

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

XI.

Of the Caliph's testing the Obedience of Gaifar.

One night, the caliph, having cast himself on his bed, felt no disposition to sleep; and having turned from side to side till he was weary, he called Mesrour unto him and said, "O Mesrour! how shall I obtain relief from this restlessness?" Mesrour answered, "The night is yet but little advanced, will my lord have the singers and dancers?" "O Mesrour" answered the caliph, "my soul inclineth not to anything of the kind." Then Mesrour said, "The garden is full of flowers, some of which send forth their sweetest perfume by night. Will my lord take his pastime therein?" The caliph replied, "O Mesrour, my soul inclineth not to anything of the kind." Mesrour then said, "There are story-tellers and jesters in the ante-chamber; shall they divert the caliph?" The caliph answered, "O Mesrour! neither doth my soul incline to anything of that kind." Then said Mesrour, "Perhaps it will amuse the Prince of the Faithful to strike off my head, for it does not contain another suggestion, and possibly this may divert his uneasiness." Then the caliph laughed and said, "Where is Giafar?" Mesrour replied, "He was here but now, and was about to return to his own house." The caliph said, "Go, bid him repair unto me on my palace roof, and we will discourse concerning the stars."

Then Mesrour departed, and the caliph arose, and went forth on his palace-roof; and behold! the stars and planets, red, blue, violet, yellow, and white, were flaming in the sky, which looked in comparison of them like the blackness of darkness: and the caliph looked and regarded them steadfastly, for he knew them by name; whether Alcor, Mizar, Aldebaian, Dubhe, Merah, Alcoth, Benetnaschy that twinkled perpetually, or the untwinkling planets; all progressing at their several rates, from west to east.

When Gaifar joined the caliph, the caliph said unto him, "O Gaifar! how glorious is night! There is a particular star under which I was born, and yonder it shines bright as a sun." Gaifar replied, "May its lustre be undimmed! I, too, had a star, but it is set."

Then the caliph looked down on the river wherein the stars were reflected; and therein he also saw reflected a bright light from the windows of a distant wing of his palace. He said, "That light comes from the quarter of my palace belonging to my sister: we will go and see why it now burneth."

Therefore he walked along his palace-roof till he came to a flight of steps descending to a terrace. The caliph went down these steps, followed by Giafar, and arrived at a certain door, which he opened by a secret spring; and within it he found armed slaves on guard. These fell back mutely at his approach, and he passed through several apartments dimly lighted, and then drew back a heavy silken curtain with green and gold fringes; and within it was a blaze of light. Divers women belonging to Abbassa were silently employing their needles; and Abbassa herself was intently reading beneath the pearl-like light of a lamp. When the women beheld the caliph and Gaifar, they hastily arose and ran away behind a curtain, because they were unveiled; but the princess Abbassa, though she blushed, remained standing where she was; saying, "Whence is this, my brother?" He said, "O my sister, I beheld thy lamp burning and reflected in the river from the roof of my palace, and I thought, 'why does Abbassa waste herself by over-study? A taper always alight, too soon it expireth. I will now go and reprove her.'" Abbassa said, "The words of the wise are as honey to the mouth." The caliph replied, "Too much honey is not good for the digestion." Gaifar said, "Some may eat more honey than others, and receive no harm." Abbassa said, "Ignorance is unbecoming in everyone; how much more so in a princess!" The caliph replied, "A little learning is dangerous to the weak; how much more so to a woman!" Gaifar said, "There are women who are not weak, and there is learning which is not dangerous."

Then said Abbassa, "The lot of a woman is in many things hard; and wisdom enableth her to bear it." The caliph said, "The lot of a woman is to submit herself; and knowledge teacheth Resistance." Gaifar said, "It is temper, and not intellect, that maketh men and women unruly; and enlightened minds are those which submit to the law of circumstance with most obedience."

Then said the caliph, "Gaifar is an oracle; and if all kept their eyes on the ground as he is doing, there would be no need of veils! O Sister! I am hungry, and thou offerest me no supper!" Then Abbassa laughed, and clapped her hands; and her slaves brought a low table of mother-of-pearl on golden legs, and covered it with every variety of viand in dishes of China-ware embossed with gold. After they had supped, and talked far into the night, the caliph and Gaifar arose, and returned as they came; and lo! the stars they had previously beheld were set, and others were risen in their place.

The next day, the caliph received letters from Balsora which pleased him not; and he shewed them to Gaifar, and said, "How is it that I am caliph, and King of Kings, and thus lightly esteemed by my cousin Mohammed? What thinkest thou? is it not proper to set another in his place?" Gaifar said, "Certainly it will not be without cause." The caliph said, "I will therefore write. Where shall I find a proper person to convey the letter, and be viceroy in his stead?" Gaifar said, "Some person of judgment and integrity should be found, whom the caliph is willing to

honour— There is Nouredin of Balsora.” The caliph said, “Meet me an hour hence in such a quarter of my palace.”

When Gaifar repaired to this apartment, which was unknown to him, he perceived a strong smell of frankincense and other sweet perfumes, and, drawing aside the curtain, he beheld the caliph, richly apparelled, sitting on a mattress of crimson satin embroidered with jewels, under a pavilion hung with draperies of cloth of gold and blue brocade. By his side sate a lady in a silver tissue veil, that covered her from head to foot. There were also four cadies and four witnesses.

The caliph said, “Gaifar, thou art a man whom I am willing to honour, to test, and to prove. I am about to confer on thee this lady in marriage. Wilt thou have her; aye or no?”

The silver veil trembled; and Gaifar’ s heart beat violently. He said, “Prince of the Faithful! I am thy servant of servants. I take thee gratefully at thy Word!”

Then the marriage proceeded; the cadies and witnesses retired. The caliph said, “Raise her veil.” Gaifar, trembling, raised it reverently; and lo! it was Abbassa, blushing and beautiful as the morning. Gaifar knelt, and kissed the hem of the caliph’s garment.

Then said the caliph, “Kiss her, and depart. I appoint thee viceroy of Balsora.”

At these words, Abbassa uttered a faint cry, and Gaifar staggered and looked imploringly towards the caliph. “Prince of the Faithful— ” he began.

But the caliph again said, “Kiss her, and depart.” Whereon Gaifar kissed her more than once, and departed without a word. Neither did Abbassa say anything, but she was cold and white as a stone. She stood like a statue till the caliph retired, and then her maids came about her.

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