

## THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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“The Tale of the Three Apples”

They relate, O King of the Age and Lord of the Time and of these days, that the King Harun al-Rashid summoned his Vizier Ja'afar one night and said to him: “I desire to go down into the city and question the common folk concerning the conduct of those charged with its governance, and those of whom they complain we will depose from office and those whom they commend we will promote.” Quoth Ja'afar, “Hearkening and obedience!” So the King went down with Ja'afar and the eunuch Masrur to the town and walked about the streets and markets, and as they were threading a narrow alley, they came upon a very old man with a fishing net and crate to carry small fish on his head, and in his hands a staff, and as he walked at a leisurely pace, he repeated these lines: “They say me: ‘Thou shinest a light to mankind With thy lore as the night which the Moon doth upright!’ I answer, ‘A truce to your jests and your gibes. Without luck what is learning?— a poor-devil wight! If they take me to pawn with my lore in my pouch, With my volumes to read and my ink case to write, For one day’s provision they never could pledge me, As likely on Doomsday to draw bill at sight.’ How poorly, indeed, doth it fare wi’ the poor, With his pauper existence and beggarly plight. In summer he faileth provision to find, In winter the

fire pot's his only delight. The street dogs with bite and with bark to him rise, And each losel receives him with bark and with bite. If he lift up his voice and complain of his wrong, None pities or heeds him, however he's right, And when sorrows and evils like these he must brave, His happiest homestead were down in the grave." When the King heard his verses, he said to Ja'afar, "See this poor man and note his verses, for surely they point to his necessities." Then he accosted him and asked, "O Sheikh, what be thine occupation?" And the poor man answered: "O my lord, I am a fisherman with a family to keep and I have been out between midday and this time, and not a thing hath the Lord made my portion wherewithal to feed my family. I cannot even pawn myself to buy them a supper, and I hate and disgust my life and I hanker after death." Quoth the King, "Say me, wilt thou return with us to Tigris' bank and cast thy net on my luck, and whatsoever turneth up I will buy of thee for a hundred gold pieces?" The man rejoiced when he heard these words and said: "On my head be it! I will go back with you," and, returning with them riverward, made a cast and waited a while. Then he hauled in the rope and dragged the net ashore and there appeared in it a chest, padlocked and heavy. The King examined it and lifted it, finding, it weighty, so he gave the fisherman two hundred dinars and sent him about his business whilst Masrur, aided by the King, carried the chest to the palace and set it down and lighted the candles. Ja'afar and Masrur then broke it open and found therein a basket of palm leaves corded with red worsted. This they cut open and saw within it a piece of carpet, which they lifted out, and under it was a woman's mantilla folded in four, which they pulled out, and at the bottom of the chest they came upon a young lady, fair as a silver ingot, slain and cut into nineteen pieces. When the King looked upon her he cried, "Alas!" and tears ran down his cheeks and turning to Ja'afar, he said: "O dog of Viziers, shall folk be murdered in our reign

and be cast into the river to be a burden and a responsibility for us on the Day of Doom? By the Lord, we must avenge this woman on her murderer, and he shall be made die the worst of deaths!" And presently he added: "Now, as surely as we are descended from the Sons of Abbas, if thou bring us not him who slew her, that we do her justice on him, I will hang thee at the gate of my palace, thee and forty of thy kith and kin by thy side." And the King was wroth with exceeding rage. Quoth Ja'afar, "Grant me three days' delay," and quoth the King, "We grant thee this." So Ja'afar went out from before him and returned to his own house, full of sorrow and saying to himself: "How shall I find him who murdered this damsel, that I may bring him before the King? If I bring other than the murderer, it will be laid to my charge by the Lord. In very sooth I wot not what to do." He kept his house three days, and on the fourth day the King sent one of the chamberlains for him, and as he came into the presence, asked him, "Where is the murderer of the damsel?" To which answered Ja'afar, "O Commander of the Faithful, am I inspector of murdered folk that I should ken who killed her?" The King was furious at his answer and bade hang him before the palace gate, and commanded that a crier cry through the streets of Baghdad: "Whoso would see the hanging of Ja'afar, the Barmaki, Vizier of the King, with forty of the Barmecides, his cousins and kinsmen, before the palace gate, let him come and let him look!" The people flocked out from all the quarters of the city to witness the execution of Ja'afar and his kinsmen, not knowing the cause. Then they set up the gallows and made Ja'afar and the others stand underneath in readiness for execution, but whilst every eye was looking for the King's signal, and the crowd wept for Ja'afar and his cousins of the Barmecides, lo and behold! a young man fair of face and neat of dress and of favor like the moon raining fire, with eyes black and bright, and brow flower-white, and cheeks red as rose

and young down where the beard grows, and a mole like a grain of ambergris, pushed his way through the people till he stood immediately before the Vizier and said to him: "Safety to thee from this strait, O Prince of the Emirs and Asylum of the Poor! I am the man who slew the woman ye found in the chest, so hang me for her and do her justice on me!" When Ja'afar heard the youth's confession he rejoiced at his own deliverance, but grieved and sorrowed for the fair youth. And whilst they were yet talking, behold, another man well stricken in years pressed forward through the people and thrust his way amid the populace till he came to Ja'afar and the youth, whom he saluted, saying: "Ho, thou the Vizier and Prince sans peer! Believe not the words of this youth. Of a surety none murdered the damsel but I. Take her wreak on me this moment, for an thou do not thus, I will require it of thee before Almighty the Lord." Then quoth the young man: "O Vizier, this is an old man in his dotage who wotteth not whatso he saith ever, and I am he who murdered her, so do thou avenge her on me!" Quoth the old man: "O my son, thou art young and desirest the joys of the world and I am old and weary and surfeited with the world. I will offer my life as a ransom for thee and for the Vizier and his cousins. No one murdered the damsel but I, so the Lord upon thee, make haste to hang me, for no life is left in me now that hers is gone." The Vizier marveled much at all this strangeness and taking the young man and the old man, carried them before the King, where, after kissing the ground seven times between his hands, he said, "O Commander of the Faithful, I bring thee the murderer of the damsel!" "Where is he?" asked the King, and Ja'afar answered: "This young man saith, 'I am the murderer,' and this old man, giving him the lie, saith, 'I am the murderer,' and behold, here are the twain standing before thee." The King looked at the old man and the young man and asked, "Which of you killed the girl?" The young man replied, "No one slew her save I,"

and the old man answered, "Indeed none killed her but myself." Then said the King to Ja'afar, "Take the twain and hang them both." But Ja'afar rejoined, "Since one of them was the murderer, to hang the other were mere injustice." "By Him who raised the firmament and dispread the earth like a carpet," cried the youth, "I am he who slew the damsel," and he went on to describe the manner of her murder and the basket, the mantilla, and the bit of carpet—in fact, all that the King had found upon her. So the King was certified that the young man was the murderer, whereat he wondered and asked him: "What was the cause of thy wrongfully doing this damsel to die, and what made thee confess the murder without the bastinado, and what brought thee here to yield up thy life, and what made thee say 'Do her wreak upon me'?" The youth answered: "Know, O Commander of the Faithful, that this woman was my wife and the mother of my children, also my first cousin and the daughter of my paternal uncle, this old man, who is my father's own brother. When I married her she was a maid, and the Lord blessed me with three male children by her. She loved me and served me and I saw no evil in her, for I also loved her with fondest love. Now on the first day of this month she fell ill with grievous sickness and I fetched in physicians to her, but recovery came to her little by little, and when I wished her to go to the hammam bath, she said, 'There is something I long for before I go to the bath, and I long for it with an exceeding longing.' 'To hear is to comply,' said I. 'And what is it?' Quoth she, 'I have a queasy craving for an apple, to smell it and bite a bit of it.' I replied, 'Hadst thou a thousand longings, I would try to satisfy them!' So I went on the instant into the city and sought for apples, but could find none, yet had they cost a gold piece each, would I have bought them. I was vexed at this and went home and said, 'O daughter of my uncle, by the Lord I can find none!' She was distressed, being yet very weakly, and her weakness increased greatly on her

that night and I felt anxious and alarmed on her account."As soon as morning dawned I went out again and made the round of the gardens, one by one, but found no apples anywhere. At last there met me an old gardener, of whom I asked about them and he answered, 'O my son, this fruit is a rarity with us and is not now to be found save in the garden of the Commander of the Faithful at Bassorah, where the gardener keepeth it for the King's eating.' I returned to my house troubled by my ill success, and my love for my wife and my affection moved me to undertake the journey, So I at me ready and set out and traveled fifteen days and nights, going and coming, and brought her three apples, which I bought from the gardener for three dinars. But when I went in to my wife and set them before her, she took no pleasure in them and let them lie by her side, for her weakness and fever had increased on her, and her malady lasted without abating ten days, after which she began to recover health. "So I left my house and betaking me to my shop, sat there buying and selling. And about midday, behold, a great ugly black slave, long as a lance and broad as a bench, passed by my shop holding in hand one of the three apples, wherewith he was playing, Quoth I, 'O my good slave, tell me whence thou tookest that apple, that I may get the like of it?' He laughed and answered: 'I got it from my mistress, for I had been absent and on my return I found her lying ill with three apples by her side, and she said to me, "My horned wittol of a husband made a journey for them to Bassorah and bought them for three dinars." 'So I ate and drank with her and took this one from her.' When I heard such words from the slave, O Commander of the Faithful, the world grew black before my face, and I arose and locked up my shop and went home beside myself for excess of rage. I looked for the apples and finding, only two of the three, asked my wife, 'O my cousin, where is the third apple?' And raising her head languidly, she answered, 'I wot not, O son of my uncle, where 'tis

gone!' This convinced me that the slave had spoken the truth, so I took a knife and coming behind her, got upon her breast without a word said and cut her throat. Then I hewed off her head and her limbs in pieces and, wrapping her in her mantilla and a rag of carpet, hurriedly sewed up the whole, which I set in a chest and, locking it tight, loaded it on my he-mule and threw it into the Tigris with my own hands." So the Lord upon thee, O Commander of the Faithful, make haste to hang me, as I fear lest she appeal for vengeance on Resurrection Day. For when I had thrown her into the river and one knew aught of it, as I went back home I found my eldest son crying, and yet he knew naught of what I had done with his mother. I asked him, 'What hath made thee weep, my boy?' and he answered, 'I took one of the three apples which were by my mammy and went down into the lane to play with my brethren when behold, a big long black slave snatched it from my hand and said, "Whence hadst thou this?" Quoth I, "My father traveled far for it, and brought it from Bassorah for my mother, who was ill, and two other apples for which he paid three ducats." 'He took no heed of my words and I asked for the apple a second and a third time, but he cuffed me and kicked me and went off with it. I was afraid lest my mother should swinge me on account of the apple, so for fear of her I went with my brother outside the city and stayed there till evening closed in upon us, and indeed I am in fear of her. And now, by the Lord, O my father, say nothing to her of this or it may add to her ailment!" "When I heard what my child said, I knew that the slave was he who had foully slandered my wife, the daughter of my uncle, and was certified that I had slain her wrongfully. So I wept with exceeding weeping and presently this old man, my paternal uncle and her father, came in, and I told him what had happened and he sat down by my side and wept, and we ceased not weeping till midnight. We have kept up mourning for her these last five days and we lamented her

in the deepest sorrow for that she was unjustly done to die. This came from the gratuitous lying of the slave, the blackamoor, and this was the manner of my killing her. So I conjure thee, by the honor of thine ancestors, make haste to kill me and do her justice upon me, as there is no living for me after her!" The King marveled at his words and said: "By the Lord, the young man is excusable. I will hang none but the accursed slave, and I will do a deed which shall comfort the ill-at-ease and suffering, and which shall please the All-glorious King." Then he turned to Ja'afar and said to him: "Bring before me this accursed slave who was the sole cause of this calamity, and if thou bring him not before me within three days, thou shalt be slain in his stead." So Ja'afar fared forth weeping and saying: "Two deaths have already beset me, nor shall the crock come off safe from every shock. In this matter craft and cunning are of no avail, but He who preserved my life the first time can preserve it a second time. By the Lord, I will not leave my house during the three days of life which remain to me, and let the Truth (whose perfection be praised!) do e'en as He will." So he kept his house three days, and on the fourth day he summoned the kazis and legal witnesses and made his last will and testament, and took leave of his children weeping. Presently in came a messenger from the King and said to him: "The Commander of the Faithful is in the most violent rage that can be, and he sendeth to seek thee and he sweareth that the day shall certainly not pass without thy being hanged unless the slave be forthcoming," When Ja'afar heard this he wept, and his children and slaves and all who were in the house wept with him. After he had bidden adieu to everybody except this youngest daughter, he proceeded to farewell her, for he loved this wee one, who was a beautiful child, more than all his other children. And he pressed her to his breast and kissed her and wept bitterly at parting from her, when he felt something round inside the bosom of her dress and asked her, "O my little



maid, what is in the bosom pocket?" "O my father," she replied, "it is an apple with the name of our Lord the King written upon it. Rayhan our slave brought it to me four days ago, and would not let me have it till I gave him two dinars for it." When Ja'afar heard speak of the slave and the apple, he was glad and put his hand into his child's pocket and drew out the apple and knew it and rejoiced, saying, "O ready Dispeller of trouble!" Then he bade them bring the slave and said to him, "Fie upon thee, Rayhan! Whence haddest thou this apple?" "By the Lord, O my master," he replied, "though a he may get a man once off, yet may truth get him off, and well off, again and again. I did not steal this apple from thy palace nor from the gardens of the Commander of the Faithful. The fact is that five days ago, as I was walking along one of the alleys of this city, I saw some little ones at play and this apple in hand of one of them. So I snatched it from him and beat him, and he cried and said, 'O youth, this apple is my mother's and she is ill. She told my father how she longed for an apple, so he traveled to Bassorah and bought her three apples for three gold pieces, and I took one of them to play withal.' He wept again, but I paid no heed to what he said and carried it off and brought it here, and my little lady bought it of me for two dinars of gold. And this is the whole story." When Ja'afar heard his words he marveled that the murder of the damsel and all this misery should have been caused by his slave. He grieved for the relation of the slave to himself while rejoicing over his own deliverance, and he repeated these lines: "If ill betide thee through thy slave, Make him forthright thy sacrifice. A many serviles thou shalt find, But life comes once and never twice." Then he took the slave's hand and, leading him to the King, related the story from first to last, and the King marveled with extreme astonishment, and laughed till he fell on his back, and ordered that the story be recorded and be made public amongst the people. But Ja'afar said, "Marvel not, O

Commander of the Faithful, at this adventure, for it is not more wondrous than the History of the Vizier Nur al-Din Ali of Egypt and his brother Shams al-Din Mohammed." Quoth the King, "Out with it, but what can be stranger than this story?" And Ja'afar answered, "O Commander of the Faithful, I will not tell it thee save on condition that thou pardon my slave." And the King rejoined, "If it be indeed more wondrous than that of the three apples, I grant thee his blood, and if not I will surely slay thy slave." So Ja'afar began in these words the

