

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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“The Sweep and the Noble Lady”

During the season of the Meccan pilgrimage, whilst the people were making circuit about the Holy House and the place of compassing was crowded, behold, a man laid hold of the covering of the Ka'aba and cried out from the bottom of his heart, saying, “I beseech thee, O the Lord, that she may once again be wroth with her husband and that I may know her!” A company of the pilgrims heard him and seized him and carried him to the Emir of the pilgrims, after a sufficiency of blows, and, said they, “O Emir, we found this fellow in the Holy Places, saying thus and thus.” So the Emir commanded to hang him, but he cried, “O Emir, I conjure thee, by the virtue of the Apostle (whom the Lord bless and preserve!), hear my story and then do with me as thou wilt.” Quoth the Emir, “Tell thy tale forthright.” “Know then, O Emir,” quoth the man, “that I am a sweep who works in the sheep slaughterhouses and carries off the blood and the offal to the rubbish heaps outside the gates. And it came to pass as I went along one day with my ass loaded, I saw the people running away and one of them said to me, ‘Enter this alley, lest haply they slay thee.’ Quoth I, ‘What aileth the folk running away?’ and one of the eunuchs who were passing said to me, ‘This is the harem of one of the notables, and her eunuchs drive the people out

of her way and beat them all, without respect to persons.’ So I turned aside with the donkey and stood still awaiting the dispersal of the crowd, and I saw a number of eunuchs with staves in their hands, followed by nigh thirty women slaves, and amongst them a lady as she were a willow wand or a thirsty gazelle, perfect in beauty and grace and amorous languor, and all were attending upon her.” Now when she came to the mouth of the passage where I stood, she turned right and left and calling one of the castratos, whispered in his ear, and behold, he came up to me and laid hold of me, whilst another eunuch took my ass and made off with it. And when the spectators fled, the first eunuch bound me with a rope and dragged me after him, till I knew not what to do, and the people followed us and cried out, saying: ‘This is not allowed of the Lord! What hath this poor scavenger done that he should be bound with ropes?’ and praying the eunuchs, ‘Have pity on him and let him go, so the Lord have pity on you!’ And I the while said in my mind: ‘Doubtless the eunuchry seized me because their mistress smelt the stink of the offal and it sickened her. Belike she is with child or ailing, but there is no Majesty and there is no Might save in the Lord, the Glorious, the Great!” “So I continued walking on behind them till they stopped at the door of a great house, and, entering before me, brought me into a big hall— I know not how I shall describe its magnificence— furnished with the finest furniture. And the women also entered the hall, and I bound and held by the eunuch and saying to myself, ‘Doubtless they will torture me here till I die and none know of my death.’ However, after a while they carried me into a neat bathroom leading out of the hall, and as I sat there, behold, in came three slave girls, who seated themselves round me and said to me, ‘Strip off thy rags and tatters.’ So I pulled off my threadbare clothes and one of them fell a-rubbing my legs and feet whilst another scrubbed my head and a third shampooed my body. When

they had made an end of washing me, they brought me a parcel of clothes and said to me, 'Put these on,' and I answered, 'By the Lord, I know not how!' So they came up to me and dressed me, laughing together at me the while. After which they brought casting bottles full of rose-water, and sprinkled me therewith." Then I went out with them into another saloon— by the Lord, I know not how to praise its splendor for the wealth of paintings and furniture therein— and entering it, I saw a person seated on a couch of Indian rattan with ivory feet, and before her a number of damsels. When she saw me, she rose to me and called me, so I went up to her and she seated me by her side. Then she bade her slave girls bring food, and they brought all manner of rich meats, such as I never saw in all my life. I do not even know the names of the dishes, much less their nature. So I ate my fill, and when the dishes had been taken away and we had washed our hands, she called for fruits, which came without stay or delay, and ordered me eat of them. And when we had ended eating she bade one of the waiting women bring the wine furniture. So they set on flagons of divers kinds of wine and burned perfumes in all the censers, what while a damsel like the moon rose and served us with wine to the sound of the smitten strings. And I drank, and the lady drank, till we were swized with wine and the whole time I doubted not but that all this was an illusion of sleep. "Presently, she signed to one of the damsels to spread us a bed in such a place, which being done, she rose and took me by the hand and led me thither, and lay down and I lay with her till the morning, and as often as I pressed her to my breast I smelt the delicious fragrance of musk and other perfumes that exhaled from her, and could not think otherwise but that I was in Paradise, or in the vain phantasies of a dream. Now when it was day, she asked me where I lodged and I told her, 'In such a place,' whereupon she gave me leave to depart, handing to me a kerchief worked with gold and silver and

containing somewhat tied in it, and took leave of me, saying, 'Go to the bath with this.' I rejoiced and said to myself, 'If there be but five coppers here, it will buy me this day my morning meal.'" Then I left her, as though I were leaving Paradise, and returned to my poor crib, where I opened the kerchief and found in it fifty miskals of gold. So I buried them in the ground and, buying two farthings' worth of bread and "kitchen," seated me at the door and broke my fast. After which I sat pondering my case, and continued so doing till the time of afternoon prayer, when lo! a slave girl accosted me saying, 'My mistress calleth for thee.' I followed her to the house aforesaid and, after asking permission, she carried me into the lady, before whom I kissed the ground, and she commanded me to sit and called for meat and wine as on the previous day. After which I again lay with her all night. On the morrow, she gave me a second kerchief, with other fifty dinars therein, and I took it and, going home, buried this also. In such pleasant condition I continued eight days running, going in to her at the hour of afternoon prayer and leaving her at daybreak, but on the eighth night, as I lay with her, behold, one of her slave girls came running in and said to me, 'Arise, go up into yonder closet.' "So I rose and went into the closet, which was over the gate, and presently I heard a great clamor and tramp of horse, and, looking out of the window which gave on the street in front of the house, I saw a young man as he were the rising moon on the night of fullness come riding up attended by a number of servants and soldiers who were about him on foot. He alighted at the door and entering the saloon, found the lady seated on the couch. So he kissed the ground between her hands, then came up to her and kissed her hands, but she would not speak to him. However, he continued patiently to humble himself, and soothe her and speak her fair, till he made his peace with her, and they lay together that night. Now when her husband had made his peace with the young

lady, he lay with her that night, and next morning the soldiers came for him and he mounted and rode away, whereupon she drew near to me and said, 'Sawest thou yonder man?' I answered, 'Yes,' and she said, 'He is my husband, and I will tell thee what befell me with him.'"It came to pass one day that we were sitting, he and I, in the garden within the house, and behold, he rose from my side and was absent a long while, till I grew tired of waiting and said to myself, 'Most like, he is in the privy.' So I arose and went to the watercloset, but not finding him there, went down to the kitchen, where I saw a slave girl, and when I enquired for him, she showed him to me lying with one of the cookmaids. Hereupon I swore a great oath that I assuredly would do adultery with the foulest and filthiest man in Baghdad, and the day the eunuch laid hands on thee, I had been four days going round about the city in quest of one who should answer to this description, but found none fouler nor filthier than thy good self. So I took thee and there passed between us that which the Lord foreordained to us, and now I am quit of my oath.' "Then she added, 'If, however, my husband return yet a pin to the cookmaid and lie with her, I will restore thee to thy lost place in my favors.' Now when I heard these words from her lips, what while she pierced my heart with the shafts of her glances, my tears streamed forth till my eyelids were chafed sore with weeping. Then she made them give me other fifty dinars (making in all four hundred gold pieces I had of her) and bade me depart. So I went out from her and came hither, that I might pray the Lord (extolled and exalted be He!) to make her husband return to the cookmaid, that haply I might be again admitted to her favors." When the Emir of the pilgrims heard the man's story, he set him free and said to the bystanders, "the Lord upon you, pray for him, for indeed he is excusable."

