

Handout: The Musician Barbad Up in a Tree

There was a royal musician named Sarkash who was skilled at pleasing his master. The nobles of the court showered him with jewels, proclaiming him an adornment to the king.

Barbad heard that Khusraw, now in the twenty-ninth year of his reign, grew in greatness. People would say to Barbad: "The king loves music. If you were known to him, you would surely surpass Sarkash in his favor."

This made Barbad ambitious. Though by no means poor, he left home to find favor in the capital and hear the king's music. When Sarkash heard Barbad play, he was deeply troubled. He bribed the master of the king's audiences, saying, "This minstrel who comes to the gate must not come before the king. He is younger than I and better in skill."

And so Barbad was refused an audience with the king. He despaired of ever being heard. But a gardener named Mardwi revived his hopes. Barbad had heard of the New Year's feast the king held in the garden under Mardwi's care. He approached the gardener and they became friends.

Barbad said to Mardwi, "We are friends, and I desire a favor of you, a little thing. When the king comes here to celebrate I want to see him without myself being seen." Mardwi replied, "As you are my dear friend, I will do as you ask."

When the king's visit was duly planned, Mardwi was aglow with happiness. He told Barbad, "The king is coming here to feast." So Barbad, dressed all in green, took his short-necked lute, and prepared to sing of glory and war.

He went to the garden and climbed a cypress whose dense leaves hid him from sight. The garden ready, the king came with cup in hand.¹

At the moment when the yellow sun set and purple night came on, Barbad took his lute and sang the heroic song he had prepared. Hidden in the tree, he sang his beautiful lay, the one we now call "*Dad-afarid*," and the king was astonished at the sweetness of his voice.

The whole company was amazed, and everyone expressed a different opinion as to what was happening. The king ordered the company to search the area thoroughly, and they looked high and low, but came back empty handed. . .

¹ Freely adapted from: Warner, Arthur George and Edmond Warner. *The Shahnama of Firdausi*. Keegan Paul, 1905-1925. Web site of Packard Humanities Institute:
<<http://persian.packhum.org/persian/main?url=pf%3Fauth%3D176%26work%3D001>>

A beautiful serving girl brought a goblet, and as the king took it from her, Barbad suddenly struck up another song, the one called “The Heroes’ Battle.”

The wise singer sang and Khusraw listened, drinking his wine as the song progressed. Then he ordered that the singer be found, and that, if need be, the garden be turned upside down in the search. They searched everywhere in the garden, taking flaming torches beneath the trees, but they saw nothing but willows and cypresses, and pheasants strutting among the flowers.

The king asked for another goblet of wine, and leaned his head forward to listen. Again a song began, accompanied by the lute’s sound; it was the one that is called “Green on Green” nowadays, and which is used for magical incantations.²

On hearing it the king asked for another, larger cup of wine. He drank and said, “This must be an angel all fragrant as musk and ambergris. If he were a demon he would not know how to sing or play. Find the player! Search the garden and the flower-beds. I will fill his mouth and his lap with gems and make him chief musician.

When Barbad heard Khusraw’s voice so kind and welcoming, he descended and bowed his head down to the ground.

Khusraw Parwiz said, “Speak! Who are you?”

Barbad said, “O Shah, I am a slave and live only by your voice.” He then told his story and the king rejoiced. Angered by Sarkash banning Barbad from his company, he banished Sarkash from his sight.

Barbad then sang and the monarch drained his cup. He filled the singer’s mouth with luminous pearls and made him chief musician.³

²Translation by Dick Davis from the Noruz Lecture (March 24, 2004).
<<http://fis-iran.org/en/programs/noruzlectures/translating-shahnameh>>

³ Warner and Warner, 1905-1925.