

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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“The Tale of the Bull and the Donkey”

Know, O my daughter, that there was once a merchant who owned much money and many men, and who was rich in cattle and camels. He had also a wife and family, and he dwelt in the country, being experienced in husbandry and devoted to agriculture. Now the Lord Most High had endowed him with understanding the tongues of beasts and birds of every kind, but under pain of death if he divulged the gift to any. So he kept it secret for very fear. He had in his cow house a bull and a donkey, each tethered in his own stall, one hard by the other. As the merchant was sitting near-hand one day with his servants and his children were playing about him, he heard and bull say to the ass: “Hail and health to thee O Father of Waking! for that thou enjoyest rest and good ministering. All under thee is clean-swept and fresh-sprinkled. Men wait upon thee and feed thee, and thy provant is sifted barley and thy drink pure spring water, while I (unhappy creature!) am led forth in the middle of the night, when they set on my neck the plow and a something called yoke, and I tire at cleaving the earth from dawn of day till set of sun. I am forced to do more than I can and to bear all manner of ill-treatment from night to night. After which they take me back with my sides torn, my neck flayed, my legs aching, and mine

eyelids sore with tears. Then they shut me up in the byre and throw me beans and crushed straw mixed with dirt and chaff, and I lie in dung and filth and foul stinks through the livelong night. But thou art ever in a place swept and sprinkled and cleansed, and thou art always lying at ease, save when it happens (and seldom enough!) that the master hath some business, when he mounts thee and rides thee to town and returns with thee forthright. So it happens that I am toiling and distress while thou takest thine ease and thy rest. Thou sleepest while I am sleepless, I hunger still while thou eatest thy fill, and I win contempt while thou winnest goodwill." When the bull ceased speaking, the donkey turned toward him and said: "O Broad-o'-Brow, O thou lost one! He lied not who dubbed thee bullhead, for thou, O father of a bull, hast neither forethought nor contrivance. Thou art the simplest of simpletons, and thou knowest naught of good advisers. Hast thou not heard the saying of the wise?" For others these hardships and labors I bear, And theirs is the pleasure and mine is the care, As the bleacher who blacketh his brow in the sun To whiten the raiment which other men wear. But thou, O fool, art full of zeal, and thou toilest and moilest before the master, and thou tearest and wearest and slayest thyself for the comfort of another. Hast thou never heard the saw that saith 'None to guide and from the way go wide'? Thou wendest forth at the call to dawn prayer and thou returnest not till sundown, and through the livelong day thou endurest all manner hardships: to wit, beating and belaboring and bad language. "Now hearken to me, Sir Bull! When they tie thee to thy stinking manger, thou pawest the ground with thy forehead and lashest out with thy hind hoofs and pushest with thy horns and bellowest aloud, so they deem thee contented. And when they throw thee thy fodder, thou fallest on it with greed and hastenest to line thy fair fat paunch. But if thou accept any advice, it will be better for

thee, and thou wilt lead an easier life even than mine. When thou goest afield and they lay the thing called yoke on thy neck, be down and rise not again, though haply they swings thee. And if thou rise, lie down a second time. And when they bring thee home and offer thee thy beans, fall backward and only sniff at thy meat and withdraw thee and taste it not, and be satisfied with thy crushed straw and chaff. And on this wise feign thou art sick, and cease not doing thus for a day or two days or even three days; so shalt thou have rest from toil and moil." When the Bull heard these words, he knew the donkey to be his friend and thanked him, saying, "Right is thy rede," and prayed that all blessings might requite him, and cried: "O Father Wakener! Thou hast made up for my failings." (Now the merchant, O my daughter, understood all that passed between them.) Next day the driver took the bull and, settling the plow on his neck, made him work as wont. But the bull began to shirk his plowing, according to the advice of the donkey, and the plowman drubbed him till he broke the yoke and made off. But the man caught him up and leathered him till he despaired of his life. Not the less, however, would he do nothing but stand still and drop down till the evening. Then the herd led him home and stabled him in his stall, but he drew back from his manger and neither stamped nor ramped nor butted nor bellowed as he was wont to do, whereat the man wondered. He brought him the beans and husks, but he sniffed at them and left them and lay down as far from them as he could and passed the whole night fasting. The peasant came next morning and, seeing the manger full of beans, the crushed straw untasted, and the ox lying on his back in sorriest plight, with legs outstretched and swollen belly, he was concerned for him, and said to himself, "By the Lord, he hath assuredly sickened, and this is the cause why he would not plow yesterday." Then he went to the merchant and reported: "O my master, the bull is ailing. He refused

his fodder last night— nay, more, he hath not tasted a scrap of it this morning.” Now the merchant-farmer understood what all this meant, because he had overheard the talk between the bull and the donkey, so quoth he, “Take that rascal donkey, and set the yoke on his neck, and bind him to the plow and make him do bull’s work.” Thereupon the plowman took the donkey, and worked him through the livelong day at the bull’s task. And when he failed for weakness, he made him eat stick till his ribs were sore and his sides were sunken and his neck was rayed by the yoke. And when he came home in the evening he could hardly drag his limbs along, either forehand or hind legs. But as for the bull, he had passed the day lying at full length, and had eaten his fodder with an excellent appetite, and he ceased not calling down blessings on the donkey for his good advice, unknowing what had come to him on his account. So when night set in and the donkey returned to the byre, the bull rose up before him in honor, and said: “May good tidings gladden thy heart, O Father Wakener! Through thee I have rested all this day, and I have eaten my meat in peace and quiet.” But the donkey returned no reply, for wrath and heartburning and fatigue and the beating he had gotten. And he repented with the most grievous of repentance, and quoth he to himself: “This cometh of my folly in giving good counsel. As the saw saith, I was in joy and gladness, naught save my officiousness brought me this sadness. And now I must take thought and put a trick upon him and return him to his place, else I die.” Then he went aweary to his manger while the bull thanked him and blessed him. And even so, O my daughter (said the Vizier) thou wilt die for lack of wits. Therefore sit thee still and say naught and expose not thy life to such stress, for, by the Lord, I offer thee the best advice, which cometh of my affection and kindly solicitude for thee. “O my father,” she answered, “needs must I go up to this King and be married to him.” Quoth he, “Do not this deed,” and quoth

she, "Of a truth I will." Whereat he rejoined, "If thou be not silent and bide still, I will do with thee even what the merchant did with his wife." "And what did he?" asked she. Know then (answered the Vizier) that after the return of the ass the merchant came out on the terrace roof with his wife and family, for it was a moonlit night and the moon at its full. Now the terrace overlooked the cow house, and presently as he sat there with his children playing about him, the trader heard the ass say to the bull, "Tell me, O Father Broad-o'-Brow, what thou purposeth to do tomorrow." The bull answered: "What but continue to follow thy counsel, O Aliboron? Indeed it was as good as good could be, and it hath given me rest and repose, nor will I now depart from it one tittle. So when they bring me my meat, I will refuse it and blow out my belly and counterfeit crank." The ass shook his head and said, "Beware of so doing, O Father of a Bull!" The buff asked, "Why?" and the ass answered, "Know that I am about to give thee the best of counsel, for verily I heard our owner say to the herd, 'If the bull rise not from his place to do his work this morning and if he retire from his fodder this day, make him over to the butcher that he may slaughter him and give his flesh to the poor, and fashion a bit of leather from his hide.' Now I fear for thee on account of this. So take my advice ere a calamity befall thee, and when they bring thee thy fodder, eat it and rise up and bellow and paw the ground, or our master will assuredly slay thee. And peace be with thee!" Thereupon the bull arose and lowed aloud and thanked the donkey, and said, "Tomorrow I will readily go forth with them." And he at once ate up all his meat and even licked the manger. (All this took place and the owner was listening to their talk.) Next morning the trader and his wife went to the bull's crib and sat down, and the driver came and led forth the bull, who, seeing his owner, whisked his tail and brake wind, and frisked about so lustily that the merchant laughed a loud laugh and kept

laughing till he fell on his back. His wife asked him, "Whereat laughest thou with such loud laughter as this?" and he answered her, "I laughed at a secret something which I have heard and seen but cannot say lest I die my death." She returned, "Perforce thou must discover it to me, and disclose the cause of thy laughing even if thou come by thy death!" But he rejoined, "I cannot reveal what beasts and birds say in their lingo for fear I die." Then quoth she: "By the Lord, thou liest! This is a mere pretext. Thou laughest at none save me, and now thou wouldest hide somewhat from me. But by the Lord of the Heaven, an thou disclose not the cause I will no longer cohabit with thee, I will leave thee at once." And she sat down and cried. Whereupon quoth the merchant: "Woe betide thee! What means thy weeping? Fear the Lord, and leave these words and query me no more questions." "Needs must thou tell me the cause of that laugh," said she, and he replied: "Thou wettest that when I prayed the Lord to vouchsafe me understanding of the tongues of beasts and birds, I made a vow never to disclose the secret to any under pain of dying on the spot." "No matter!" cried she. "Tell me what secret passed between the bull and the ass and die this very hour an thou be so minded." And she ceased not to importune him till he was worn-out and clean distraught. So at last he said, "Summon thy father and thy mother and our kith and kin and sundry of our neighbors." Which she did, and he sent for the kazi and his assessors, intending to make his will and reveal to her his secret and die the death; for he loved her with love exceeding because she was his cousin, the daughter of his father's brother, and the mother of his children, and he had lived with her a life of a hundred and twenty years. Then, having assembled all the family and the folk of his neighborhood, he said to them, "By me there hangeth a strange story, and 'tis such that if I discover the secret to any, I am a dead man." Therefore quoth every one of those present to the woman, "the Lord upon thee, leave

this sinful obstinacy and recognize the right of this matter, lest haply thy husband and the father of thy children die." But she rejoined, "I will not turn from it till he tell me, even though he come by his death." So they ceased to urge her, and the trader rose from amongst them and repaired to an outhouse to perform the wuzu ablution, and he purposed thereafter to return and to tell them his secret and to die. Now, Daughter Scheherazade, that merchant had in his outhouses some fifty hens under one cock, and whilst making ready to farewell his folk he heard one of his many farm dogs thus address in his own tongue the cock, who was flapping his wings and crowing lustily and jumping from one hen's back to another and treading all in turn, saying: "O Chanticleer! How mean is thy wit and how shameless is thy conduct! Be he disappointed who brought thee up. Art thou not ashamed of thy doings on such a day as this?" "And what," asked the rooster, "hath occurred this day?" when the dog answered; "Dost thou not know that our master is this day making ready for his death? His wife is resolved that he shall disclose the secret taught to him by the Lord, and the moment he so doeth he shall surely die. We dogs are all a-mourning, but thou clappeth thy wings and clarionest thy loudest and treadest hen after hen. Is this an hour for pastime and pleasuring? Art thou not ashamed of thyself?" "Then by the Lord," quoth the cock, "is our master a lackwit and a man scanty of sense. If he cannot manage matters with a single wife, his life is not worth prolonging. Now I have some fifty dame partlets, and I please this and provoke that and starve one and stuff another, and through my good governance they are all well under my control. This our master pretendeth to wit and wisdom, and she hath but one wife and yet knoweth not how to manage her." Asked the dog, "What then, O Cock, should the master do to will clear of his strait?" "He should arise forthright," answered the cock, "and take some twigs from yon mulberry tree and give her a regular back-basting

and ribroasting till she cry: 'I repent, O my lord! I will never ask thee a question as Ion, as I live!' Then let him beat her once more and soundly, and when he shall have done this, he shall sleep free from care and enjoy life. But this master of ours owns neither sense nor judgment."

"Now, Daughter Scheherazade," continued the Vizier, "I will do to thee as did that husband to that wife." Said Scheherazade, "And what did he do?" He replied, "When the merchant heard the wise words spoken by his cock to his dog, he arose in haste and sought his wife's chamber, after cutting for her some mulberry twigs and hiding them there. And then he called to her, "Come into the closet, that I may tell thee the secret while no one seeth me, and then die." She entered with him and he locked the door and came down upon her with so sound a beating of back and shoulders, ribs, arms, and legs, saying the while "Wilt thou ever be asking questions about what concerneth thee not?" that she was well-nigh senseless. Presently she cried out: "I am of the repentant! By the Lord, I will ask thee no more questions, and indeed I repent sincerely and wholesomely." Then she kissed his hand and feet and he led her out of the room submissive, as a wife should be. Her parents and all the company rejoiced and sadness and mourning were changed into joy and gladness. Thus the merchant learnt family discipline from his cock and he and his wife lived together the happiest of lives until death. And thou also, O my daughter! continued the Vizier, unless thou turn from this matter I will do by thee what that trader did to his wife. But she answered him with much decision: "I will never desist, O my father, nor shall this tale change my purpose. Leave such talk and tattle. I will not listen to thy words and if thou deny me, I will marry myself to him despite the nose of thee. And first I will go up to the King myself and alone and I will say to him: 'I prayed my father to wive me with thee, but he refused, being resolved to disappoint his lord, grudging the like of me to the like of

thee'." Her father asked, "Must this needs be?" and she answered, "Even so." Hereupon the Vizier, being weary of lamenting and contending, persuading and dissuading her, all to no purpose, went up to King Shahryar and, after blessing him and kissing the ground before him, told him all about his dispute with his daughter from first to last and how he designed to bring her to him that night. The King wondered with exceeding wonder, for he had made an especial exception of the Vizier's daughter, and said to him: "O most faithful of counsellors, how is this? Thou wettest that I have sworn by the Raiser of the Heavens that after I have gone into her this night I shall say to thee on the morrow's 'Take her and slay her!' And if thou slay her not, I will slay thee in her stead without fail." "the Lord guide thee to glory and lengthen thy life, O King of the Age," answered the Vizier. "It is she that hath so determined. All this have I told her and more, but she will not hearken to me and she persisteth in passing this coming night with the King's Majesty." So Shahryar rejoiced greatly and said, "'Tis well. Go get her ready, and this night bring her to me." The Vizier returned to his daughter and reported to her the command, saying, "the Lord make not thy father desolate by thy loss!" But Scheherazade rejoiced with exceeding joy and get ready all she required and said to her younger sister, Dunyazade: "Note well what directions I entrust to thee! When I have gone into the King I will send for thee, and when thou comest to me and seest that he hath had his carnal will of me, do thou say to me: 'O my sister, an thou be not sleepy, relate to me some new story, delectable and delightsome, the better to speed our waking hours.' And I will tell thee a tale which shall be our deliverance, if so the Lord please, and which shall turn the King from his bloodthirsty custom." Dunyazade answered "With love and gladness." So when it was night, their father the Vizier carried Scheherazade to the King, who was gladdened at the sight and asked, "Hast thou brought me

my need?" And he answered, "I have." But when the King took her to his bed and fell to toying with her and wished to go in to her, she wept, which made him ask, "What aileth thee?" She replied, "O King of the Age, I have a younger sister, and lief would I take leave of her this night before I see the dawn." So he sent at once for Dunyazade and she came and kissed the ground between his hands, when he permitted her to take her seat near the foot of the couch. Then the King arose and did away with his bride's maidenhead and the three fell asleep. But when it was midnight Scheherazade awoke and signaled to her sister Dunyazade, who sat up and said, "the Lord upon thee, O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightsome and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night." "With joy and goodly gree," answered Scheherazade, "if this pious and auspicious King permit me." "Tell on," quoth the King, who chanced to be sleepless and restless and therefore was pleased with the prospect of hearing her story. So Scheherazade rejoiced, and thus, on the first night of the Thousand Nights and a Night, she began her recitations.

