

THE NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

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“The Eldest Lady’s Tale”

Verily a strange tale is mine and ‘tis this: Yon two black bitches are my eldest sisters by one mother and father, and these two others she who beareth upon her the signs of stripes and the third our procuratrix, are my sisters by another mother. When my father died, each took her share of the heritage and after a while my mother also deceased, leaving me and my sisters german three thousand dinars, so each daughter received her portion of a thousand dinars and I the same, albe’ the youngest. In due course of time my sisters married with the usual festivities and lived with their husbands, who bought merchandise with their wives’ moneys and set out on their travels together. Thus they threw me off. My brothers-in-law were absent with their wives five years, during which period they spent all the money they had and, becoming bankrupt, deserted my sisters in foreign parts amid stranger folk. After five years my eldest sister returned to me in beggar’s gear with her clothes in rags and tatters and a dirty old mantilla, and truly she was in the foulest and sorriest plight. At first sight I did not know my own sister, but presently I recognized her and said, “What state is this?” “O our sister,” she replied, “words cannot undo the done, and the reed of Destiny hath run through what the Lord decreed.” Then I

sent her to the bath and dressed her in a suit of mine own, and boiled for her a bouillon and brought her some good wine, and said to her: "O my sister, thou art the eldest, who still standest to us in the stead of father and mother, and as for the inheritance which came to me as to you twain, the Lord hath blessed it and prospered it to me with increase, and my circumstances are easy, for I have made much money by spinning and cleaning silk. And I and you will share my wealth alike." I entreated her with all kindness and she abode with me a whole year, during which our thoughts and fancies were always full of our other sister. Shortly after she too came home in yet fouler and sorrier plight than that of my eldest sister, and I dealt by her still more honorably than I had done by the first, and each of them had a share of my substance. After a time they said to me, "O our sister, we desire to marry again, for indeed we have not patience to drag on our days without husbands and to lead the lives of widows bewitched," and I replied: "O eyes of me! Ye have hitherto seen scanty weal in wedlock, for nowadays good men and true are become rareties and curiosities, nor do I deem your projects advisable, as ye have already made trial of matrimony and have failed." But they would not accept my advice, and married without my consent. Nevertheless I gave them outfit and dowries out of my money, and they fared forth with their mates. In a mighty little time their husbands played them false and, taking whatever they could lay hands upon, levanted and left them in the lurch. Thereupon they came to me ashamed and in abject case and made their excuses to me, saying: "Pardon our fault and be not wroth with us, for although thou art younger in years yet art thou older in wit. Henceforth we will never make mention of marriage, so take us back as thy handmaidens that we may eat our mouthful." Quoth I, "Welcome to you, O my sisters, there is naught dearer to me than you." And I took them in and redoubled my kindness to them. We

ceased not to live after this loving fashion for a full year, when I resolved to sell my wares abroad and first to fit me a conveyance for Bassorah. So I equipped a large ship, and loaded her with merchandise and valuable goods for traffic and with provant and all needful for a voyage, and said to my sisters, "Will ye abide at home whilst I travel, or would ye prefer to accompany me on the voyage?" "We will travel with thee," answered they, "for we cannot bear to be parted from thee." So I divided my moneys into two parts, one to accompany me and the other to be left in charge of a trusty person, for, as I said to myself, "Haply some accident may happen to the ship and yet we remain alive, in which case we shall find on our return what may stand us in good stead." I took my two sisters and we went a-voyaging some days and nights, but the master was careless enough to miss his course, and the ship went astray with us and entered a sea other than the sea we sought. For a time we knew naught of this, and the wind blew fair for us ten days, after which the lookout man went aloft to see about him and cried, "Good news!" Then he came down rejoicing and said, "I have seen what seemeth to be a city as 'twere a pigeon." Hereat we rejoiced, and ere an hour of the day had passed, the buildings showed plain in the offing, and we asked the Captain, "What is the name of yonder city?" and he answered: "By the Lord, I wot not, for I never saw it before and never sailed these seas in my life. But since our troubles have ended in safety, remains for you only to land where with your merchandise, and if you find selling profitable, sell and make your market of what is there, and if not, we will rest here two days and provision ourselves and fare away." So we entered the port and the Captain went up town and was absent awhile, after which he returned to us and said, "Arise, go up into the city and marvel at the works of the Lord with His creatures, and pray to be preserved from His righteous wrath!" So we landed, and going up into the city, saw at the gate men

hending staves in hand, but when we drew near them, behold, they had been translated by the anger of the Lord and had become stones. Then we entered the city and found all who therein woned into black stones enstoned. Not an inhabited house appeared to the espier, nor was there a blower of fire. We were awe-struck at the sight, and threaded the market streets, where we found the goods and gold and silver left lying in their places, and we were glad and said, "Doubtless there is some mystery in all this." Then we dispersed about the thoroughfares and each busied himself with collecting the wealth and money and rich stuffs, taking scanty heed of friend or comrade. As for myself, I went up to the castle, which was strongly fortified, and, entering the King's palace by its gate of red gold, found all the vaiselle of gold and silver, and the King himself seated in the midst of his chamberlains and nabobs and emirs and Viziers, an clad in raiment which confounded man's art. I drew nearer and saw him sitting on a throne encrusted and inlaid with pearls and gems, and his robes were of gold cloth adorned with jewels of every kind, each one flashing like a star. Around him stood fifty Mamelukes, white slaves, clothed in silks of divers sorts, holding their drawn swords in their hands. But when I drew near to them, lo! all were black stones. My understanding was confounded at the sight, but I walked on and entered the great hall of the harem, whose walls I found hung with tapestries of gold-striped silk, and spread with silken carpets embroidered with golden flowers. Here I saw the Queen lying at full length arrayed in robes purfled with fresh young pearls. On her head was a diadem set with many sorts of gems each fit for a ring, and around her neck hung collars and necklaces. All her raiment and her ornaments were in natural state, but she had been turned into a black stone by the Lord's wrath. Presently I espied an open door, for which I made straight, and found leading to it a flight of seven steps. So I walked up and came upon

a place pargeted with marble and spread and hung with gold-worked carpets and tapestry, a-middlemost of which stood a throne of juniper wood inlaid with pearls and precious stones and set with bosses of emeralds. In the further wall was an alcove whose curtains, bestrung with pearls, were let down and I saw a light issuing therefrom, so I drew near and perceived that the light came from a precious stone as big as an ostrich egg, set at the upper end of the alcove upon a little chryselephantine couch of ivory and gold. And this jewel, blazing like the sun, cast its rays wide and side. The couch also was spread with all manner of silken stuffs amazing the gazer with their richness and beauty. I marveled much at all this, especially when seeing in that place candies ready lighted, and I said in my mind, "Needs must someone have lighted these candles." Then I went forth and came to the kitchen and thence to the buttery and the King's treasure chambers, and continued to explore the palace and to pace from place to place. I forgot myself in my awe and marvel at these matters and I was drowned in thought till the night came on. Then I would have gone forth, but knowing not the gate, I lost my way, so I returned to the alcove whither the lighted candles directed me and sat down upon the couch, and wrapping myself in a coverlet, after I had repeated somewhat from the Koran, I would have slept but could not, for restlessness possessed me. When night was at its noon I heard a voice chanting the Koran in sweetest accents, but the tone thereof was weak. So I rose, glad to hear the silence broken, and followed the sound until I reached a closet whose door stood ajar. Then, peeping through a chink, I considered the place and lo! it was an oratory wherein was a prayer niche with two wax candles burning and lamps hanging from the ceiling. In it too was spread a prayer carpet whereupon sat a youth fair to see, and before him on its stand was a copy of the Koran, from which he was reading. I marveled to see him alone alive amongst the

people of the city and entering, saluted him. Whereupon he raised his eyes and returned my salaam. Quoth I, "Now by the truth of what thou readest in the Lord's Holy Book, I conjure thee to answer my question." He looked upon me with a smile and said: "O handmaid of the Lord, first tell me the cause of thy coming hither, and I in turn will tell what hath befallen both me and the people of this city, and what was the reason of my escaping their doom." So I told him my story, whereat he wondered, and I questioned him of the people of the city, when he replied, "Have patience with me for awhile, O my sister!" and, reverently closing the Holy Book, he laid it up in a satin bag. Then he seated me by his side, and I looked at him and behold, he was as the moon at its full, fair of face and rare of form, soft-sided and slight, of well-proportioned height, and cheek smoothly bright and diffusing light. I glanced at him with one glance of eyes which caused me a thousand sighs, and my heart was at once taken captive-wise, so I asked him, "O my lord and my love, tell me that whereof I questioned thee," and he answered: "Hearing is obeying! Know, O handmaid of the Lord, that this city was the capital of my father who is the King thou sawest on the throne transfigured by the Lord's wrath to a black stone, and the Queen thou foundest in the alcove is my mother. They and all the people of the city were Magians who fire adored in lieu of the Omnipotent Lord and were wont to swear by lowe and heat and shade and light, and the spheres revolving day and night. My father had ne'er a son till he was blest with me near the last of his days, and he reared me till I grew up and prosperity anticipated me in all things. Now it is fortun'd there was with us an old woman well stricken in years, a Muslimah who, inwardly believing in the Lord and His Apostle, conformed outwardly with the religion of my people. And my father placed thorough confidence in her for that he knew her to be trustworthy and virtuous, and he treated her with ever-increasing kindness, believing her to

be of his own belief." So when I was well-nigh grown up my father committed me to her charge saying: 'Take him and educate him and teach him the rules of our faith. Let him have the best instructions and cease not thy fostering care of him.' So she took me and taught me the tenets of Al-Islam with the divine ordinances of the wuzu ablution and the five daily prayers and she made me learn the Koran by rote, often repeating, 'Serve none save the Lord Almighty!' When I had mastered this much of knowledge, she said to me, 'O my son, keep this matter concealed from thy sire and reveal naught to him, lest he slay thee.'" So I hid it from him, and I abode on this wise for a term of days, when the old woman died, and the people of the city redoubled in their impiety and arrogance and the error of their ways. "One day while they were as wont, behold, they heard a loud and terrible sound and a crier crying out with a voice like roaring thunder so every ear could hear, far and near: 'O folk of this city, leave ye your fire-worshiping and adore the Lord the All-compassionate King!" At this, fear and terror fell upon the citizens and they crowded to my father (he being King of the city) and asked him: 'What is this awesome voice we have heard; for it hath confounded us with the excess of its terror?' And he answered: 'Let not a voice fright you nor shake your steadfast sprite nor turn you back from the faith which is right.' Their hearts inclined to his words and they ceased not to worship the fire and they persisted in rebellion for a full year from the time they heard the first voice. And on the anniversary came a second cry, and a third at the head of the third year, each year once. Still they persisted in their malpractices till one day at break of dawn, judgment and the wrath of Heaven descended upon them with all suddenness, and by the visitation of the Lord all were metamorphosed into black stones, they and their beasts and their cattle, and none was saved save myself, who at the time was engaged in my devotions. From that day to

this I am in the case thou seest, constant in prayer and fasting and reading and reciting the Koran, but I am indeed grown weary by reason of my loneliness, having none to bear me company." Then said I to him (for in very sooth he had won my heart and was the lord of my life and soul): "O youth, wilt thou fare with me to Baghdad city and visit the Ulema and men teamed in the law and doctors of divinity and get thee increase of wisdom and understanding and theology? And know that she who standeth in thy presence will be thy handmaid, albeit she be head of her family and mistress over men and eunuchs and servants and slaves. Indeed my life was no life before it fell in with thy youth. I have here a ship laden with merchandise, and in very truth Destiny drove me to this city that I might come to the knowledge of these matters, for it was fated that we should meet." And I ceased not to persuade him and speak him fair and use every art till he consented. I slept that night at his feet and hardly knowing where I was for excess of joy. As soon as the next morning dawned (she pursued, addressing the King), I arose and we entered the treasuries and took thence whatever was light in weight and great in worth. Then we went down side by side from the castle to the city, where we were met by the Captain and my sisters and slaves, who had been seeking for me. When they saw me, they rejoiced and asked what had stayed me, and I told them all I had seen and related to them the story of the young Prince and the transformation wherewith the citizens had been justly visited. Hereat all marveled, but when my two sisters (these two bitches, O Commander of the Faithful!) saw me by the side of my young lover, they jaloused me on his account and were wroth and plotted mischief against me. We awaited a fair wind and went on board rejoicing and ready to fly for joy by reason of the goods we had gotten, but my own greatest joyance was in the youth. And we waited awhile till the wind blew fair for us and then we set sail and fared forth. Now as we sat

talking, my sisters asked me, "And what wilt thou do with this handsome young man?" and I answered, "I purpose to make him my husband!" Then I turned to him and said: "O my lord, I have that to propose to thee wherein thou must not cross me, and this it is that, when we reach Baghdad, my native city, I offer thee my life as thy handmaiden in holy matrimony, and thou shalt be to me baron and I will be femme to thee." He answered, "I hear and I obey! Thou art my lady and my mistress and whatso thou doest I will not gainsay." Then I turned to my sisters and said: "This is my gain. I content me with this youth and those who have gotten aught of my property, let them keep it as their gain with my goodwill." "Thou sayest and doest well," answered the twain, but they imagined mischief against me. We ceased not spooning before a fair wind till we had exchanged the sea of peril for the seas of safety, and in a few days we made Bassorah city, whose buildings loomed clear before us as evening fell. But after we had retired to rest and were sound asleep, my two sisters arose and took me up, bed and all, and threw me into the sea. They did the same with the young Prince, who, as he could not swim, sank and was drowned, and the Lord enrolled him in the noble army of martyrs. As for me, would Heaven I had been drowned with him, but the Lord deemed that I should be of the saved, so when I awoke and found myself in the sea and saw the ship making off like a flash of lightning, He threw in my way a piece of timber, which I bestrided, and the waves tossed me to and fro till they cast me upon an island coast, a high land and an uninhabited. I landed and walked about the island the rest of the night, and when morning dawned, I saw a rough track barely fit for child of Adam to tread, leading to what proved a shallow ford connecting island and mainland. As soon as the sun had risen I spread my garments to dry in its rays, and ate of the fruits of the island and drank of its waters. Then I set out along the foot track and ceased not walking till I reached the mainland.

Now when there remained between me and the city but a two hours' journey, behold, a great serpent, the bigness of a date palm, came fleeing toward me in all haste, gliding along now to the right, then to the left, till she was close upon me, whilst her tongue lolled groundward a span long and swept the dust as she went. She was pursued by a dragon who was not longer than two lances, and of slender build about the bulk of a spear, and although her terror lent her speed and she kept wriggling from side to side, he overtook her and seized her by the tail, whereat her tears streamed down and her tongue was thrust out in her agony. I took pity on her and, picking up a stone and calling upon the Lord for aid, threw it at the dragon's head with such force that he died then and there, and the serpent, opening a pair of wings, flew into the lift and disappeared from before my eyes. I sat down marveling over that adventure, but I was weary and, drowsiness overcoming me, I slept where I was for a while. When I awoke I found a jet-black damsel sitting at my feet shampooing them, and by her side stood two black bitches (my sisters, O Commander of the Faithful!). I was ashamed before her and, sitting up, asked her, "O my sister, who and what art thou?" and she answered: "How soon hast thou forgotten me! I am she for whom thou wroughtest a good deed and sowedest the seed of gratitude and slewest her foe, for I am the serpent whom by the Lord's aidance thou didst just now deliver from the dragon. I am a Jinniyah and he was a Jinn who hated me, and none saved my life from him save thou. As soon as thou freedest me from him I flew on the wind to the ship whence thy sisters threw thee, and removed all that was therein to thy house. Then I ordered my attendant Marids to sink the ship, and I transformed thy two sisters into these black bitches, for I know all that hath passed between them and thee. But as for the youth, of a truth he is drowned." So saying, she flew up with me and the bitches, and presently set us down on the terrace roof of my house, wherein I

found ready stored the whole of what property was in my ship, nor was aught of it missing. "Now (continued the serpent that was), I swear by all engraven on the seal ring of Solomon (with whom be peace!) unless thou deal to each of these bitches three hundred stripes every day I will come and imprison thee forever under the earth." I answered, "Hearkening and obedience!" and away she flew. But before going she again charged me saying, "I again swear by Him who made the two seas flow (and this be my second oath), if thou gainsay me I will come and transform thee like thy sisters." Since then I have never failed, O Commander of the Faithful, to beat them with that number of blows till their blood flows with my tears, I pitying them the while, and well they wot that their being scourged is no fault of mine and they accept my excuses. And this is my tale and my history!

