

The Adventures of the Caliph Haroun Alraschid

XII.

Of the Fate of Gaifar and Abbassa.

Now Balsora is seven days from Bagdad. The caliph thought within himself, "Gaifar is a faithful servant, and of high virtue and honour: there is none other such in my kingdom; but yet I will see what is in his heart. If he obey me for a whole year in this matter, well: I will recall him, and give him my Sister, and promote him to yet higher honour."

How soon passes a year! It is even like a halt in the desert.

Howbeit, the caliph closely watched his sister during this period; and she troubled him with much weeping, and entreating him to recall her husband, saying, "It had been better not to give me to Gaifar." He said, "Why these tears? Haft thou not all thou hadst before? and wast thou not content? Thou saidst all pleasure was in books."

She replied, "Thou hast spoiled that pleasure: I now behold their words and their letters, but they impart no sense. Thou hast done very cruelly unto me. I was in peace, and thou troubledst me. Thou madest me to see and hear Gaifar, and I found him highly to be prized, and thou saidst, Shall I bestow thee on him, my sister? and I thought to be his dear companion for life, and now thou hast sundered us altogether!" Then the caliph departed, thinking within himself, "At the year's end, her joy will be in proportion to her present sorrow." And he abstained from visiting her again for a long season, because he knew not how to answer her. When he went to her after some time, behold, she had wasted to a shadow, and was drooping like a broken lily; wherefore his heart smote him, and he thought within himself, "Yet a little while, and though I tell not Gaifar, I will tell her that his recall is intended at the year's end." Howbeit, affairs of state drove the matter from his mind for a few days; and when he visited her again, she was reviving, and spoke to him with cheerfulness; wherefore he said within himself, "I will let the matter remain."

Now the reason why Abbassa's countenance had changed was this. After the caliph had ceased to visit her, because she wearied him with her tears and her sighing, she declined even to the point of death. Wherefore her nurse said unto her, "O my mistress! thou art even at death's door for sorrow of heart. Write now

a few farewell lines to my lord Gaifar, and I will convey them to him privately.” Then Abbassa wrote him a letter and said,

“For want of sun and dew, the rose perisheth; thus, in the absence of Gaifar, withers my Heart!

Pearls scattered may be recollected; but a broken heart can never be mended.

The mole that hath never seen the light is content; but the eagle shut up in darkness, perisheth!

How cruel is my brother! It were better never to have known Gaifar, than, having seen him, to lament him.

Perchance at Balsora thou art happy; and I cannot with thee otherwise, though my tears are my meat.”

When Gaifar received this Letter, he spoke privately with the messenger who had brought it; and then held a secret conference with a faithful slave who had lived with him from infancy. The next day the report throughout Balsora was that the viceroy, having eaten of an unripe melon at supper, was taken seriously ill, and confined to his bed. Meantime Gaifar was riding post to Bagdad. When he at length reached the abode of peace, the darkness of night covered his entrance by a private way into the palace. Abbassa was amazed, and overwhelmed with joy at his arrival: her slaves were faithful, they did not betray the secret unto the caliph. Gaifar dared not remain more than a few hours; he counselled his wife to fortitude and patience; she promised compliance; they exchanged a thousand assurances of affection and fidelity; and an hour before daybreak, Gaifar was on his return to Balsora.

Hence the restored spirits of Abbassa. When her gaiety subsided, it gave place to composure and patience; she returned to her needle and her studies. The caliph, deceived by her, was well pleased; he thought, “For every hour of self-control, thou shalt have a year of felicity.” He sent a present to Gaifar by a trustworthy messenger, whom he charged to examine and report on the viceroy’s appearance. Also, Abbassa was permitted to exchange letters with Gaifar by the same envoy. The caliph read Gaifar’s letter to his sister; it was full of affection, wisdom, and patience. The Messenger also reported that the viceroy appeared well in health, and in good spirits, and was greatly beloved by the people of Balsora. Thereat the caliph was content.

About this time, new wars in some of the provinces occupied much of the attention of Haroun Alraschid. When he was again at leisure to attend to the affairs of Gaifar and Abbassa, the year was nearly ended. Meantime, Abbassa, losing the peace of mind imparted by Gaifar’s visit, had wasted daily, and was reduced to great sickness and prostration. Her Nurse again urged her to send for Gaifar, but she would not. At length, the Nurse, loving her beyond all things, and desirous of purchasing her happiness at any hazard, sent the same messenger as

before to Bagdad without Abbassa's knowledge. The messenger secretly informed Gaifar that Abbassa was at the point of death. Now, Gaifar had all this time been supporting himself by the belief that the caliph would soon recall him; but the time having now been so long without his appearing to occupy any portion of the caliph's thought, he was much fretting and chafing within himself. Therefore, when he learned that Abbassa was about to die, and found the caliph did not send for him, he thought, "Surely she is my wife to all intents and purposes, and I have a right to see her, and I will, though it should cost me my life." Therefore, he rode night and day till he reached Bagdad; and he entered the palace as beforetime at night; and came into his wife's presence. As soon as she saw him, she uttered a shriek of joy; and the colour returned to her cheeks and lips, and her mortal sickness passed away. Then she ordered refreshment for him, and they conversed with one another, hour after hour, without being satiated; and were happy.

Now this night was the very last of their marriage-year; and the caliph bearing it in mind, thought within himself, "Now know that Gaifar is faithful and true: a man to be entirely esteemed! His obedience and submission are wonderful; there is none other like him in the kingdom. Erroneously spake the poet who said, 'A monarch has no true friend; for either he will deceive him and circumvent him, or else he will curse him in his heart.'" Also the caliph said within himself, "This day shall be the happiest of days to Gaifar and Abbassa; for already have I despatched a messenger to Balsora, and already must he be at the city-gates, and Gaifar will learn that he is recalled, and Abbassa shall learn it too." Then the caliph arose and dressed himself as if for a wedding feast, in vests of silk of Alexandria and Baalbec, and a Farajjah of silver gauze, and he proceeded to his sister's quarter of the palace, through the private door. As soon as the armed slaves on guard saw him, they made a rush towards the princess's apartment, for they knew that Gaifar was there; but the caliph said, "remain." Then said one of the slaves, prostrating himself before the caliph, "O my lord! her slippers are before the door, none may go in." But the caliph looked at the door, and said, "Liar, they are not!" Then he drew back the curtain.

Now Gaifar at that moment held his wife in his arms, in the very act of taking leave. As soon as the curtain was withdrawn, Abbassa, beholding the caliph first, fell into a swoon. Gaifar, supposing it caused by grief at their parting, kissed her tenderly and laid her on the couch, thinking it best to depart while she was insensible. Then, turning about with a deep sigh, suddenly his eyes met those of the caliph, inflamed with rage, and he became transfixed. He essayed to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. They eyed one another a moment, and then the caliph dropped the curtain and withdrew without a word. The next instant, Gaifar was in the custody of his wife's slaves, all weeping. They tied his hands, and led him, unresisting, to the caliph's officers. In another half-hour, every Barmecide in Bagdad was on the scaffold before the palace, and Mesroul with his terrible sword standing beside the block. He, in tears, whispered to Gaifar

“O my lord! I would make it my request to the caliph that I might depute another to this office, but that I know there is no other equally skilful headsman in Bagdad.” “Deplore it not, O Mesroure” returned Gaifar, “strike firmly, and strike me first, that I behold not the death of my kinsmen. Oh, happy for me that my father and mother no longer survive! I will but repeat the Confession of Faith.”

Meanwhile a herald was making proclamation in the market-place, “Whoso will recreate himself by beholding the decapitation of Gaifar the Barmecide and of all the other Barmecides, let him repair to the court which is before the palace. Thus dealeth the caliph, the just! with the man who dissimulateth and who betrayeth his trust, even though he be the friend of his own bosom. This very night were the Espousals of Gaifar and of the caliph’s only sister to have been publicly declared!” But the people all wept. Meantime, the execution being over, the officers of justice proceeded to raze the houses of all the Barmecides to the Ground, and spoil all their goods; and proclamation was made that their names were never more to be mentioned, on pain of death. Now Abbassa, having been more than two hours in her swoon, recovered not till Gaifar’s death had taken place; and then, all wild with terror, without knowing from her women what had happened, she flew, without so much as veiling herself, into the caliph’s palace, every one falling back from her path as soon as they saw her. Thus she fled on till she entered the hall of audience just as Mesroure, weeping, entered with Gaifar’s head. The moment she saw it, she lost her senses, and with a wild shriek ran out into the open air and through the streets of Bagdad, filling them with her cries, and scaring every man, woman, and child from her; even the wild dogs slinking away out of her path. Thus, all day the city rang with her terrible voice, no one daring to intermeddle with her; till towards nightfall she rushed out through one of the city gates, and among the desolate tombs. With bleeding feet and dishevelled hair, with fiery eyes and parched tongue, she wandered, wildly laughing and muttering, among the graves, till she came to a little hovel reared in the midst of them. An old woman, ugly and haggard as a ghoul, came out to the door.

“Turn in, turn in unto me, my daughter!” said she compassionately, “for why shouldest thou be as one of the desolate? Turn in unto me, and eat bread and drink water, for who should shelter the caliph’s desolate sister but the mother whom he hath made desolate? If thou art driven mad, so was I, for I am Mary the Christian, mother of John the baker, who was baked in his own oven; but the LORD careth for his own. Blessed be forever the Name of the LORD!”

Then Abbassa, who till that day had dwelt among the veils and the curtains, and had eaten off gold and trodden marble pavements, was received into the miserable hut of the old woman; who laid her palpitating and shuddering, like a lamb whose throat is but half cut, on her own bed of rags, and washed her bleeding feet, and held water to her lips. But Abbassa could not swallow, and lay thrilling like a wounded bird that is about to die, when a film comes over its eyes.

That night, the caliph stood on his palace-roof, and his heart was desolate. Beneath him lay the ruins of the mansions of the Barmecides: close at hand were the deserted apartments of his sister. He thought, "I have performed a grand act of justice, but it was very terrible! How little do those who envy princes know their pains! how little do those who blame princes know their provocations!"— and tears burst from his eyes.

While he yet thus wept, behold! the ghost-like shadow of a woman stood between him and the moon; close at his side, making all his joints to tremble, and the hair of his flesh to stand up.

The figure spake and said, "Shall mortal man be more just than GOD? Yet GOD in his justice remembers mercy."

The caliph said, "Woman, who art thou? Whence comest thou?" She said, "From the tombs."

Then he said, "Away from me! Thou scarest me not! Thou art not Abbassa!"

She said, "Abbassa is departed— thou wilt see her no more. O caliph! The LORD dealt well with thee, and gave thee many good things— why was thy heart hardened in judgment? He that sheweth justice without mercy, shall receive justice without mercy— how will it then fare with thee, O caliph? Behold, thou hast caused much sorrow; wherefore thou shalt know much sorrow; thou hast cut off a good man in the midst of his days; wherefore thy days, O caliph! shall be cut off."

Then she departed as she came, and the caliph knew not whether she were of this world or from the abode of departed spirits. He heard no more of Abbassa unto the day of his death; and being much troubled in his mind, he made a pilgrimage on foot to Mecca, which eased his conscience and diverted his thoughts, besides winning for him the great reverence of all his people. After his return, he abode much at his palace of Racca on the Euphrates, from whence he frequently visited his most distant provinces; being always a man of great activity of body and mind. At length, having put down an insurrection in Persia, he returned to Bagdad. In passing through the streets one evening, with his old attendant Mesrour, he heard an aged man saying with a sigh, "Ah, that was in our prosperous days— that was in the days of the Barmecides!" "Knowest thou, old man," said the caliph, "that it is death to name their names?" "I know that it is death to break that Law," returned the old man, "but it is worse than death to keep it. I owed all my well-doing and all my happiness to them, and their memories live in my heart. Go and report me, if thou wilt, to the caliph: he had never a friend like Gaifar, and so I would tell him to his beard."

"Mesrour," said the caliph, "give this old man an hundred pieces of gold." And he turned about and went back to his palace, the tears running down his cheeks and down his beard; and he was glad of the darkness, that Mesrour might not see him wiping them away. And he took to his bed and lay murmuring, "Oh

Gaifar and Abbassa! Oh Gaifar and Abbassa!” and so died; being only in his forty-sixth year.

But Mary the Christian, who had found some remains of life in Abbassa when she returned from communing with the caliph on the roof of his palace, sheltered and cherished her among the tombs. Thus these two women continued to live together; Abbassa’s high mind descending to the humility of her fate, and enabling her to support it with resignation. Shortly after the caliph’s death, Enis Eljelis, the wife of Nouredin, in bestowing an alms on a poor woman, recognised in her the once beautiful and prosperous Abbassa, and melted into tears at the sight.

“O Enis Eljelis!” said Abbassa, “I once was the mistress of four hundred slaves; I have now no other property than two sheep skins, one of which serves for my upper, the other for my under garment. But I am penitent and content; and attribute my misfortunes to my want of gratitude to GOD for former blessings. He has chastened and corrected me, but has not given me over unto death. I was too impatient; had I been more patient and submissive, Gaifar had not died. But the LORD giveth, and the LORD taketh away; blessed be the Name of the LORD!”

Enis Eljelis wept, and gave her five hundred pieces of silver. She blessed her, and said, “You have enriched me beyond my wants! I shall even have something, once more, to bestow upon the poor!”

FINIS.

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Prepared for www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Manning/am_main.htm

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