

# The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

## III.

*Of the Avarice of the Blind Beggar, Baba Abdala.*

After this, the caliph received embassies and congratulations, and exchanged letters and presents with foreign princes, and sent troops into divers provinces, and revised the customs of the state. Throughout all the city and all the land and all foreign lands, he became renowned. His name was like the Tigris, rising from a small source, and rolling onward and joining the Euphrates, and at last becoming part of the mighty sea.

One day Gaifar came in unto the caliph, and found him sitting alone and in profound thought; and he welcomed him not, nor so much as lift up his eyes when he drew nigh unto him. Then Gaifar remained standing where he was, and at length the caliph raised his eyes and saw him, but straitway looked aside and took no notice of him.

At length Gaifar said, "O Prince of the Faithful! why is thy countenance fallen? and why art thou overcome with dejection?" The caliph made answer and said, "O Gaifar! there are times when we are overcome with the shadow of darkness without being able to assign any reason thereof, and such is the case with me at present. I have all earthly glory at my command— it does not seem worth an egg! I care neither for friends, nor wives, nor children, nor fame, nor riches, nor for life itself! All appears a vain dream."

Gaifar replied, "O caliph! these fluctuations of spirit are natural to all men; save those who never think, and who are unremittingly employed in something that takes them out of themselves. It were better that I came to thee another day on the business in hand." "What is it?" said the caliph. Gaifar answered, "I have organized the police of Bagdad, and I came to receive thy commands when we should go forth in disguise to observe how it works." "No time like the present," said the caliph. "Go thou and disguise thyself as a merchant from Tiberias, and I will do like wise."

Then they disguised themselves so cunningly that it was impossible they should be recognised; for the caliph painted a furrow between his eye-brows, and a line from each nostril that made him look forty years of Age. While he did thus, he smiled in his heart, and forgot his melancholy. They went through a private door of the palace garden which opened into the country. They passed along the banks of the river, without noticing any irregularity, and crossed the river in the

first boat they found, and reviewed the city on the opposite bank; after which, they returned across the Tigris by the Bridge of Boats.

At the foot of the bridge, they observed a blind old man, begging. The caliph dropped a piece of gold into his hand; whereon the blind man caught him by the sleeve and cried, "Whoever thou art, who givest me this alms, give me likewise a blow on the head, I beseech thee; for I have deserved this punishment, and much greater."

The caliph would have plucked his sleeve away, but the beggar held him fast; whereon he said, "O blind man! I cannot do that which thou requirest; I wish thee good, and thou wouldst compel me to do thee evil." "O master," rejoined the beggar, "I beseech thee, deny me not, other wise I must return thine alms or break mine oath." Thereupon the caliph gave him a slight blow on the head and went on his way, followed by the blind man's blessings.

While the caliph mused in his mind what this might mean, he observed in a street through which he had not lately passed, a newly built house, which seemed that of a rich man. He inquired of a neighbour who dwelt therein. "O merchant," replied the man, "this house belongs to Cogia Hassan the rope-maker, who till lately pursued his trade in extreme poverty, and I know not by what means he hath become so rich." Then the caliph said apart to Gaifar, "I would see this Cogia Hassan, and learn of him by what means he hath acquired such wealth as to enable him to build so large a house. Bid him come to me to-morrow, when the afternoon prayers are ended; and return likewise to the blind man, and desire him to come also."

Gaifar said, "I hear and obey;" wherefore, on the ensuing afternoon the two men stood before the caliph and prostrated themselves. Then the caliph bade them arise, and inquired of the blind man wherefore he had refused to take an alms without likewise receiving a blow.

"O caliph," said the beggar, thy servant is named Baba Ab-dalla. From my youth up I was frugal and fond of money; wherefore I was at length enabled to buy fourscore camels, which I sent on hire to the caravan merchants, accompanying them myself to divers places, for purposes of trade.

"It came to pass, that one day, as I was returning from Balsora with my camels unladen, and meditating deeply how I should extend my possessions, I came to a convenient pasturage, where I turned them to graze, while I sat down to rest. Anon I was accosted by a dervish, who sat down beside me, and inquired whence I came, and whither I was going. I satisfied him, and then put the same questions to him; whereon he told me, that since I seemed to love money, he could tell me of a place he had lately discovered by chance in his wanderings, where lay a treasure so vast, that if all my fourscore camels should be laden from thence with gold and jewels, it would seem as if nothing had been taken away."

Then cried I, "O dervish! shew me this place!" "Presently," said he, "thou shalt see it;" and "deliberately finished eating some food I had given him. "Let us

not lose time," said I at length; "thou art one who has little Interest in the things of this world, and treasure is of no value to thee; but to me it is of infinite consideration, wherefore, if I indeed find, as thou sayest, that there is treasure enough to load my fourscore camels, I will give one of them, with its burthen, to thee.

"O man!" replied he, with a smile, and a look that searched my heart, "thou knowest that what thou offerest bears no proportion to the benefit thou expectest to derive from me. I needed not to have told thee of this treasure, nor needed I to shew thee the way. Why should I concern my self at all with so over-reaching a fellow? However, I will propose an arrangement which thou wilt yet find advantageous enough. We will together load the camels with as much as they can carry, on condition that thou shalt give half of them with their burthens to me; after which we will go our separate ways, and see each other's faces no more. Thou seest that by this means, though thou shalt have given me forty camels, I shall have supplied thee with the means to purchase a thousand."

I said, "I consent; on my head be it," though grudgingly in my heart. Then I hastily collected the camels, and drove them along after the dervish. After some time we reached a valley, the entrance of which was so narrow that my camels could only enter it in single file; but after a while the path widened and extended into a little meadow, hemmed in by inaccessible rocks. Here the dervish desired that we should halt. I made the camels lie down, and then, joining him, found that he had kindled a little fire of brushwood. He cast into it some perfume, uttering words I understood not; where on a thick smoke arose into the air."

"When the smoke dispersed, I perceived what I had not seen before, a small fissure in the face of the rock, just large enough to admit a man on his hands and knees. The dervish bade me enter, and followed me. I was soon able to stand up and look around me, and I marvelled to find myself in a huge cavern, lighted by what aperture I knew not, and filled with heaps of treasure either hidden by robbers, or placed there by evil spirits for the temptation of mankind."

"As an eagle darts on his prey, so flew I, O caliph, to the nearest heap of gold, and began to fill a sack with it. The dervish was equally busy, but confined himself to jewels, which, as he explained to me, was on account of their lying in so much smaller compass than their value in gold. There upon I helped myself also to jewels, even until my avarice was satiated; and when we had with difficulty and for a long time employed ourselves in removing them, by pulling and pushing them in small loads through the aperture, we loaded our camels and prepared to depart.

"Now it came to pass, O caliph, that before we left the cavern, the dervish placed in his bosom a small pot of ointment, which he found among the treasure. Then he kindled a fire and uttered certain words; after which, the entrance to the cavern was no longer to be discerned. We then divided the loaded camels, placed ourselves at the head of our separate divisions, returned whence we came, and

parted; he taking the road to Balsora, and I to Bagdad. Now, I had not journeyed far, when, instead of being elated at the treasure I had so easily secured, I began to envy the dervish his share of the spoils. 'Of a surety' thought I, 'he hath no need of it, for he can return and help himself again when he will.' Thereupon, I made my camels halt, and ran after the dervish, calling to him as loudly as I could. He heard me and stopped. As soon as I came up to him, 'Brother,' said I, panting, 'I have thought of what did not occur to me before we separated. Thou art an holy man, devoted to the contemplation of heavenly things, and hast no concern with earthly riches. They will only be an encumbrance to thee, and a snare unto thy soul. Be content, therefore, and take only thirty camels— thou wilt find them sufficiently difficult to manage.'"

"He looked at me penetratingly, said, 'I am content;' and let me take them without a word. I felt a little shame as I drove them away, but soon forgot it in my regret that, while I was about it, I had not asked for twenty camels instead of ten. Wherefore, I returned unto him again, and said, 'Brother, I am still uneasy for thy comfort. Thou art unaccustomed to driving camels, and will find twenty require all thy skill; whereas I, being used to them, can drive sixty as well as one.' 'That is true,' replied he, and he suffered me to take ten more camels from him. I should now have been content; but like a man in a dropsy, who, the more he drinketh, the more thirsty he becomes, I grew still more greedy for the twenty camels which the dervish still possessed."

"I therefore asked him for ten more; he was in no condition to dispute for them with me; and I then asked for the last remaining ten. "Make a good use of them, Brother,' said he, 'and remember that GOD can take away riches from us as well as bestow them, if we do not dedicate them to His glory, by making them serviceable to the poor, whom He could easily enrich, but whom He is pleased to leave in poverty for the express purpose of giving the rich an opportunity, by their alms, of meriting his favour in a better world.'"

"I heard him with little attention, my soul being athirst to obtain from him the little pot of ointment. 'Why shouldst thou burthen thyself with it?' said I. A dervish can surely have no occasion for it; and it is such a trifle, that thou wilt hardly refuse to give it to me.'"

"O caliph! would that he had denied my request! Instead whereof, he straightway plucked it from his bosom, and put it into my hands with a smile, saying, 'There, Brother, take it, and may thy soul be satisfied; it is for application to the eyes. I advise thee, nevertheless, not to make use of it unto thine hurt.'"

"O caliph, I deemed that he would keep from me the power of espying hidden treasure, and hastily rubbed both my eyes with the ointment, expecting that the riches of an unknown world would be revealed to me. In place of this, I found myself totally blind! 'Ah, ill-omened dervish!' cried I, 'what mischief hast thou wrought upon me!' 'Unhappy man,' said he, 'thou hast brought it on thyself. I advised thee to forbear, but thy insatiable covetousness, which made thee grudge

me this little pot of ointment after my bestowing on thee vast riches, has met with its just desert. The blindness of thine heart has brought upon thee the blindness of thine eyes. It is true I possess many secrets, as thou must have learnt even during the short time we have been in company; but I have not one that will restore thee to sight. GOD bestowed on thee riches of which thou wast unworthy. He is now about to withdraw them from thee, and distribute them, by my hands, among those who will be more grateful for them.”

“So saying, he departed, taking with him my fourscore camels, which I had no means of withholding from him; and I groped my way homeward, penniless, blind, and distracted with sorrow. I had no resource left but to beg alms, and this has been my employment to the present hour; but to expiate my crime towards GOD, I have imposed on myself the punishment of a blow from every charitable person who shall relieve me. O caliph, my story is ended.”

The caliph then said, “O Baba Abdalla! thy sin has been great; but thou art sensible of its enormity, and hast submitted to this public penance in token of thy contrition. Continue to ask pardon of GOD in thy daily prayers, but abstain henceforth from begging; and to supply thee with the means of subsistence I will bestow on thee four drachms of silver daily.”

Then Baba Abdalla cast himself at the caliph’s Feet, and kissed the hem of his garments; after which he departed, blessing him as he went.

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