

TWENTY-THIRD PSALM.

The might of God's enfolding arms my foes and fears alike will daunt;
His mercy brims my cup; He is my shepherd and I shall not want.

E'en though my head be but a crust, my roof be mean, my fire burn low,
His love will fill my soul with peace, my heart with a diviner glow.

Through pastures sweet with scented bloom His unseen presence leadeth me;
In running brooks and waters still His unremitting care I see.

Yea, when I walk within the vale where death's black shadow glooms the way,
I shall not fear; the Lord my God will guide my feet and be my stay.

Beyond the vale no heart is torn, no eye with tears of anguish wet—
His Word it is the solid rock whereon my house of hope is set.

O long and long the way He leads His children to their destined place;
A many suns must rise and sink ere we may look upon His face;

But sometime, be it ere so far, the way will lead us to His door,
And we shall bide at His dear side forever and forevermore.

—Frank Putnam, in the February National.

A TALE OF THE DESERT
AND WOMAN'S LOVE.

Edgar Mayhew Bacon, in New York Evening Post: This is the tale that Al-Sherif told as we sat under the tamarind tree in the garden of Josef Wali-el-Din, the dealer in girls at Shiraz:

It was, after the fast of Ramazan, that makes all men weak and thin, and the sun's heat at midsummer was like fire to waste the substance of a man's body. That is why the saad of the desert was red as blood to my eyes, any my head swayed from side to side as I rode.

I dare not say to anyone that the fever was upon me, for one does not pay to have his body anointed and to be left on the sand for the jackals to finish when the caravan has gone by.

Sheyk Sulym, my neighbor, prated night and day of Utaiba robbers—a plague to him—and I knew that he feared for the safety of the pearls that were hidden in the folds of his turban, yes, I knew that his daughter had been the price of them; yet he broke off his lamentations to recite the prayers when we halted. When I bowed I could not remember a prayer, and the sound of the people and the beasts was afar off. Also, when the rest had completed their prayers, I forgot to raise my head from my mat.

At last some one took me by the shoulder, shaking me till I awoke. I heard a woman's voice in salutation: "Nalman." I tried to answer: "As salem alaykum," but my tongue was too thick for speech, and my will was weak.

Then an arm as strong and gentle as my mother's lefted me. Slowly I opened my eyes, though at first I distinguished nothing but the motion of all about me, but at last I understood that the host was astir and passing by.

My mare stood near, and the woman helped me to mount, but, as I turned to bless her, I saw that she was a daughter of the Wahhabis, whom my soul loathed; so my heart was hardened against her.

Fleet as an antelope, she ran towards the company of her own people, and I lost sight of her; nevertheless, I could not forget, my heart being sore because I had been helped by one of that tribe.

The night was not dark. This Syrian moon is a softer daylight, and I saw that I was among a party of Alexandrian pilgrims, hajj, and dervishes from the Upper Nile. But the fever had hold of me again, and the things that moved around me faded. I rode like a drunken man, with my hands buried in the shaggy hair of my horse, for the hot wind on my cheek was fanned by the wing of Azrael, the Angel of Death.

I lay upon my good mare's neck, now dreaming thirstily of the Wady Laymum—the valley of lime trees—where the water falls with a tinkling sound between the stones and the bittern dips his wing into the pools; now burning with shame that a woman of the Wahhabis had helped me. Then I forgot my hate, and heard only the tinkling that sometimes I knew to be the bell of my neighbor's camel, but more often I thought was the stream in the Wady.

They were lifting me from my mare. Who?

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I knew nothing at all, cared for nothing, except that they had destroyed my rest in the valley of limes, and that the spreading wings of Azrael darkened the sky where the dawn should have been.

Then the stupor floated away for a little while, as a mist is blown, going and returning, drifting, always drifting.

It seemed that there were two of me, one that looked down upon the other and pitied. I saw how they poured upon the wasted body of that other the drops of precious oil and wrapped it in the shroud that I, like all pilgrims to Mecca, had provided before setting out. It had been sprinkled with holy water from the Prophet's well of Zemzem, against that day.

They laid me in the sand, covering my limbs with the shroud and reciting a prayer from the Koran. Then I was left alone with Azrael; for the caravan never waits.

How glorious it was as it passed away across the desert! The horses and dromedaries with trappings of crimson and mountings of brass that flung back the sunlight; the plodding camels, burdened with merchandise; the white burnouses of some prince's retinue, starred with points of glittering steel, dashing among the press of litters and vans, of mules and asses, and the straggling horde of vendors and mendicants. There was the train from Bulak, and the company from Cairo; there rode the dervishes that had come up from El Medina, and the Damascus caravan, splendid with scarlet and green and gold. In the midst of all, surrounded by a moving sea of bright-hued awnings, but towering far above them, moved the litter that the Sultan at Stamboul had sent with presents for the Prophet's shrine.

And ever above that moving mass rose the voices of thousands, continually crying: "Labbayk—Allahumma—Labbayk!" Further and further away they went. The colors faded into the blue of the desert horizon, the cry became a murmur—"Labbayk—Labbayk—here am I!"

Labbayk—here am I! The mist drifted away once more. "Allahumma—here am I—alone!"

The desert was vast and empty, I alone in the midst of it under the hovering wing of the shadow. I turned my head to the right; there were specks in the distance; they were jackals. Overhead there were specks in the sky—they were vultures.

Then Fear came, and sat beside me on the sand, and whispered that the jackals and the vultures would gather nearer, that the fever would burn and the thirst torment, that my tongue would thicken and my blood turn to fire, and I would cry to Azrael to strike, lest the jackals and the vultures forget to wait.

But I was a martyr. What a comfort there is in pride! As truly was I a martyr as if I fell in battle for Islam, and all the benefits that could come to those who marched about the Kaabah or listened to the sermon on Araat—escape from the demons and a speedy entrance into Paradise—would be mine.

For an hour I comforted my soul with these reflections; then I buried my face in the folds of my shroud and Fear whispered: "I am here!"

Allah! It is a frightful thing to lie alone, weak and helpless as a babe, in the middle of the desert, between the burning of the fever and the chill of the shadow, and to know that the specks in the distance come nearer and nearer.

I lifted my voice, weak as a babe's, in that solitude and cried in despair: "Labbayk!" and an answering cry came from the distance: "Labbayk."

Alhamdu lilla! I was not deserted. Some one came swiftly across the sand of the desert, alone and on foot. I could see by the light lisam that covered her mouth that it was a woman, but my heart sank and I turned my head away when I knew that it was the hated daughter of Wahhabis.

She knelt at my side, raising my head to her knee, I heard the gurgle of water in the goatskin zemzimiyah that she carried.

"Drink," she commanded. I, being too weak to contend, drank; then she made a shade over me from the sun and pillowed my head in her lap, crooning a mountain song until I slept. But before I slept I knew that Fear had gone away.

When it was night again the woman roused me to put between my lips a sweet, strong cordial that gave me strength. With her arm still under me I staggered to my feet, and thus we set out, guided by a star that hung in the west.

All night we journeyed. I was like one walking in sleep, or like a child wakened unwillingly, crying with weariness and anger that she would not let me lie down on the sand. My shroud was around me still and it trailed on the sand, but I heeded not. Far away now was the trail of the caravan, like a scar on the bosom of the desert, and our own track a pitiful, wavering line that bent to the west.

I cursed the woman that she would not let me alone, but my weak rebellion was as nothing to her will. So I stumbled on, and the daughter of the Wahhabis held me up till it was dawn. Then we rested.

All day she sat by me, while the air quivered with heat and the light dazzled the

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eye. All day she sat between me and the sun, holding her garment as an awning over my face, and moistening my lips with water from the zemzimiyah. Dates, too, she compelled me to eat; yet herself tasted neither date nor so much as a drop of water, lest there should not be enough.

I saw her face: lustrous eye, black as midnight, and mouth that the lisam would not hide. Beneath the linen I could see the tenderness of its smile. I almost forgot that she was the daughter of my enemies. Slowly my strength returned, as if it flowed from her life into mine, till at the evening hour of prayer I was able to kneel unaided and repeat the words that the Prophet teaches.

She had the courage and strength that her people never lack. She was bred in the mountains, used to climbing the steepes with the water jar on her head, or herding her father's flocks, yet she was comely and pleasant to look upon, one in a thousand for grace.

Still I spoke not to her, for was she not of the Wahhabis? It would be sin to bless her, and curse her I could not.

Again night, and we journeyed west. Still I stumbled, and still the woman held me up. Yet her step, it seemed, was less strong, and I saw in the moonlight that her face had grown drawn and weary.

In the dawn I heard her whisper: "Courage, I smell the lime trees." Then I felt that she tottered, and together we sank upon the sand; yet even then she tried to lift my head, and poured between my lips the last drop of water. I crawled on, alone, and reached the Wady Laymum, and heard the tinkle of the water, and smelt the fragrance of the limes.

But in the green Wady there was no soul but me. The woman lay out there in the desert, and the Wady was lonelier than the desert. I cursed the fever and the greed of thirst that had made me push on unmindful that I was alone. Like the rush of the wind my manhood came back to me. Gathering my hands full of limes, I went back to where she lay. Her lips could utter no word, but her eyes—Allah! did ever eyes show such a wonder of joy?

I laid her in the shade of the limes, by the pool. She drank of the water, and the cool sour of the fruit revived her.

There were roses blooming by the water, and a wild melon that climbed about the trunk of a pomegranate made a screen like a curtain where the woman rested. Her name was that of the Prophet's daughter, our lady Fatimah.

I strayed down by the stream, seeing the birds flee from me, and stopping to gather the dates that had fallen in the grove. The cry of the bittern sounded so sorrowful that it made my heart ache, and I crept back to where Fatimah lay.

Her face lit gloriously when I spoke to her. "Why did you give your strength for mine? Why did you, of all the caravan, take pity to help me?" I asked.

"Five years ago," she answered, smiling, yet speaking slowly, and barely above a whisper, "five years ago I came with my father, a child, to Alexandria. Five years ago—and you were there, though you remember me not. How could you remember the Wahhabi girl you saved from the stick of the camel driver? You forget in an hour, but I never forget. Till I saw your face in the caravan four days ago I had not hoped ever to see it again, yet never for a moment had I forgotten it."

She stopped, too weak for further speech, but her eyes brightened with a smile that was like the dawn that breaks over the holy city. She did not try even to veil their secrets.

Oh, wonderful heart of woman! Who that lives can fathom its depths of tenderness, or measure its heights of sacrifice? Who can bound it, or describe it, or explain it? Its love is born of a word, a movement of kindness, a glamour; and is immortal as the stars, and mightier than death!

When night came again, and the moon struggled to pierce the screen of the melon vine that veiled Fatimah's resting place, her voice was silent and her eyes were closed. All night long I lay upon my face on the ground, mourning for the daughter of my enemies, the woman of the Wahhabis, whom love had slain.

Then in the morning I dug a grave under the lime trees and laid her there, and made long lamentation. And there my heart lies, with Fatimah.

Then the Haji Al Sherif hid his face in his hands and howled his head, and I knew he forgot that I had heard the story that is written here.

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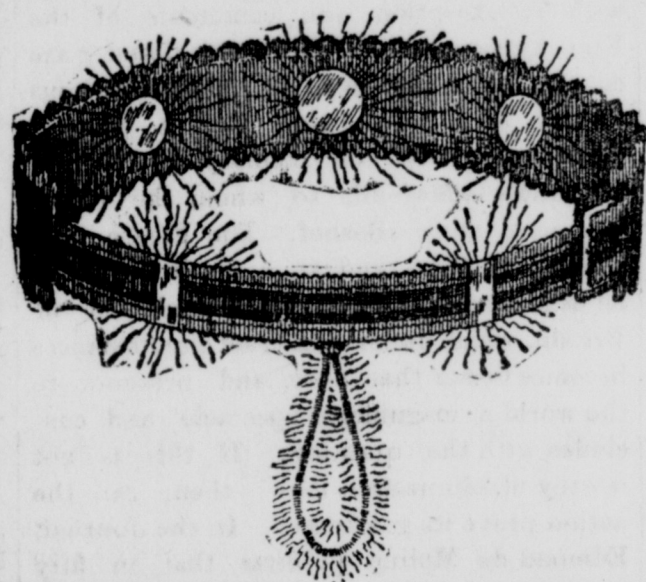
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