

## THE MAGIC CARPET

by Sophie Masson

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Once upon a time, a boy called Hamid lived with his uncle and aunt in the very middle of a great city. Hamid's uncle and aunt kept the best-known carpet shop in that great city, and people came from near and far, just for a chance to look at their marvellous carpets.

Hamid's uncle, who was as thin as a stick of cinnamon, and his aunt, who was as round as a honey cake, greeted everyone at the door with a bow, and a smile, and a flash of gold teeth. They dressed in fine, silken clothes, and Hamid's uncle wore a tall dark-blue silk turban, and his aunt a gauzy, spangled scarf.

But poor Hamid had no silken clothes, and no dark blue turban, and he was hardly ever allowed in the shop, only occasionally at night, when no-one was about. His uncle and aunt said he was very lucky, for they had taken him in when his parents had died. Hamid had to spend his days in the kitchen, cooking the nine different dishes his uncle and aunt demanded each evening.

Every afternoon, Hamid went to the market to buy the food for the next day. This was at the time when his uncle and aunt closed their shop and slept in their grand, silken-hung bedroom. But Hamid was never allowed to sleep or rest in the day. When he wasn't cooking, he had to take bundles of laundry to the washer girl, or polish silver till his arms ached, or beat carpets until his face was covered in dust.

Yet Hamid loved the carpets. He would have stayed all day in the shop, if he had been allowed, fingering the rich stuff of the carpets and dreaming of the places from where they came. Sometimes, when he did this, there were pictures in his mind of another time, another place when he had been happy, when gentle arms had held him, and soft voices whispered to him. But the pictures were like shadows, or dreams; unable to be grasped. And if his uncle-as-thin-as-a-stick-of-cinnamon or his aunt-as-

round-as-a-honeycake saw him dreaming, they would shout, and order him back to the kitchen.

One afternoon, as he made his way back from the market, a figure came walking up the street towards him, with a parcel under its arm. As the figure came closer, Hamid saw that it was a woman, a young, lovely woman, though he could see only her eyes, and her hands. She was dressed all in dusty grey, and her eyes above her veil were of a most surprising colour, almost as blue as the lapis lazuli necklace owned by Hamid's aunt. She stopped in front of Hamid. She did not say anything, but her eyes looked both sad and smiling, all at once.

Hamid's heart fluttered a little as he looked at her; for he thought that somewhere, sometime, he had seen her. He said, "What is it you want? Are you a beggar? For I have no money." Still, the young woman said nothing, but she touched Hamid lightly on the arm, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Are you ill?" he said. She shook her head. She held out the parcel she was carrying.

"This is not mine," he said, and he tried to give it back to her, but she shook her head, and put her finger to her lips. Then she stroked him—very, very gently—on the hair, and vanished, completely.

Hamid stood on the road, his heart thumping even louder. The touch of her hand had reminded him of those dreams he had, those dreams of a happier time, when he was loved. As if in a dream, he walked back to his uncle's and aunt's place.

Alas! When he got back to his house, his uncle and aunt were both awake, and as bad-tempered as usual, only more so, because their midday sleeps made them feel hot and sticky. Hamid had no time to hide the parcel, and they ripped the covering off it, only to reveal an extremely old, faded, dirty carpet whose pattern could no longer be distinguished.

Hamid's aunt boxed his ears, then, and his uncle called him sixteen different kinds of idiot. When they were out of breath, they told Hamid he was to stay in his room until the next day; they would go out to eat in a restaurant. And they tossed the old carpet out the back door, where it landed with a soft plop on top of a pile of compost.

Now normally, Hamid was a cheerful boy. But today, his cheer seemed to have deserted him. He lay on his straw bed and thought about his life, and how he wished...

Suddenly, he jumped off the bed and went outside to the back courtyard. Gently, he lifted the old carpet off the compost pile. Even though it was so old, and worn, it was the very first thing he had ever been given for himself. Perhaps, if he cleaned it well, it would look better?

And so, he fetched buckets of water, and soap, and a hard brush, and kneeling on the cobblestones of the courtyard, he began to scrub at the carpet. Scrub, scrub, scrub, he went, and soon he began to see a pattern emerging. "Oh," said Hamid to himself. There was a curly golden pattern on a bed of deepest blue, and at the sides, something else, a red creature with a horn of purest white. Hamid knelt on the wet carpet and scrubbed gently at it, watching, absorbed, the colours, the patterns emerging from the old grime and dust. Why, he thought as he scrubbed, it was beautiful! He got a sponge, and tenderly began wiping away the soap from the other parts of the carpet.

He was so absorbed that he did not hear his aunt and uncle returning. They had gone into restaurant after restaurant and found fault with each, till at last the exasperated owners told them to go. So, dinnerless and more bad-tempered than ever, they had come home, intending to force Hamid to make something for them. What was their surprise and anger to find him not in his mean room, but out in the courtyard, wasting good soap and water on an old bit of rubbish! Hamid's uncle reached over to pull his hair, and his aunt opened her mouth to call him twenty different kinds of rude names, till all of a sudden they saw the carpet properly for the first time.

Their mouths closed; their arms dropped. They stared at the carpet, and at Hamid, who did not even look frightened. He stroked the carpet, and said, "It is strange, it is almost as if I know this carpet, already..."

"Don't be stupid!" said his uncle, fetching him a stinging blow on the ear. "Don't be absurd!" said his aunt, pulling at his hair. Hamid, looking up in pain and surprise, saw that his uncle-as-thin-as-a-stick-of-cinnamon and his aunt-as-round-as-a-

honeycake had gone white as salt. He wiped a tear from his eye and stood up, sad but no longer afraid.

“You will put this old bit of rubbish on the fire!” his aunt commanded, her three chins wobbling like almond jelly.

“At once!” added his uncle, his eyes as round as if he’d seen a ghost.

But Hamid shook his head. “No,” he said, “it is mine.”

His uncle and aunt goggled at him. “But,” said the uncle, with a cunning, cruel smile, “You are our servant.”

“It is therefore ours,” agreed his wife, her cold eyes snapping.

“Give it to us,” said the uncle-as-thin-as-a-cinnamon-stick, advancing on Hamid. “Yes, give it here,” said the aunt-as-round-as-a-honey-cake, clawing towards Hamid. But Hamid grabbed the carpet and held it tight.

And then came a voice from the back door. A tired, used-to-commanding voice. “Is there no one to help a customer, in this place?”

Instantly, the uncle’s and aunt’s faces changed. From being white-mean, tight-cruel, they smoothed out into smiling brown masks. “Oh, Your Highness,” simpered the uncle. “Your Gracious Lordliness,” wheedled the aunt. “It is only this silly boy of ours, who will not drop his bit of old rubbish. Come, Hamid,” she said in a silky voice.

The man at the door frowned. Hamid saw a short, grey-haired man, wearing splendid clothes and a vast white turban. There were lines on his face, of crossness and something else, something deeper and sadder. The man looked back at Hamid. He blinked, wiped his hand across his forehead, and said, “I came...to buy a carpet. If this is the way you treat your...” but then he stopped. He said, still looking at Hamid, “Strange...oh, you remind me so much of...but no, it isn’t possible. . .”

“Oh sir,” said Hamid, feeling a curious sort of emotion, which filled his eyes and his chest, but to which he could not put a name. “Sir, it is only that I wish to keep this most beautiful carpet.” And before his startled aunt and uncle could stop him, he had unrolled it, almost at the man’s feet.

The man started violently. He looked at the carpet, at Hamid, at the uncle and aunt, and then he did the strangest thing. He burst into tears! Then he took Hamid in his arms, still crying, and said, “My son, oh my son...”

Hamid, clutched in the man's arms, full of a warm, surging wonder, said, as if he were trying the words out, "Father...is it really you, Father?"

They went on in this way for quite some time, but at last they thought of the uncle, as thin as a stick of cinnamon, and the aunt, as round as a honey cake. And do you know, those two had simply disappeared, leaving everything in their shop, their money, their fine clothes, everything except what they had on them!

And then the man told Hamid that his son had been kidnapped as a small child. Although a huge ransom had been paid, the boy had never been seen again. His wife had died of grief, and he himself had become sad and empty and impatient of life. "And now, my son," he said, weeping, hugging Hamid—who-was-his son, "here you are, and there is the carpet, the very carpet on which you had been lying, when you were taken!" And from the big pocket of his robe, he had taken out a miniature of a young woman, and shown it to Hamid—a young woman with a soft, round face, and amazing lapis lazuli eyes that seemed to smile right into Hamid. And then Hamid recognized her, and knew why his heart had been thumping, in the street, that afternoon. In his mind, came a picture of her—not sad anymore, but smiling, her sky-eyes sparkling as a spring morning. And in his mind, she held out her hand to him, and whispered, "My son. My son. My dearest son. "

And when Hamid and the man-who-was-his father were back in the prince's (for he was a prince, you see) marvelous marble-and-filigree palace, they talked long into the night of the wonderful and terrible things that had happened. And so long as they lived, the old carpet had pride of place in the most beautiful hall of the palace, under the portrait of the princess, Hamid's mother, with her lapis lazuli eyes...

But as to the uncle-as-thin-as-a-stick-of-cinnamon and the aunt-as-round-as-a-honeycake, why, nothing was heard from them again, at least not in that country. But I have heard it whispered that in a cold and dusty and forgotten corner of a far-distant land, there is a greasy restaurant with a dirty kitchen where, day after day, a bent man as dry as a stick of thin grass and a woman as squashed as a melting cake stand in front of a vast pile of dishes, and wash, and wash, their arms up to the elbows in scummy suds.