

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

IX.

Of the caliph's bestowing on the Emperor Charlemagne the Protectorship of the Holy Places.

One day the caliph noticed among those who stood in his hall of audience, a hale, weather-beaten old man, of dignified appearance; whose beard was beginning to whiten, and whose face was curiously interfered by a network of small wrinkles; while his eyes, which were still quick and lively, were deep set in his head.

The caliph, who knew him well, sent a slave to desire him to remain after the others were dispersed. When, therefore, all had departed save Gaifar, the caliph beckoned to the old man, who drew near and made obeisance.

"O Sindbad!" then said the caliph, "I have not seen thee for a long time; tell me what thou hast been doing, and whether thou hast again been voyaging and meeting with remarkable adventures."

"O Prince of the Faithful!" returned Sindbad, "I made a vow within myself that after so many perils and disasters I would remain quietly in the abode of peace till removed by the Terminator of Delights and Separator of Companions. However, a nephew of mine, who, through my means, had freighted a ship at Joppa, was desirous I should accompany him on his first voyage to the Isles of the Sea; and some what reluctantly I consented. We touched at Cyprus and Crete, and went from island to island, everywhere trading with great advantage; till, as we approached the extreme west, a most violent tempest arose, which lasted for several weeks, and drove us beyond the Pillars of Hercules into the remote and unknown seas. After drifting many days and nights without moon or star, without sail or mast, without bread or fresh water, our crew became exhausted; and I, who was looked on as the most experienced man in the ship, was so overpowered by my continued wakefulness as to find myself frequently dropping to sleep whether I would or no. Therefore I called unto me a little black boy, and gave him a large, sharp-pointed needle, saying unto him, 'Abide constantly beside me, and whensoever thou seest me fall asleep, prick me with this needle, and if I wake not, pierce me again and again with it, even though thou drive it into my flesh up to the eye, for on my wakefulness depends the safety of the ship and of all that are therein.' Therefore he obeyed me, and pricked me again and again; and again and

again I fell asleep; until at length, amid the darkness of the night and the stupefying sound of the winds and the waves, sleep altogether overcame me, and doubtless overcame the boy also, for I was awakened by a horrible crash, and found that the ship, having struck upon a rock, was about to sink. In another instant of time, it went down with all on board, save myself; but, impelled by a sudden instinct, I made a leap in the dark, which brought me head foremost into the sea at some distance from the eddy formed by the sinking ship. I rose like a cork, and struck out and swam at hazard, till I presently got into a raging surf, which hurried me forward with prodigious swiftness, and dashed me on the shingle as if I had been a straw or a whisp of hay. Then the surf ran back, raking the shingle with a grating noise; and though I was half stunned by the violence with which I had been cast on the shore, yet, knowing that I should be lost if I awaited the return of the wave, I scrambled up and ran away from it, till I dashed my head against a rock in the dark and fell down insensible. When I came to myself, day was breaking, and I found myself lying on a rocky and terrible coast. O caliph! my limbs were so benumbed that a I could scarcely crawl; however, I made my way slowly along under the rocks till I came to a place where they became less precipitous, so that I was able to ascend them. No sooner had I done so than I was surrounded by the natives of the country, who crowded about me and addressed me in an unknown language. They were well clad, O caliph, for tillers of the earth, though their garments were short; but what shewed me I had fallen among barbarians, was that women were mingled among the men, and the women wore no veils. Howbeit, their countenances were comely and modest; they learnt from my signs that I had been shipwrecked, and, with compassion on their countenances, conducted me to a fisherman's hut, where they fed and warmed me and dried my garments. The men presently departed to their work, leaving me in charge of the women; and, overcome by long watching, I soon fell into profound sleep. When I awoke, they gave me broiled fish and bread, and offered me wine, which they were surprised at my refusing. O caliph, I soon made out that they were Christians, for they had crucifixes and pictures; also I beheld them cross themselves. When the men returned, they brought with them some persons of superior condition to examine me; but as we could not understand one another's languages, though I tried them with several, we could arrive at no conclusion respecting one another. However, they mounted me on a good horse, and made me accompany them through a fertile and populous country, to a magnificent city, in the streets of which, to my great joy, I saw moors mingled with the Christians. I pointed them out to my companions, and made signs that I wanted to speak to them. They nodded and smiled, but still rode forward, till we came to a house that looked like a court of justice. Here they presented me before the tribunal of a venerable man who appeared to be a magistrate. many persons were present, both Christians and moors; and, at the first sentence I uttered, a Jew in a richly-furred gaberdine stepped forward and addressed me in Arabic. All was then made plain:

I told him who I was and whence I came; and he informed me that I was in a part of Spain at war with Charlemagne, emperor of the west, to whom the moors had offered vassalage, but the Christians were not consenting thereto. The governor, finding I stood in the sunshine of thy favour, O Prince of the Faithful! appointed unto me a lodging and food from his own table, promising that I should be assisted to journey homeward at the earliest opportunity. However, this opportunity was long of arriving; meantime the city was convulsed by the approach of the emperor to make war against it. As I was an old man, a foreigner, and a man of peace, I could not be expected to take any Interest in these transactions; nevertheless, when the emperor sacked the city, I, with a great many others, was carried captive across the mountains to the empire of Frangistan. While we were entangled among the mountain passes, the army being much encumbered with booty, the Spaniards fell on the emperor's rear-guard in a certain place called Roncesvalles, and slaughtered it to a man, including the emperor's nephew Roland and many brave warriors.

“O Prince of the Faithful! were I to tell thee of the fabulous deeds attributed to these Paladins, I should cease to be accounted by thee a man of veracity. Tremendous lamentation was made for them throughout Frangistan; and I and my fellow captives esteemed ourselves in danger of being slain as an expiatory sacrifice. When we were brought into the emperor's tent, bare-footed and with ropes about our necks, we beheld a majestic old man with a long white beard, Eyes flaming like fire, and a most terrible countenance. This was the great Charlemagne. When he saw from my appearance that I was neither a Spaniard, Jew, nor Moor, he questioned me by means of an interpreter; and again, O caliph! thy name and favour were unto me a shield of defence; for I was spared while the others were slain, and the emperor ordered me a suitable attendance and equipage, and entertained me with distinction. After sojourning for some time at his court, and seeing everything worthy of observation, I was dismissed with noble provision for my journey to my own country, which I have made at leisure, and in safety. Before dismissing me, the emperor offered me a permanent place of importance in his court, if I would renounce my religion and take the oath of allegiance to him. This, of course, I declined, alleging thy displeasure; he did not press it; and I can declare to thee, O caliph! that, considering what a benighted barbarian he is, in comparison of a Moslem, he hath attained unto a wonderful height of civilization and magnificence. Neither did I perceive, during my residence among the Christians, though I watched them narrowly, that any of them were cannibals : albeit the Jews aver that they love the flesh of young children at their feasts.”

“It appears to me, O Sindbad!” said the caliph, “that thy last voyage, though fraught with important events, is less entertaining than any of the preceding. What sayest thou, Gaifar?” “It appears to me less entertaining, but more true,” returned Gaifar. “Prince of the Faithful!” said Sindbad, a little nettled at the

caliph's observations, "I could have diversified my narrative with incidents sufficiently surprising, but that I feared thou wouldst not believe them. For instance, with respect unto the emperor's nephew Roland, I beheld with my own eyes an enormous cleft between two mountains, which he had made with a single stroke of his sword; and this chasm was sufficiently wide for an army to pass through it, an hundred men abreast. After this relation, on which I stake my word, it will seem to thee the less incredible that with the same sword, he, single-handed, slew an entire army of a thousand men. The fact, however, ceases to be astonishing, when I admit that his sword was enchanted, as was likewise his bugle-horn, his last blast on which was heard from Roncesvalles to Fontarabia, a distance of about five hundred miles. No wonder, O caliph, that the bugle burst in half. But, without the assistance of magic, he could root up oaks of a hundred years' growth, as if they had been radishes; and roll a live full-grown moor into a ball and fling him at the head of another. It is not, therefore, surprising that Charlemagne should grieve deeply for his nephew, who was in himself a host."

"Then, as for the women of Frangistan, they are as singular for beauty and goodness as the men for strength and valour. Girls without veils, O caliph, go to the shops and markets without attracting notice, the value of each of whom, in Bagdad, would be ten thousand pieces. They excel in all arts and sciences; are taught logic, rhetoric, divinity, and astronomy; are conversed with among men, as equals, and are eligible to the highest offices of the state. Hence it comes to pass that they not only are superior to intrigue, but their minds are uninfluenced by envy, jealousy, or malice. None of the petty passions and absurd squabbles which disturb our harems exist among them; their minds are devoted to lofty subjects, their hearts are pure, and of wonderful constancy, and their beauty is only one among many attractions. When they grow old, they are still charming, and when they die, they are lamented."

"Gaifar," said the caliph, "canst thou credit what our friend Sindbad has related concerning the achievements of Roland?" "I am a man of slow Imagination," said Gaifar; "I cannot." "Canst thou believe," said the caliph, "his report of the women of Frangistan?" "Prince of the Faithful," said Gaifar, "I can." "Thine imagination is not then so sluggish," said the caliph. "There are a hundred women in my Harem, but among them all, not one like these of Frangistan" "Perhaps, if there were fewer, they would be better," said Gaifar. "It may be so," said the caliph, "since the only woman I thoroughly esteem is one who lives apart and cultivates her intellects my sister Abbassa."

Then, after a pause, he said, "I think it will be well to send an embassy and a present to this emperor of the west. What favour can I confer upon him that will give him satisfaction?"

"Prince of the Faithful," said Sindbad, "the emperor is, in respect of his benighted religion, a complete devotee; there is nothing he will so much delight in as free access to the holy places in Palestine." "Then," said the caliph, "I will make

him their titular protector; and he and his pilgrims shall resort to Jerusalem freely and unmolested.” And he sent unto Charlemagne an elephant, and a tent, and a water-clock, and the keys of the city Jerusalem; which, being interpreted, signifieth “The Vision of Peace.”



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