

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

X.

Of the Plague at Bagdad.

Now the Lady Abbassa was more learned than all the ladies of the east. Also she set her face wholly against marriage, and devoted herself to the reading of many books, and the study of many arts and sciences; as music, poetry, grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, astrology, geometry, chemistry, and many things besides. Also she knew the name and properties of every flower, and the language of birds.

The Lady Abbassa highly esteemed Fetnah the wife of Gaifar, and Enis Eljelis the wife of Nouredin, and Joanna the wife of George Baktishua, the Christian physician. Also she was abundantly liberal to the poor, so that her name was blessed.

Now in the height and glory of the reign of the caliph Haroun, a rumour arose that the plague had been brought into Bagdad by certain people of Kerkook; and the rumour proved to be true. Then, when it began to rage in the city, many opulent persons removed to Balsora, to Moussoul, and to other places, to be out of its reach; and many poor people crept a little way into the country, but soon returned, preferring to die in their homes. All rich persons largely contributed of their abundance to relieve those who were suffering; and the caliph and his wife Zobeide, and his mother and his sister were lavish in their generosity. The physicians risked their lives in attendance on the sick, and several of them fell victims to the disease. Then George Baktishua presented himself to the caliph and said, "O caliph! the sick and the healthy at present congregate together, regardless of infection: this is not well." The caliph replied, "What can be done? Poverty compels them to it, and what is written is written. None will die but those whose deaths are decreed." Therefore, people continued to die more and more; and when the caliph saw George Baktishua shake his head upon it, his heart smote him, and he caused many tents to be erected for the poor beyond the walls of the city. However, this benefit to them did not last long, for the Euphrates and Tigris, being swollen with much rain, overflowed their banks far beyond the usual water-marks, and laid all the country round about Bagdad under water, even unto the gates of the city. Therefore, people could no longer encamp beyond the walls, nor even bury their dead in the burial-places, but were obliged to inter them in their own

court-yards, and in the yards of mosques and stables, and at length, even under the pavements of the streets; so that the stench became very great and the mortality increased. At length the river broke down the north-west wall of the city, and overflowed and washed down about five thousand houses, burying beneath the ruins multitudes of poor people, both sick and well. Therefore the other parts of the city became over-peopled; every one striving who should show most humanity and generosity to the sufferers that had escaped; so that even the outhouses and stables of rich Persons were crowded with poor people, who, but for them, would have miserably perished.

Instead of long files of camels and caravans of rich merchandize approaching the city from all quarters, all trade was now stopped; all the shops, except those for the absolute necessaries of life, were closed; even the water-carriers disappeared from the market-places; the mosques were shut, the voices of the muezzins were no longer heard calling to prayer; and instead of them were heard the piteous voices of numberless little children who had lost their parents and friends, and were straying comfortless and crying about the streets.

As provisions became more and more scarce, robberies were committed by persons whom hunger had made desperate. The dead had at first been decently swathed in grave-clothes of cotton; but this soon became impracticable, for there remained only one shopkeeper in Bagdad who had any winding-sheets left to sell; and rich persons might frequently be seen in his shop, as long as any of his stock remained, buying their own shrouds.

It was a grievous sight to see the uncoffined dead brought forth in barrows and on the backs of asses, and laid in the streets until a trench should be dug to bury them in. As the trenches were not always dug sufficiently deep, the corpses were often disinterred at night by the lean and ravenous dogs that prowled about the city. Wherefore, some persons carried their dead to the Tigris, and cast them in.

Fetnah, the wife of Gaifar, was in much fear of the plague. Being convinced from the first, that she should fall a victim to it, she gave way to much weeping, and took infinite precautions. In vain Gaifar said unto her, "O Fetnah! to what good? What is written is written; we cannot hasten nor retard our appointed time." At length one of the inferior slaves died: the other slaves, fearing to alarm their mistress, concealed the event, and buried the corpse secretly by night under the court-yard pavement. Presently after, the vizier's younger daughter, Soul's Delight, sickened: her mother was distracted with grief, and no longer cared about her own safety, but attended her day and night till she died. The eldest daughter, the Star-eyed, then received the infection, and in like manner was tended by her mother, and in like manner died. Before she was placed in her winding-sheet, Fetnah was taken ill. She then addressed her husband and said, "O Gaifar, best of Men! I no longer deplore my fate, but am perfectly resigned to it. I feel assured we shall meet again in another existence. Bury me with my Children, O husband!

thy love for me has been wonderful. I have not always been as deserving of it as I should have been, but my love has never abated for one moment. Mourn for me awhile, O Gaifar! but not for ever; else wilt thou be destroyed by overmuch Sorrow. Take another wife into thy Harem, else wilt thou be lonely; but love her not to the Exclusion of my Memory.”

Then she departed, and Gaifar fell on her face and wept; he had lost all his harem in three days. For a week, he shut himself up in darkness: then he came forth, and gave largely to the poor, and administered justice, and shewed mercy, and directed the rebuilding of the city wall, and the repairing of the houses and the more decent burying of the dead. In Process of time, the waters assuaged, the plague abated, the fugitives returned to their homes, trade was restored, and buyers and sellers once more went about the streets; howbeit Gaifar the vizier was a brokenhearted man.

Then the caliph said unto him, “How long shall it be ere sorrow departeth from thee? The sun sets to-night, but it riseth again to-morrow. Choose thee another wife, and I will pay for her though she cost ten thousand pieces. But Gaifar answered and said, “O my lord! suffer me to be left alone in this matter; a cut finger healeth none the sooner for our bidding it not to smart.”

When Abbassa, the sister of the caliph, heard how Gaifar mourned and refused comfort, she, having known and loved Fetnab, addressed to him some verses of consolation; and they ran thus:—

“How great, O Gaifar! are thine afflictions! yet GOD designeth them for thy Good.

Though the Prophet does not reveal it, I am convinced that they who love truly are re-united in heaven.

There again shalt thou behold thy Fetnah, and thy star-eyed, and thy Soul’s Delight.

I passed through the garden, and beheld a noble pomegranate-tree, almost cleft in twain near the root.

Then said I to the gardener, ‘Why is this? Why hast thou dealt thus with the Pomegranate!’

He replied, ‘It used to shoot so strong, that it brought forth too many leaves: but now that I have nearly cut it through, it will bear a great abundance of fruit.’

O Gaifar! thus will it be with thee: thine afflictions will make thee yet more resplendent in virtues.”

Abbassa, having written these verses, shewed them to the caliph, who was pleased with them; and he took them and gave them unto Gaifar, who kept them next his heart.



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