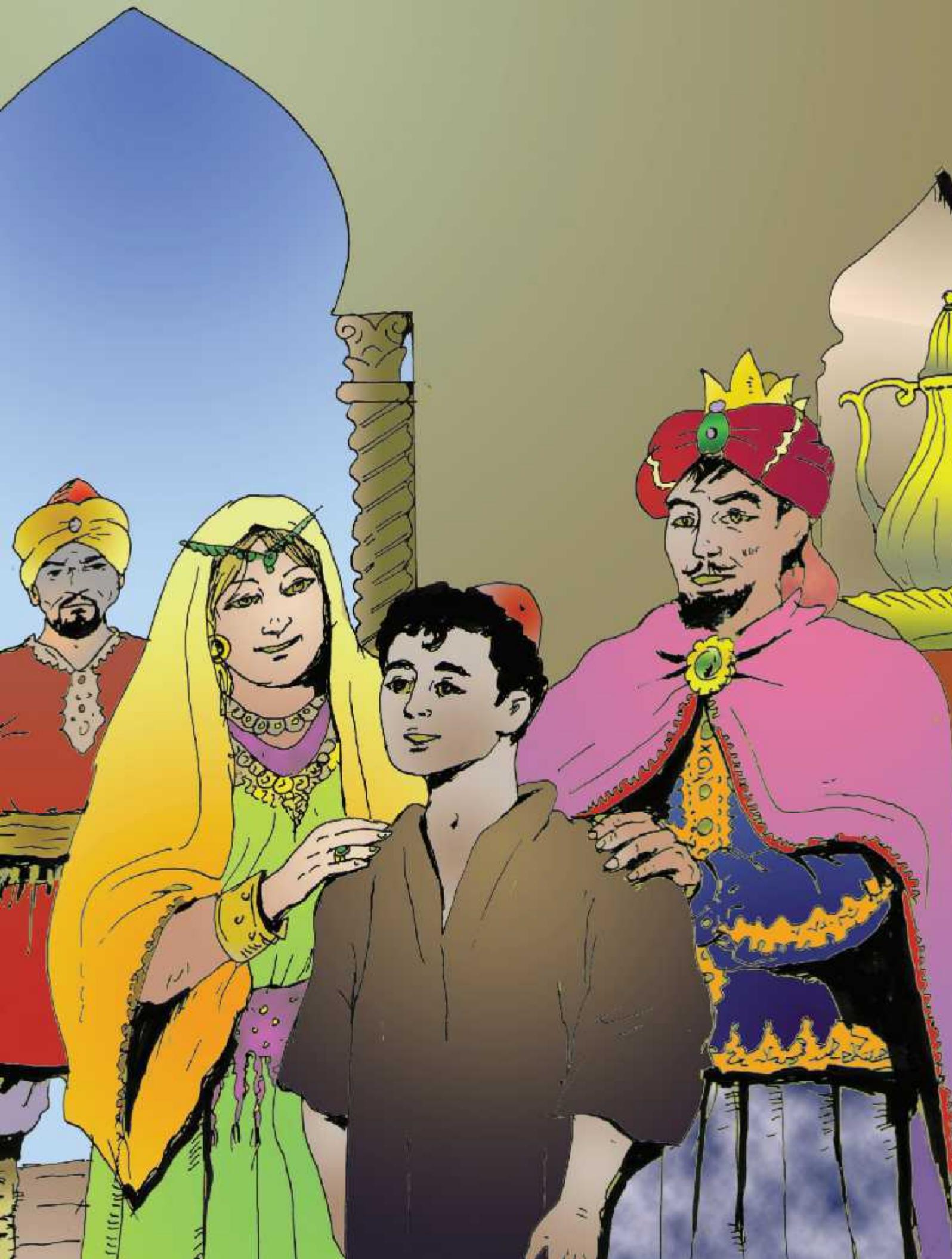
The following day, the sheikh and his wife went to the castle accompanied by their daughter Asluja. The great surprise was when the two women recognized who the queen Murjana. The latter honored them and knew about the metamorphosis of Zarif. Asluja and her mother regretted their past misconduct and thus apologized.

After three days of hospitality, the sheikh took his wife and Asluja and left the castle, for he was afraid his daughter, Queen Murjana, might fall victim to his second wife's malevolence. From time to time, the sheikh would go to see his two children, Queen Murjana and Zarif the gazelle!

After several days, the king came back from his long voyage, carrying medicinal herbs for the healing of the gazelle-boy. He handed the drugs to the doctors to help them reverse the magic effects of the river's water the boy had gulped before. After a period of two weeks, the hard-working scientists announced having come up with a treatment for Zarif. The good news delighted the royal family, and the whole kingdom. The people gathered in front of the laboratory to witness the miraculous transformation of Zarif into a human again.

He looked handsome and smiling. The euphoria overwhelmed the castle amidst hugs and kisses.

So, the community had enjoyed peace and love for many decades, until the invasion of the destroyers of minds, the makers of orphans, the wreckers of castles and the diggers of graves. Innumerable people fell dead and the others outlived the ruinous wars.



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