

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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“The City of Many-columned Iram and Abdullah Son of Abi Kilabah”

It is related that Abdullah bin Abi Kilabah went forth in quest of a she-camel which had strayed from him, and as he was wandering in the deserts of Al-Yaman and the district of Saba, behold, he came a great city girt by a vast castle around which were palaces and pavilions that rose high into middle air. He made for the place thinking to find there folk of whom he might ask concerning his she-camel. But when he reached it, he found it desolate, without a living soul in it. So (quoth he) I alighted and, hobbling my dromedary, and composing my mind, entered into the city. Now when I came to the castle, I found it had two vast gates (never in the world was seen their like for size and height) inlaid with all manner jewels and jacinths, white and red, yellow and green. Beholding this, I marveled with great marvel and thought the case mighty wondrous. Then, entering the citadel in a flutter of fear and dazed with surprise and affright, I found it long and wide, about equaling Al-Medinah in point of size. And therein were lofty palaces laid out in pavilions all built of gold and silver and inlaid with many colored jewels and jacinths and chrysolites and pearls. And the door leaves in the pavilions were like those of the castle for beauty, and their floors

were strewn with great pearls and balls, no smaller than hazelnuts, of musk and ambergris and saffron. Now when I came within the heart of the city and saw therein no created beings of the Sons of Adam, I was near swooning and dying for fear. Moreover, I looked down from the great roofs of the pavilion chambers and their balconies and saw rivers running under them, and in the main streets were fruit-laden trees and tall palms, and the manner of their building was one brick of gold and one of silver. So I said to myself, "Doubtless this is the Paradise promised for the world to come." Then I loaded me with the jewels of its gravel and the musk of its dust as much as I could carry, and returned to my own country, where I told the folk what I had seen. After a time the news reached Mu'awiyah, son of Abu Sufyan, who was then King in Al-Hijaz, so he wrote to his lieutenant in San'a of Al-Yaman to send for the teller of the story and question him of the truth of the case. Accordingly the lieutenant summoned me and questioned me of my adventure and of all appertaining to it, and I told him what I had seen, whereupon he dispatched me to Mu'awiyah, before whom I, repeated the story of the strange sights, but he would not credit it. So I brought out to him some of the pearls and balls of musk and ambergris and saffron, in which latter there was still some sweet savor, but the pearls were grown yellow and had lost pearly color. Now Mu'awiyah wondered at this and, sending for Ka'ab al-Ahbar, said to him, "O Ka'ab, I have sent for thee to ascertain the truth of a certain matter and hope that thou wilt be able to certify me thereof." Asked Ka'ab, "What is it, O Commander of the Faithful?" and Mu'awiyah answered, "Wottest thou of any city founded by man which is builded of gold and silver, the pillars whereof are of chrysolite and rubies and its gravel pearls and bans of musk and ambergris and saffron?" He replied, "Yes, O Commander of the Faithful, this is 'Iram with pillars decked and dight, the like of which was never made in the lands,'

and the builder was Shaddad son of Ad the Greater." Quoth the King, "Tell us something of its history," and Ka'ab said: "Ad the Greater had two sons, Shadid and Shaddad, who when their father died ruled conjointly in his stead, and there was no King of the Kings of the earth but was subject to them. After awhile Shadid died and his brother Shaddad reigned over the earth alone. Now he was fond of reading in antique books, and happening upon the description of the world to come and of Paradise, with its pavilions and pileries and trees and fruits and so forth, his soul move him to build the like thereof in this world, after the fashion aforesaid. Now under his hand were a hundred thousand kings, each ruling over a hundred thousand chiefs, commanding each a hundred thousand warriors, so he called these all before him and said to them: 'I find in ancient books and annals a description of Paradise as it is to be in the next world, and I desire to build me its like in this world. Go ye forth therefore to the goodliest tract on earth and the most spacious, and build me there a city of gold and silver, whose gravel shall be chrysolite and rubies and pearls, and for support of its vaults make pillars of jasper. Fill it with palaces, whereon ye shall set galleries and balconies, and plant its lanes and thoroughfares with all manner trees bearing yellow-ripe fruits, and make rivers to run through it in channels of gold and silver.'" Whereat said one and all, 'How are we able to do this thing thou hast commanded, and whence shall we get the chrysolites and rubies and pearls whereof thou speakest?' Quoth he, 'What! Weet ye not that the kings of the world are subject to me and under my hand and that none therein dare gainsay my word?' Answered they, 'Yes, we know that.' Whereupon the King rejoined, 'Fare ye then to the mines of chrysolites and rubies and pearls and gold and silver and collect their produce and gather together all of value that is in the world, and spare no pains and leave naught. And take also for me such of these things as be in men's hands

and let nothing escape you. Be diligent and beware of disobedience.’ And thereupon he wrote letters to all the kings of the world and bade them gather together whatsoever of these things was in their subjects’ hands, and get them to the mines of precious stones and metals, and bring forth all that was therein, even from the abysses of the seas. “This they accomplished in the space of twenty years, for the number of rulers then reigning over the earth was three hundred and sixty kings. And Shaddad presently assembled from all lands and countries architects and engineers and men of art and laborers and handicraftsmen, who dispersed over the world and explored all the wastes and wolds and tracts and holds. At last they came to an uninhabited spot, a vast and fair open plain clear of sand hills and mountains, with founts flushing and rivers rushing, and they said, ‘This is the manner of place the King commanded us to seek and ordered us to find.’ So they busied themselves in building the city even as bade them Shaddad, King of the whole earth in its length and breadth, leading the fountains in channels and laying the foundations after the prescribed fashion. Moreover, all the kings of earth’s several reigns sent thither jewels and precious stones and pearls large and small and carnelian and refined gold and virgin silver upon camels by land, and in great ships over the waters, and there came to the builders’ hands of all these materials so great a quantity as may neither be told nor counted nor conceived.” So they labored at the work three hundred years, and when they had brought it to end, they went to King Shaddad and acquainted him therewith. Then said he: ‘Depart and make thereon an impregnable castle, rising and towering high in air, and build around it a thousand pavilions, each upon a thousand columns of chrysolite and ruby and vaulted with gold, that in each pavilion a Vizier may dwell.’ So they returned forthwith and did this in other twenty years, after which they again presented themselves before King

Shaddad and informed him of the accomplishment of his will. Then he commanded his Viziers, who were a thousand in number, and his chief officers and such of his troops and others as he put trust in, to prepare for departure and removal to Many-columned Iram, in the suite and at the stirrup of Shaddad, son of Ad, King of the world, and he bade also such as he would of his women and his harem and of his handmaids and eunuchs make them ready for the journey. "They spent twenty years in preparing for departure, at the end of which time Shaddad set out with his host, rejoicing in the attainment of his desire till there remained but one day's journey between him and Iram of the Pillars. Then the Lord sent down on him and on the stubborn unbelievers with him a mighty rushing sound from the Heavens of His power, which destroyed them all with its vehement clamor, and neither Shaddad nor any of his company set eyes on the city. Moreover, the Lord blotted out the road which led to the city, and it stands in its stead unchanged until the Resurrection Day and the Hour of Judgment." So Mu'awiyah wondered greatly at Ka'ab al-Ahbar's story, and said to him, "Hath any mortal ever made his way to that city?" He replied, "Yes, one of the companions of Praiseworthy (on whom be blessing and peace!) reached it, doubtless and for sure after the same fashion as this man here seated." And (quoth Al-Sha'abi) it is related, on the authority of learned men of Himyar in Al-Yaman that Shaddad, when destroyed with all his host by the sound, was succeeded in his kingship by his son Shaddad the Less, whom he left viceregent in Hazramaut and Saba when he and his marched upon Many-columned Iram. Now as soon as he heard of his father's death on the road, he caused his body to be brought back from the desert to Hazramaut and bade them hew him out a tomb in a cave, where he laid the body on a throne of gold and threw over the corpse threescore and ten robes of cloth of gold, purfled with precious stones. Lastly at his sire's head

he set up a tablet of gold whereon were graven these verses: Take warning O proud, And in length o' life vain! I'm Shaddad son of Ad, Of the forts castellain, Lord of pillars and power, Lord of tried might and main, Whom all earth sons obeyed For my mischief and bane, And who held East and West In mine awfulest reign. He preached me salvation Whom God did assain, But we crossed him and asked, "Can no refuge be ta'en?" When a Cry on us cried From th' horizon plain, And we fell on the field Like the harvested grain, And the Fixt Day await We, in earth's bosom lain! Al-Sa'alibi also relateth: It chanced that two men once entered this cave and found steps at its upper end, so they descended and came to an underground chamber, a hundred cubits long by forty wide and a hundred high. In the midst stood a throne of gold, whereon lay a man of huge bulk, filling the whole length and breadth of the throne. He was covered with jewels and raiment gold-and-silver wrought, and at his head was a tablet of gold bearing an inscription. So they took the tablet and carried it off, together with as many bars of gold and silver and so forth as they could bear away. And men also relate the tale of

