

Yasmeen and Yousef

There was once an old castle in a great, dense forest. A wicked old man lived there by himself. In the daytime, he turned himself into a cat or a night owl, and at night he resumed his human form.

He had a way of luring birds and animals, and when he had killed them, he would boil or roast them. If anyone came within a hundred steps of the castle, they froze in their tracks and couldn't stir from the spot until he said certain words that broke the spell. If a young boy went inside the circle, the man turned him into a bird and shut him up in a wicker cage which he carried to one of the rooms in his castle. He had about seven thousand of these rare birds, all in wicker cages.

Now once there was a girl named Yasmeen, who was as clever and curious as any in all the world. Her dearest companion was a kind boy named Yousef. Their greatest joy was in being together. One afternoon they went walking into the forest. "Take care," said Yousef, "don't go too near the castle." It was a lovely evening, the sun shone between the tree trunks and lit up the dark green darkness of the forest, and the turtledoves sang mournfully in the old beech trees.

Now and then Yasmeen wept. She sat down in the sun and sighed, and Yousef sighed too. They were as sad as if death had been near. They looked around in bewilderment, for they no longer knew the way home. The sun was still half above the hill and half below it. Yasmeen looked through the bushes and saw the old castle wall only a few steps away. She was overcome with dread. Yousef sang;

*My little bird with the wing so red sings sorrow, sorrow, sorrow.
He sings that the turtledove is dead, sing sorrow, sor....jug, jug jug.*

Yasmeen looked at Yousef. He had been turned into a nightingale and was singing, "jug, jug, jug." A night owl flew out with fiery eyes, flew around Yasmeen and screeched 3 times, "To whoo, to whoo, to whoo." Yasmeen couldn't move, she stood still as stone, unable to speak or move hand or foot. The sun had gone down; the owl flew into a bush. A moment or two later, a gnarled old man, stooped and scrawny, came out of the bush. He had big red eyes and a crooked nose which almost touched his chin. Muttering to himself, he caught the nightingale in his hands and carried it away. Yasmeen couldn't say a word or stir from the spot and the nightingale was gone. At last the man came back and muttered: "*Greetings Zachiel. When the moon shines on her, let her go.*" And Yasmeen was free. She fell to her knees and begged the old man to release Yousef, but the man said Yasmeen would never see him again, and left her.

She cried out, she wept, she moaned, but all in vain. "Oh, what is to become of Yousef?" Yasmeen went away and came at last to a strange village. There she stayed a long time, guarding the sheep. She often walked around the castle, but not too close. Then one night she dreamed she had found a blood-red flower with a fine, large pearl in it. She plucked the flower and went to the castle with it. Everything she touched with the

flower was freed from the spell. She also dreamed that the flower helped her to free Yousef.

When she awoke the next morning, she began to search hill and dale for the flower. Eight days she searched and early on the morning of the ninth she found the blood-red flower. In the middle there was a big dewdrop, as big as the finest pearl. Holding the flower, she journeyed day and night until she reached the castle. When she came to within a hundred steps of the castle, she was not held fast and continued on to the gate. Her heart leaped. She touched the gate with the flower and it sprang open. She went in, passed through the courtyard, and listened for the sound of the birds. At length she heard them. On and on she went till she found the room, and there was the wicked man feeding the birds in the seven thousand cages. When he saw Yasmeen, he was angry, very angry. He scolded, he spat poison and gall at her, but he couldn't get near her, not within two paces. Paying no attention to him, Yasmeen went up and down the rooms looking at the birds in the cages. There were hundreds of nightingales, how would she ever find Yousef?

Suddenly, while she was searching the birds, she saw the old man on the sly taking down one cage and heading for the door with it. In a flash, Yasmeen jumped and touched the cage with the flower. She also touched the old man who then lost his power to do magic. And there stood Yousef, next to Yasmeen, as human as ever. After she freed all the others from the spell, Yasmeen and Yousef went home, and they lived happily for many, many years.