

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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[continues]

“The First Kalandar’s Tale”

Know, O my lady, that the cause of my beard being shorn and my eye being outtorn was as follows: My father was a king and he had a brother who was a king over another city; and it came to pass that I and my cousin, the son of my paternal uncle, were both born on one and the same day. And years and days rolled on and as we grew up I used to visit my uncle every now and then and to spend a certain number of months with him. Now my cousin and I were sworn friends, for he ever entreated me with exceeding kindness. He killed for me the fattest sheep and strained the best of his wines, and we enjoyed long conversing and carousing. One day when the wine had gotten the better of us, the son of my uncle said to me, “O my cousin, I have a great service to ask of thee, and I desire that thou stay me not in whatso I desire to do!” And I replied, “With joy and goodly will.” Then he made me swear the most binding oaths and left me, but after a little while he returned leading a lady veiled and richly appareled, with ornaments worth a large sum of money. Presently he turned to me (the woman being still behind him) and said, “Take this lady with thee and go before me to such a burial ground” (describing it, so that I knew the place) “and enter with her into such a sepulcher and there await my coming.” The

oaths I swore to him made me keep silence and suffered me not to oppose him, so I led the woman to the cemetery and both I and she took our seats in the sepulcher. And hardly had we sat down when in came my uncle's son, with a bowl of water, a bag of mortar, and an adze somewhat like a hoe. He went straight to the tomb in the midst of the sepulcher and, breaking it open with the adze, set the stones on one side. Then he fell to digging into the earth of the tomb till he came upon a large iron plate, the size of a wicket door, and on raising it there appeared below it a staircase vaulted and winding. Then he turned to the lady and said to her, "Come now and take thy final choice!" She at once went down by the staircase and disappeared, then quoth he to me, "O son of my uncle, by way of completing thy kindness, when I shall have descended into this place, restore the trapdoor to where it was, and heap back the earth upon it as it lay before. And then of thy great goodness mix this unslaked lime which is in the bag with this water which is in the bowl and, after building up the stones, plaster the outside so that none looking upon it shall say: 'This is a new opening in an old tomb'. For a whole year have I worked at this place whereof none knoweth but the Lord, and this is the need I have of thee," presently adding, "May the Lord never bereave thy friends of thee nor make them desolate by thine absence, O son of my uncle, O my dear cousin!" And he went down the stairs and disappeared for ever. When he was lost to sight, I replaced the iron plate and did all his bidding till the tomb became as it was before, and I worked almost unconsciously, for my head was heated with wine. Returning to the palace of my uncle, I was told that he had gone forth a-sporting and hunting, so I slept that night without seeing him. And when the morning dawned, I remembered the scenes of the past evening and what happened between me and my cousin. I repented of having obeyed him when penitence was of no avail. I still thought,

however, that it was a dream. So I fell to asking for the son of my uncle, but there was none to answer me concerning him, and I went out to the graveyard and the sepulchers, and sought for the tomb under which he was, but could not find it. And I ceased not wandering about from sepulcher to sepulcher, and tomb to tomb, all without success, till night set in. So I returned to the city, yet I could neither eat nor drink, my thoughts being engrossed with my cousin, for that I knew not what was become of him. And I grieved with exceeding grief and passed another sorrowful night, watching until the morning. Then went I a second time to the cemetery, pondering over what the son of mine uncle had done and, sorely repenting my hearkening to him, went round among all the tombs, but could not find the tomb I sought. I mourned over the past, and remained in my mourning seven days, seeking the place and ever missing the path. Then my torture of scruples grew upon me till I well-nigh went mad, and I found no way to dispel my grief save travel and return to my father. So I set out and journeyed homeward, but as I was entering my father's capital a crowd of rioters sprang upon me and pinioned me. I wondered thereat with all wonderment, seeing that I was the son of the Sultan, and these men were my father's subjects and amongst them were some of my own slaves. A great fear fell upon me, and I said to my soul, "Would Heaven I knew what hath happened to my father!" I questioned those that bound me of the cause of their so doing, but they returned me no answer. However, after a while one of them said to me (and he had been a hired servant of our house), "Fortune hath been false to thy father. His troops betrayed him, and the Vizier who slew him now reigneth in his stead, and we lay in wait to seize thee by the bidding of him." I was well-nigh distraught and felt ready to faint on hearing of my father's death, when they carried me off and placed me in presence of the usurper. Now between me and him there was an olden

grudge, the cause of which was this: I was fond of shooting with the stone bow, and it befell one day, as I was standing on the terrace roof of the palace, that a bird lighted on the top of the Vizier's house when he happened to be there. I shot at the bird and missed the mark, but I hit the Vizier's eye and knocked it out, as fate and fortune decreed. Now when I knocked out the Vizier's eye, he could not say a single word, for that my father was King of the city, but he hated me ever after, and dire was the grudge thus caused between us twain. So when I was set before him hand-bound and pinioned, he straightway gave orders for me to be beheaded. I asked, "For what crime wilt thou put me to death?" Whereupon he answered, "What crime is greater than this?" pointing the while to the place where his eye had been. Quoth I, "This I did by accident, not of malice prepense," and quoth he, "If thou didst it by accident, I will do the like by thee with intention." Then cried he, "Bring him forward," and they brought me up to him, when he thrust his finger into my left eye and gouged it out, whereupon I became one-eyed as ye see me. Then he bade bind me hand and foot, and put me into a chest, and said to the sworder, "Take charge of this fellow, and go off with him to the wastelands about the city. Then draw thy scimitar and slay him, and leave him to feed the beasts and birds." So the headsman fared forth with me, and when he was in the midst of the desert, he took me out of the chest (and I with both hands pinioned and both feet fettered) and was about to bandage my eyes before striking off my head. But I wept with exceeding weeping until I made him weep with me and, looking at him I began to recite these couplets: "I deemed you coat o'mail that should withstand
The foeman's shafts, and you proved foeman's brand. I
hoped your aidance in mine every chance, Though fail my
left to aid my dexter hand. Aloof you stand and hear the
railer's gibe While rain their shafts on me the giber band.
But an ye will not guard me from my foes, Stand clear, and

succor neither these nor those!” And I also quoted: “I deemed my brethren mail of strongest steel, And so they were— from foes to fend my dart! I deemed their arrows surest of their aim, And so they were— when aiming at my heart!” When the headsman heard my lines (he had been sworder to my sire and he owed me a debt of gratitude), he cried, “O my lord, what can I do, being but a slave under orders?” presently adding, “Fly for thy life and nevermore return to this land, or they will slay thee and slay me with thee.” Hardly believing in my escape, I kissed his hand and thought the loss of my eye a light matter in consideration of my escaping from being slain. I arrived at my uncle’s capital, and going in to him, told him of what had befallen my father and myself, whereat he wept with sore weeping and said: “Verily thou addest grief to my grief, and woe to my woe, for thy cousin hath been missing these many days. I wot not what hath happened to him, and none can give me news of him.” And he wept till he fainted. I sorrowed and condoled with him, and he would have applied certain medicaments to my eye, but he saw that it was become as a walnut with the shell empty. Then said he, “O my son, better to lose eye and keep life!” After that I could no longer remain silent about my cousin, who was his only son and one dearly loved, so I told him all that had happened. He rejoiced with extreme joyance to hear news of his son and said, “Come now and show me the tomb.” But I replied, “By the Lord, O my uncle, I know not its place, though I sought it carefully full many times, yet could not find the site.” However, I and my uncle went to the graveyard and looked right and left, till at last I recognized the tomb, and we both rejoiced with exceeding joy. We entered the sepulcher and loosened the earth about the grave, then, upraising the trapdoor, descended some fifty steps till we came to the foot of the staircase, when lo! we were stopped by a blinding smoke. Thereupon said my uncle that saying whose sayer shall never come to shame: “There is no

Majesty and there is no Might save in the Lord, the Glorious, the Great!" and we advanced till we suddenly came upon a saloon, whose floor was strewed with flour and grain and provisions and all manner necessaries, and in the midst of it stood a canopy sheltering a couch. Thereupon my uncle went up to the couch and, inspecting it, found his son and the lady who had gone down with him into the tomb, lying in each other's embrace. But the twain had become black as charred wood. It was as if they had been cast into a pit of fire. When my uncle saw this spectacle, he spat in his son's face and said: "Thou hast thy deserts, O thou hog! This is thy judgment in the transitory world, and yet remaineth the judgment in the world to come, a durer and a more enduring." I marveled at his hardness of heart and, grieving for my cousin and the lady, said: "By the Lord, O my uncle, calm thy wrath. Dost not see that all my thoughts are occupied with this misfortune, and how sorrowful I am for what hath befallen thy son, and how horrible it is that naught of him remaineth but a black heap of charcoal? And is not that enough, but thou must smite him with thy slipper?" Answered he: "O son of my brother, this youth from his boyhood was madly in love with his own sister, and often and often I forbade him from her, saying to myself, 'They are but little ones.' However, when they grew up sin befell between them, and although I could hardly believe it, I confined him and chided him and threatened him with the severest threats, and the eunuchs and servants said to him: 'Beware of so foul a thing which none before thee ever did, and which none after thee will ever do, and have a care lest thou be dishonored and disgraced among the kings of the day, even to the end of time.' And I added: 'Such a report as this will be spread abroad by caravans, and take heed not to give them cause to talk or I will assuredly curse thee and do thee to death.' After that I lodged them apart and shut her up, but the accursed girl loved him with passionate love, for Satan had

got the mastery of her as well as of him and made their foul sin seem fair in their sight. Now when my son saw that I separated them, he secretly built this souterrain and furnished it and transported to it victuals, even as thou seest, and when I had gone out a-sporting, came here with his sister and hid from me. Then His righteous judgment fell upon the twain and consumed them with fire from Heaven, and verily the Last Judgment will deal them durer pains and more enduring!" Then he wept and I wept with him, and he looked at me and said, "Thou art my son in his stead." And I bethought me awhile of the world and of its chances, how the Vizier had slain my father and had taken his place and had put out my eye, and how my cousin had come to his death by the strangest chance. And I wept again and my uncle wept with me. Then we mounted the steps and let down the iron plate and heaped up the earth over it, and after restoring the tomb to its former condition, we returned to the palace. But hardly had we sat down ere we heard the tom-toming of the kettledrum and tantara of trumpets and clash of cymbals, and the rattling of war men's lances, and the clamors of assailants and the clanking of bits and the neighing of steeds, while the world was canopied with dense dust and sand clouds raised by the horses' hoofs. We were amazed at sight and sound, knowing not what could be the matter. So we asked, and were told us that the Vizier who had usurped my father's kingdom had marched his men, and that after levying his soldiery and taking a host of wild Arabs into service, he had come down upon us with armies like the sands of the sea. Their number none could tell, and against them none could prevail. They attacked the city unawares, and the citizens, being powerless to oppose them, surrendered the place. My uncle was slain and I made for the suburbs, saying to myself, "If thou fall into this villain's hands, he will assuredly kill thee." On this wise all my troubles were renewed, and I pondered all that had betided my father and

my uncle and I knew not what to do; for if the city people or my father's troops had recognized me, they would have done their best to will favor by destroying me. And I could think of no way to escape save by shaving off my beard and my eyebrows. So I shored them off and, changing my fine clothes for a Kalandar's rags, I fared forth from my uncle's capital and made for this city, hoping that peradventure someone would assist me to the presence of the Prince of the Faithful, and the King who is the Viceregent of the Lord upon earth. Thus have I come hither that I might tell him my tale and lay my case before him. I arrived here this very night, and was standing in doubt whither I should go when suddenly I saw this second Kalandar. So I salaamed to him, saying, 'I am a stranger' and he answered,— 'I too am a stranger!' And as we were conversing, behold, up came our companion, this third Kalandar, and saluted us saying, 'I am a stranger!' And we answered, 'We too be strangers!' Then we three walked on and together till darkness overtook us and Destiny drove us to your house. Such, then, is the cause of the shaving of my beard and mustachios and eyebrows, and the manner of my losing my left eye. They marveled much at this tale, and the King said to Ja'afar, "By the Lord, I have not seen nor have I heard the like of what hath happened to this Kalandar!" Quoth the lady of the house, "Rub thy head and wend thy ways." But he replied, "I will not go till I hear the history of the two others." Thereupon the second Kalandar came forward and, kissing the ground, began to tell

