

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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[continues]

“The Sleeper and the Waker”

It hath reached me, O auspicious King, that there was once at Baghdad, in the Kingate of Harun al-Rashid, a man and a merchant who had a son Abu al-Hasan al-Khali'a by name. The merchant died leaving great store of wealth to his heir, who divided it into two equal parts, whereof he laid up one and spent of the other half. And he fell to companying with Persians and with the sons of the merchants, and he gave himself up to good drinking and good eating till all the wealth he had with him was wasted and wantoned.

Whereupon he betook himself to his friends and comrades and cup companions and expounded to them his case, discovering to them the failure of that which was in his hand of wealth. But not one of them took heed of him or even deigned answer him. So he returned to his mother (and indeed his spirit was broken) and related to her that which had happened to him and what had befallen him from his friends, how they had neither shared with him nor requited him with speech. Quoth she: “O Abu al-Hasan, on this wise are the sons of this time: And thou have aught, they draw thee near to them, and if thou have naught, they put thee away from them.” And she went on to condole with him, what while he bewailed himself and his tears flowed and he repeated these lines: “An wane my wealth, no man

will succor me, When my wealth waxeth all men friendly show. How many a friend for wealth showed friendliness Who, when my wealth departed, turned to foe!" Then he sprang up, and going to the place wherein was the other half of his goods, took it and lived with it well. And he swore that he would never again consort with a single one of those he had known, but would company only with the stranger, nor entertain even him but one night, and that when it morrowed, he would never know him more. Accordingly he fell to sitting every eventide on the bridge over Tigris and looking at each one who passed by him. And if he saw him to be a stranger, he made friends with him and carried him to his house, where he conversed and caroused with him all night till morning. Then he dismissed him, and would never more salute him with the salaam nor ever more drew near unto him, neither invited him again. Thus he continued to do for the space of a full year, till one day while he sat on the bridge, as was his wont, expecting who should come to him so he might take him and pass the night with him, behold, up came the King and Masrur, the Swarder of his vengeance, disguised in merchants' dress, according to their custom. So Abu al-Hasan looked at them, and rising, because he knew them not, asked them: "What say ye? Will ye go with me to my dwelling place, so ye may eat what is ready and drink what is at hand; to wit, platter bread and meat cooked and wine strained?" The King refused this, but he conjured him and said to him: "the Lord upon thee, O my lord. Go with me, for thou art my guest this night, and balk not my hopes of thee!" And he ceased not to press him till he consented, whereat Abu al-Hasan rejoiced, and walking on before him, gave not over talking with him till they came to his house and he carried the King into the saloon. Al-Rashid entered a hall such as an thou sawest it and gazedst upon its walls, thou hadst beheld marvels, and hadst thou looked narrowly at its water conduits, thou wouldst have seen a fountain cased

with gold. The King made his man abide at the door, and as soon as he was seated, the host brought him somewhat to eat. So he ate, and Abu al-Hasan ate with him, that eating might be grateful to him. Then he removed the tray and they washed their hands and the Commander of the Faithful sat down again. Whereupon Abu al-Hasan set on the drinking vessels, and seating himself by his side, fell to filling and giving him to drink and entertaining him with discourse. And when they had drunk their sufficiency the host called for a slave girl like a branch of ban, who took a lute and sang to it these two couplets: "O thou aye dwelling in my heart, Whileas thy form is far from sight, Thou art my sprite by me unseen, Yet nearest near art thou, my sprite." His hospitality pleased the King, and the goodliness of his manners, and he said to him: "O youth, who art thou? Make me acquainted with thyself, so I may requite thee thy kindness." But Abu al-Hasan smiled and said: 'O my lord, far be it, alas! that what is past should again come to pass and that I company with thee at other time than this time!" The Prince of True Believers asked: "Why so? And why wilt thou not acquaint me with thy case?" and Abu al-Hasan answered, "Know, O my lord, that my story is strange and that there is a cause for this affair." Quoth Al-Rashid, "And what is the cause?" and quoth he, "The cause hath a tail." The King laughed at his words and Abu al-Hasan said, "I will explain to thee this saying by the tale of the ruffian and the cook. So hear thou, O my lord, the

