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Tales of the Caliph

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TALES OF THE CALIPH.

That stories such as those in the "Arabian Nights," and fairy tales of every kind, should delight us all, men and women no less than boys and girls, is very natural. We find it charming to escape for a period, however brief, from all the familiar surroundings of modern life, and on opening a volume to pass at once into another region, where all is strange, and where the sceptical glances of science never intrude to banish magic and the supernatural.

Emboldened by these reflections, we may forthwith commence the narration of certain noteworthy occurrences concerning the celebrated Caliph Haroun Alraschid. He was in the habit, as every one knows, of wandering very frequently through the town after nightfall in various disguises to see for himself that justice was done, and also, it may be confessed, by no means loth to encounter such adventures as he might meet with. Many of these have been already related, but others, no whit less interesting and extraordinary, remain still untold.

Some of these adventures were very diverting and naturally pleasing, but others involved so many dangers and such hardships that it is indeed surprising that the Caliph should ever again have ventured on these nocturnal ramblings.

An adventure of the latter and more serious description happened as follows, and may be entitled:

The Caliph and the Pirates.

The Caliph, being on a tour of inspection through the various provinces of his empire, chanced on a certain occasion to be stopping at Bussora. And one evening, disguised, as was his wont, as a

merchant, and, as usual, accompanied only by his faithful Grand Vizier, Giafer, he strolled through the bazaars silent and observant. Meeting with nothing worthy of arresting his particular attention, he wandered on until he came at length to some very narrow and mean lanes near the waterside. In one of these, and when passing the door of a low caravanserai, or public-house, frequented chiefly by sailors, they noticed some men approaching, who were carrying great sacks quite full, and so heavy that each sack was carried by two men, who, on reaching the door of the caravanserai, entered. The Caliph, tired with his ramble, and curious to learn what might be in the sacks, beckoned to Giafer and followed the men into the caravanserai. The interior was so dark, being lit only by a few small oil lamps, that it was at first difficult to distinguish objects clearly. However, their eyes having become accustomed to the gloom after a few minutes, the Caliph and his Vizier, who had entered quietly and unobserved, and had seated themselves on a low sofa or divan which ran round the sides of the apartment, perceived that the company were all rough, seafaring men of a very fierce and truculent aspect. Among them one was seated, who appeared by his dress and demeanour to be the chief or captain of the band. This man, addressing those who had brought in the sacks, asked them what they had there. To which they replied, "Things from Abbas Bey." At this answer the Caliph's interest increased, inasmuch as Abbas Bey was a palace official; and because many things had lately been stolen from the palace, but although many suspected persons had been punished and dismissed, yet the thefts had not been certainly traced to any one. These great sacks contained, therefore, without doubt, all kinds of valuable property from the palace, and Abbas Bey was the traitor who had delivered it to the thieves. The anger of the Caliph, who was a man prone to the fiercest bursts of passion, could scarcely be restrained. Nevertheless, he managed to preserve silence and a calm demeanour, the more especially since he desired to learn what would next be done. He had not long to wait, for, some wine having been given to the men who brought the sacks, the captain ordered them to go at once on board, as he should set sail that very night. The Caliph hearing this, whispered to Giafer that he should go out with the men as they left with the sacks, and that he should instantly proceed to the nearest guard-house and fetch a company of soldiers, with whom he should surround the

house and take all within prisoners. Giafer, doing as he was bid, left the house with the men as they came out again with the sacks, and hastened to fetch the guard as the Caliph had ordered.

Unluckily, it happened that the captain of the pirates—for such they were—being more alert and observant than his men, had noticed the presence of the two strangers, and had remarked the Caliph whisper to his companion, and the departure of the latter. Instantly divining that their proceedings had been discovered, and that the man who went out had gone to betray them to the authorities, the captain whispered an order to the two or three who sat nearest to him, and immediately they rose, fell upon the Caliph, gagged and bound him; and all so suddenly and swiftly that he had no time to offer any kind of resistance. Then the captain, commanding his men to bring their prisoner in the midst of them, proceeded at once to their vessel, which lay at no great distance. The night was dark, and that band of well-armed, resolute men could not easily have been overpowered, even had there been any to attempt such a thing. But, in fact, they met no one on their short journey from the caravanserai to the waterside. In a few minutes, therefore, after the departure of the trusty Giafer, the Caliph found himself lying bound and helpless on board a ship, which at once set sail and carried him he knew not whither.

The next day one of the crew came and removed the cloth they had tied over his mouth to gag him, and brought him some food. Then the unhappy Caliph declared to the man who he was, and demanded that the captain should be brought before him. But the fellow only laughed, and going afterwards to the captain, said: "The merchant you have taken has lost his wits, and he proclaims himself to be the Commander of the Faithful, and says that we are but his slaves." The captain laughed heartily and said, "Nevertheless, he is stout and strong, and may be sold for a fair price when we come to the port we are bound for."

Leaving the Caliph to proceed on the voyage he had begun so unwillingly, we must return to the Grand Vizier, who, as soon as he found himself outside the caravanserai, had hastened to the nearest guard-house, and, calling the captain of the guard, had ordered him to assemble his men and accompany him immediately.

When he got back to the caravanserai he posted his men so that none of the inmates should escape, and then, entering with the captain and ten soldiers, was aghast to find the place empty. At once he hastened with his whole force to the waterside; but too late! Nothing could be seen of the pirate ship, which was already lost in the darkness.

Fortunately the Vizier, always a reticent and prudent man, had not mentioned the Caliph, and he now ordered the company to return to their guard-house, merely remarking that the robbers had for this time escaped him.

Returning to the palace, he was for some time lost in doubt as to the best course for him to pursue under the circumstances. That the Caliph should escape from the clutches of the desperate gang who had carried him off seemed little likely. And yet so many and such strange adventures had been experienced by them both, and they had found their way out of so many dangerous scrapes into which the Caliph's curiosity and daring had involved them, that no good fortune seemed impossible.

Moreover, he reflected that Haroun had at this time no son old enough to succeed him, while Ibrahim, his half-brother, and next heir according to Moslim usage, was the Vizier's declared enemy. His accession to the throne would therefore mean infallibly the destruction of the Vizier and his whole family.

He resolved, after much consideration, to take the boldest course as being really the safest, as indeed it frequently is.

Taking with him a small escort, he left Bussora at daybreak, and proceeded as fast as the horses would carry them to Bagdad. On his arrival he wrote immediately a note to Zobeideh, Haroun's favourite wife; told her that the Caliph, while engaged in one of his usual nocturnal rambles, had temporarily disappeared, and suggested, in the interest of herself and her son, that she should give out that, being indisposed, the Caliph had retired for a short time to one of his palaces in the provinces, and had confided the government meanwhile into the hands of his old and trusty Vizier. In this way, and with the connivance of Zobeideh, the astute Giafer managed to retain without question the government of the country during the absence of the Caliph.

To return to the Caliph. For three days the pirate ship pursued her course in fair weather, and without incident. On the fourth day she sighted a merchantman, to whom she gave chase. But the captain of the merchantman, seeing his danger, crowded on every stitch of canvas he possessed, and having a fair wind, and an uncommonly fast ship, he kept so far ahead that, the sun going down, the pirate lost sight of him, and he escaped.

This chase had carried the pirates far out of their course, and on the next day a great storm arose, and they were obliged to shorten sail and run before the wind. At length one huge wave which broke over the ship, having swept no less than eight of the crew overboard, the captain, who found himself short-handed, gave orders that the prisoner should be released, that he might do his part in the endeavour to save the ship and all their lives. The ship having sprung a leak—or, indeed, more probably several, for the water poured in upon them apace—the crew, including the Caliph himself, became exhausted with continuous pumping, and the captain, therefore, descriing a coast-line, determined to run the ship boldly ashore, in the hope that some of them at least might be saved. And in fact, although the ship when she touched the beach was stove in and broken up by the force of the waves, yet the Caliph, the captain, and three of his men were washed ashore, and lay on the beach in a very faint and exhausted condition.

Here they were found by certain natives of that region, who gave them food and drink to revive them. Then, without either binding or in any way ill-treating them, they conducted them along a broad and level road which ran inland towards the capital of the country.

In about an hour's time, being all wearied and thirsty, the sun being now very fierce, they descried with great pleasure a village at no great distance, which was very pleasantly situated at the foot of a steep hill, in the shadow of which it lay, embowered in a profusion of palms and date-trees. Here the villagers were scattered in groups, feasting and merry-making, it being a festival held in honour of some local magnate, whose daughter had that day been married. The villagers received their fellow-countrymen, as also the Caliph and the pirates, with every demonstration of good-will, bringing

them fresh milk to drink, and bread, made of a mixture of rye and oats, with plenty of dates, to eat.

Here the whole party rested for some hours, but when their conductors wished again to resume their journey, the three pirates flatly refused to depart, saying that they were well off where they were, and would go no further—at least for that day. It was intimated to them that the king of that country would suffer no stranger to dwell there unless he had first seen him and granted his permission. However, all was in vain; they no longer regarded the authority of their captain, and, being three men to one, he could not compel them to obey. Leaving them, therefore, the Caliph and the captain set out again, hoping before nightfall to reach the town where the king, who had already been informed of their arrival, was expecting them.

For some distance their road lay through a pleasant and well-cultivated country, dotted at intervals by hamlets and scattered cottages, which were surrounded by groves of orange-trees or clumps of dates and palms. At length, as they advanced, the ground became broken and hilly, the road was steep, and far in the distance they saw, on a great plateau or table-land, the sparkling domes and minarets of a majestic city.

The sun was already low as they drew near to the city, and they were congratulating themselves on being able to enter the town before the darkness should be upon them, when suddenly they came to the edge of a vast and precipitous abyss, which completely severed the country they had been traversing from the heights on which the city had been built. The road they could see continued its course on the other side, but, spanning the dizzy chasm, the only bridge was the trunk of a gigantic tree, which lay stretched across it. Without hesitation or difficulty the natives of the country passed over, trusting themselves without apparent concern to walk at that tremendous height along the rough surface of the primitive bridge, which afforded so uncertain and precarious a foothold. The captain, having the nerves and nimbleness of a sailor, followed them fearlessly and safely. But for the Caliph the adventure was extremely perilous. However, seeing the others cross, with his wonted intrepidity and hardihood he ventured to follow them. But on reaching

the middle of the narrow and uneven footway, and looking down into the tremendous depths below, becoming giddy he threatened to fall headlong, and only by a strong effort of the resolute will that distinguished him, and steadying himself by looking earnestly at a fixed spot in front of him, he succeeded in reaching the other side in safety.

Shortly after passing over this dangerous bridge they began to find themselves in the suburbs of the city. On either side the road there were fine houses situated in beautiful gardens, and they had not proceeded far before a guard met them, sent by Selim Sadek, the king.

Selim was very desirous to see and speak with the two brave men who unaided had crossed the tree-bridge in safety—a feat no stranger previously had succeeded in accomplishing.

When they reached the palace—which was a noble and imposing pile of buildings, situated on a steep hill, and overlooking not only the city, but extensive plains and lakes stretching away as far as the eye could see—they were shown into apartments where baths and food were prepared for them. After bathing and enjoying an excellent repast, they retired to rest, being greatly fatigued with their journey.

The Grand Chamberlain, after he had seen that the king's orders had been duly carried out, and that the strangers had been properly received and lodged, hastened to report to his master what had been done. Selim, on receiving his report, inquired what his guests were like. The Chamberlain replied, "Both of them, your Majesty, are fine, well-built men; and both are exceptionally brave, as their bearing, when they came to the bridge, amply proved; but in all other respects they are very unlike. The one is but a rough fellow, probably a sea captain, who stared about him in astonishment when he came into the halls of your palace, although they are by no means the best. We noticed, also, that he eyed the plate, although it was but silver, not only with admiration, but somewhat greedily, as though he would, if opportunity had offered, have gladly seized and gone off with it. The other stranger, on the contrary, seemed to view the magnificence of the palace with the greatest indifference, and took everything, even to the attendance of the attendants and

great officers, so much as a matter of course, that I feel persuaded," said the Chamberlain, "that he must be a very great personage, perhaps even a king, in his own country."

This account of the strangers given by his Grand Chamberlain inflamed the curiosity of Selim to the highest degree, and the next morning early he seated himself on his throne in the great audience-chamber of his palace, and commanded that the two strangers should be brought before him.

When they were come he inquired who they were, and where they were going when they encountered the storm that had wrecked their vessel. To this the Caliph, who in the new robes that had been supplied them looked a man of great dignity and good breeding, replied by announcing that he was the Caliph Haroun Alraschid, and relating all that had occurred from the time he entered the caravanserai at Bussora until the time when the pirate ship was wrecked.

When King Selim heard that the man before him was the renowned Caliph Haroun Alraschid, whose fame had spread throughout all the world, he, being a good Moslim, came down off his high throne, and, making obeisance to the Commander of the Faithful—"Sire," said he, "a happy day is this for your servant that he should be privileged to see your face or to do aught for your illustrious Majesty. And first, say by what death does it please you that this vile pirate and traitor shall die?"

The captain, who from conversations he had held with the Caliph during their journey since the wreck had become convinced of the true position and rank of his captive, stood silent with bowed head awaiting his sentence.

King Selim having led Haroun Alraschid up the steps of the throne and seated him upon it, would himself have stood upon the steps, but the Caliph bade him come up and be seated by his side.

Then, looking towards the captain of the pirates, who had already been seized by the king's officers, he said, "Although this man has committed that which is very worthy of death, yet because God, the most Merciful, has spared him in the tempest and the wreck, I also will spare him this once; therefore give him a hundred pieces of

gold that he may not be tempted by poverty further to do wrong, and let him go."

When this magnanimous sentence had been pronounced, the pirate captain laid his hand upon his beard and, bowing his head, said to the Caliph, "O Commander of the Faithful, and you, King Selim, if from this time forth I rob any more, I shall deserve mercy from neither God nor man."

Then said King Selim: "Since the Commander of the Faithful has pardoned thee, and that thou mayest not further be tempted, I enrol thee, as thou art a brave man, among the officers of my guard."

Therefore they invested him with the robes of his office and gave him a hundred pieces of gold as the Caliph had commanded, and thenceforth he became one of the bravest and most trustworthy officers of King Selim.

On the next day the Caliph inquired of the king respecting the three men who had remained behind at the village festival. But Selim informed him that they had a law in that country prohibiting any stranger from dwelling with the people of the land until the king had granted his permission. Therefore, when the men had been found by the officials of government living at that village without having first obtained leave and authority so to do, they would be led immediately to execution.

"Then," said the Caliph, "by this wholesome law your people are protected from the evil influence of villains, and in this case we are rid of three men who were not only thieves and pirates, but lazy, worthless, and mutinous fellows, who refused to obey and follow even their own captain. The action of your law has but forestalled what would have been my own sentence upon them."

The Caliph remained a whole month with King Selim, accompanying him on grand hunting expeditions, and being entertained with all the magnificent and varied pleasures the royal court could devise.

At the end of that period he had intended to have set out on his return to Bagdad. But just at that moment a messenger arrived from a neighbouring king with a very insolent message for Selim and a declaration of war. This king, whose name was Gorkol, had asked

the daughter of Selim in marriage for his son. But King Selim, being a good Moslim, had refused to give his daughter in marriage to the son of a heathen, and one, moreover, who was reported to be proficient in the vilest arts of magic. Hence the declaration of war. The Caliph, being naturally of a very fierce and hasty temper, resented hotly this insult to his host. He therefore announced his intention to accompany the latter, who gathered together an army to chastise the insolent heathen.

The military display as the Caliph and the king left the capital was most imposing. The army consisted of twenty thousand men, half of whom were infantry and half cavalry. There were also elephants and camels with stores, and a great multitude of camp-followers.

For five days they marched through Selim's dominions, and on the sixth day entered the territory of King Gorkol. The frontier was marked by a range of hills, and the passage of so large a force over these was a toilsome and tedious operation. The Caliph and king had each a large tent for his own use, and a small army of officers and attendants to wait on him.

On the night of the seventh day, after a very exhausting march over difficult ground, the army encamped in a spacious valley into which they had descended just as night was approaching.

Whether the enemy managed to get at them unobserved, being stealthy and knowing every feature of the country, or whether the sentinels, being weary, slept at their post, is uncertain, but suddenly before daybreak the great army was awakened by shouts and blows to find the foe was upon them. In the darkness and the excitement of the moment all was confusion. Different parties of the royal troops starting hurriedly to arms, wildly attacked each other. The strife being furious and hand-to-hand was terrific and deadly; and when daylight appeared the enemy, pressing boldly forward to the centre of the camp, overcame all the resistance of which the thinned and disorganized army was capable, and captured both the king and the Caliph.

The two princes were carried with every mark of indignity into the presence of the heathen monarch, who, insulting them with references to their defeat, demanded of them that they should

abandon the Moslem faith and worship the idols of the gods of his people, who had, he said, given his troops the victory.

But the Caliph answered that although Allah, whose name be praised, had permitted them to be worsted in the confusion of a night attack, yet they still trusted in him, and they would never vary in the least degree from the glorious words of the Prophet: "Allah is God, and there is no God but Allah."

Hearing this, King Gorkol ordered them to be confined separately in two dungeons of his castle, there to remain until a great festival of the gods which was approaching should arrive, when he would sacrifice them both to the gods whom they had dared to despise. Locked in the gloomy vaults, and seeing no one but the jailer who once a day brought them the scanty and hard fare necessary to keep them alive till the day of vengeance should come, their position seemed altogether desperate and their fate assured.

But in the case of King Selim he had, unknown to his captors and concealed in the folds of his turban, a ruby of great size and of immense value. With this he hoped to be able to bribe his jailer and effect his escape. And in fact so well did he manage that before a week was passed he was travelling homewards in the disguise of a merchant, accompanied by the jailer, who dared not remain in his own country in possession of the ruby because, according to the custom prevailing in that kingdom, all precious stones must be surrendered to the king under penalty of death by torture. He therefore fled with Selim, disguised as his slave.

The king had made great efforts to induce the jailer to effect the release of the Caliph at the same time as himself, but as Haroun Alraschid was in charge of another jailer, it could not be managed. Selim was obliged therefore, to his great grief, to leave the Caliph to his fate; but he hurried back to his own dominions with the utmost speed, determined to at once return with another army to avenge the death of the Caliph, whose life he could not hope to arrive in time to save.

The Caliph, having about him neither jewels nor money, had no means of propitiating his jailer or abating the rigour and severity of the treatment to which he was subjected. Once a day only, early in the morning, the jailer appeared, and, without opening the great

heavy door of the dungeon, he opened one panel only, and through that opening handed to his prisoner the two small loaves, or rather, flat cakes, and the flask of water which must supply his wants till the following morning.

Five days had thus passed, and there seemed no possibility of the Caliph escaping the painful and humiliating death to which he was destined by the heathen king. The festival to be held in honour of the gods of the country was approaching, and two days hence the people, who were already becoming greatly excited, both by religious fury and also by drinking great quantities of a strong and fiery spirit which they distilled, were to be gratified by the sight of the sacrifice by horrible tortures of their unfortunate prisoners.

Just before daybreak on the sixth day, the same morning on which Selim and his jailer were effecting their escape, the Caliph awoke, and thoughts of the frightful situation in which he found himself prevented him from again falling asleep. In great distress of mind he prayed earnestly to God that strength might be given him to enable him to sustain with firmness and fortitude the pains he might be called upon to endure. After which prayer he felt calmer and more composed. Presently, being very hungry, he tried in the dim light to find a small piece of bread which he had not yet eaten. He had placed it on a narrow ledge near to the place where he slept, but in the darkness he pushed it with his hand before he had grasped it, and it fell upon the floor. Groping about to find it, his hand came suddenly upon something which felt soft and cool—an object apparently about the size and shape of a hen's egg, yet not hard like an egg-shell, but elastic and yielding readily to the pressure of the fingers. What it was the sense of touch did not enable him to guess, and as yet the light was insufficient to permit him to distinguish anything clearly. And, marvellous to relate, as the light increased, although all the objects around him became visible, yet this something which he had felt, and which he still felt to be grasped in his hand, was nevertheless not to be seen. This circumstance surprised the Caliph very much, and he sat cross-legged on the straw which had been placed in the corner of the dungeon for him to sleep on, just as he had been used to do on the splendid divan in his palace, still grasping the unknown object in his hand, and yet still unable to see what it was. After he had sat thus for some

time cogitating what this might mean, the hour came round when the jailer should come and bring him his food for the day.

Now it so happened that the Caliph's jailer when bringing his food had to pass the dungeon in which Selim had been confined. This morning as he passed he was amazed to observe that the door was unfastened, and, looking in, he perceived that the vault was empty. Fearful that his prisoner might likewise have effected his escape, he hurriedly set down the food and ran on to the dungeon containing the Caliph.

The latter was surprised to hear his jailer running rapidly along the passage, and still more surprised when the man, after looking through the panel, withdrew the huge bolts and, opening the door, came into the great gloomy vault, looking excitedly about him. Then after a few moments, apparently bewildered and terror-struck, he turned about, went out, closed the door behind him, and, without waiting to replace the bolts, walked quickly along the passage and disappeared.

The Caliph, although unable to guess to what he owed his good fortune, did not neglect to avail himself of it. Pushing open the door, and stopping to close it and bolt it behind him, he walked down the corridor without knowing where and to what it might lead him. This passage or corridor seemed at first sight to terminate with a dead wall at the end of it. But, proceeding further along it, he presently perceived a side-passage turning out of it at right angles, and this smaller passage, which was short, terminated in a flight of steps leading evidently into the castle-yard. The door at the top of the steps was partly open, and when he reached it the Caliph could hear and catch glimpses of a group of soldiers standing and chatting together not far from the doorway. He stood for some moments uncertain what he should do. If he opened the door and went out, doubtless he would immediately be seized; on the other hand, to stay where he was meant no less certain destruction, as at any moment some one might enter and find him there. He had just determined to step out boldly and risk detection, in the hope that in the bustle of the castle-yard his exit might pass unnoticed, when a gust of wind blew the door wide open, and he stood face to face, not ten paces distant, with that group of soldiers he had heard conversing.

For a moment he stood horror-struck, expecting to see them rush forward and secure him. To his extreme surprise, none of them, not even those facing him, took the slightest notice of his presence. They appeared not even to see him, but perhaps they took him for one of the innumerable retainers of the Court; at any rate, the Caliph, plucking up courage, stepped out and walked quietly away.

As he was crossing the courtyard, a great mounted warrior on a powerful black steed came pounding along, and would apparently have ridden right over the Caliph just as though he was unaware of his existence, but Haroun drew quickly aside, and the horse shied, thereby drawing upon itself many hard blows from the fierce and haughty rider.

Passing out of the castle-gates, and turning eastward, as he judged, by the position of the sun, the Caliph proceeded in the direction which would enable him, he hoped, in due time, to reach his own country. He had not gone far when he met a rough country fellow who carried a long piece of wood on his shoulder, and Haroun would have been struck full in the face with it had he not stepped quickly on one side to avoid it. But the man, although he passed close by him, neither looked at nor spoke to him, and seemed altogether unconscious of his presence.

It now first dawned upon the Caliph that the strange and invisible substance which he had picked up in the dungeon, and which he still carried in his hand, possessed indeed the marvellous property of rendering him entirely invisible to other men. This accounted for the remarkable panic of his jailer, who, when he looked into, and even entered his dungeon, failed to see him; it explained why the soldiers had permitted him to leave the building unmolested, why the horseman had nearly ridden over him, and why the clown who had just passed had, without knowing it, nearly brained him with his load.

Much comforted and strengthened by the discovery of this wonderful exemption from observation which he now enjoyed, he walked on briskly, till the sun, being now high in the heavens, and the heat very great, he came to a village, and entering boldly an inn there, and passing through into an empty apartment, he lay down