

The Man Who Never Laughed

Folk-Lore And Legends: Oriental

Arabic

Advanced
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There was a man, of those possessed of houses and riches, who had wealth and servants and slaves and other possessions; and he departed from the world to receive the mercy of God (whose name be exalted!), leaving a young son. And when the son grew up, he took to eating and drinking, and the hearing of instruments of music and songs, and was liberal and gave gifts, and expended the riches that his father had left to him until all the wealth had gone. He then betook himself to the sale of the male black slaves, and the female slaves, and other possessions, and expended all that he had of his father's wealth and other things, and became so poor that he worked with the labourers. In this state he remained for a period of years. While he was sitting one day beneath a wall, waiting to see who would hire him, lo! a man of comely countenance and apparel drew near to him and saluted him. So the youth said to him, "O uncle, hast thou known me before now?"

The man answered him, "I have not known thee, O my son, at all; but I see the traces of affluence upon thee, though thou art in this condition."

The young man replied, "O uncle, what fate and destiny have ordained hath come to pass. But hast thou, O uncle, O comely-faced, any business in which to employ me?"

The man said to him, "O my son, I desire to employ thee in an easy business."

The youth asked, "And what is it, O uncle?"

And the man answered him, "I have with me ten sheykhs in one abode, and we have no one to perform our

wants. Thou shalt receive from us, of food and clothing, what will suffice thee, and shalt serve us, and thou shalt receive of us thy portion of benefits and money. Perhaps, also, God will restore to thee thine affluence by our means.”

The youth therefore replied, “I hear and obey.”

The sheykh then said to him, “I have a condition to impose upon thee.”

“And what is thy condition, O uncle?” asked the youth.

He answered him, “O my son, it is that thou keep our secret with respect to the things that thou shalt see us do; and when thou seest us weep, that thou ask us not respecting the cause of our weeping.” And the young man replied, “Well, O uncle.”

So the sheykh said to him, “O my son, come with us, relying on the blessing of God (whose name be exalted!).” And the young man followed the sheykh until the latter conducted him to the bath; after which he sent a man, who brought him a comely garment of linen, and he clad him with it, and went with him to his abode and his associates. And when the young man entered, he found it to be a high mansion, with lofty angles, ample, with chambers facing one another, and saloons; and in each saloon was a fountain of water, and birds were warbling over it, and there were windows overlooking, on every side, a beautiful garden within the mansion. The sheykh conducted him into one of the chambers, and he found it decorated with coloured marbles, and its ceiling ornamented with blue and brilliant gold, and it was spread with carpets of silk; and he found in it ten sheykhs sitting facing one another, wearing the garments of mourning, weeping, and wailing. So the young man wondered at their case, and was about to question the sheykh who had brought him, but he remembered the condition, and therefore withheld his tongue. Then the sheykh committed to the young man a chest, containing thirty thousand pieces of gold, saying to him, “O my son, expend upon us out of this chest, and upon thyself, according to what is just, and be thou faithful, and take care of that wherewith I have intrusted thee.”

And the young man replied, “I hear and obey.” He continued to expend upon them for a period of days and nights, after which one of them died; whereupon his companions took him, and washed him and shrouded him, and buried him in a garden behind the mansion. And death ceased not to take of them one after another,

until there remained only the sheykh who had hired the young man. So he remained with the young man in that mansion, and there was not with them a third; and they remained thus for a period of years. Then the sheykh fell sick; and when the young man despaired of his life, he addressed him with courtesy, and was grieved for him, and said to him, "O uncle, I have served you, and not failed in your service one hour for a period of twelve years, but have acted faithfully to you, and served you according to my power and ability."

The sheykh replied, "Yes, O my son, thou hast served us until these sheykhs have been taken unto God (to whom be ascribed might and glory!), and we must inevitably die."

And the young man said, "O my master, thou art in a state of peril, and I desire of thee that thou inform me what hath been the cause of your weeping, and the continuance of your wailing and your mourning and your sorrow."

He replied, "O my son, thou hast no concern with that, and require me not to do what I am unable; for I have begged God (whose name be exalted!) not to afflict any one with my affliction. Now if thou desire to be safe from that into which we have fallen, open not that door," and he pointed to it with his hand, and cautioned him against it; "and if thou desire that what hath befallen us should befall thee, open it, and thou wilt know the cause of that which thou hast beheld in our conduct; but thou wilt repent, when repentance will not avail thee." Then the illness increased upon the sheykh, and he died; and the young man washed him with his own hands, and shrouded him, and buried him by his companions.

He remained in that place, possessing it and all the treasure; but notwithstanding this, he was uneasy, reflecting upon the conduct of the sheykhs. And while he was meditating one day upon the words of the sheykh, and his charge to him not to open the door, it occurred to his mind that he might look at it. So he went in that direction, and searched until he saw an elegant door, over which the spider had woven its webs, and upon it were four locks of steel. When he beheld it, he remembered how the sheykh had cautioned him, and he departed from it. His soul desired him to open the door, and he restrained it during a period of seven days; but on the eighth day his soul overcame him, and he said, "I must open that door, and see what will happen to me in consequence; for nothing will repel what God (whose name be exalted!) decreeth and predestineth, and no event will happen but by His will." Accordingly he arose and opened the door, after he had broken the locks. And when he had opened the door he saw a narrow passage, along which he walked for the space of three

hours; and lo! he came forth upon the bank of a great river. At this the young man wondered. And he walked along the bank, looking to the right and left; and behold! a great eagle descended from the sky, and taking up the young man with its talons, it flew with him, between heaven and earth, until it conveyed him to an island in the midst of the sea. There it threw him down, and departed from him.

So the young man was perplexed at his case, not knowing whither to go; but while he was sitting one day, lo! the sail of a vessel appeared to him upon the sea, like the star in the sky; wherefore the heart of the young man became intent upon the vessel, in the hope that his escape might be effected in it. He continued looking at it until it came near unto him; and when it arrived, he beheld a bark of ivory and ebony, the oars of which were of sandal-wood and aloes-wood, and the whole of it was encased with plates of brilliant gold. There were also in it ten damsels, virgins, like moons. When the damsels saw him, they landed to him from the bark, and kissed his hands, saying to him, "Thou art the king, the bridegroom." Then there advanced to him a damsel who was like the shining sun in the clear sky, having in her hand a kerchief of silk, in which were a royal robe, and a crown of gold set with varieties of jacinths. Having advanced to him, she clad him and crowned him; after which the damsels carried him in their arms to the bark, and he found in it varieties of carpets of silk of diverse colours. They then spread the sails, and proceeded over the depths of the sea.

“Now when I proceeded with them,” says the young man, “I felt sure that this was a dream, and knew not whither they were going with me. And when they came in sight of the land, I beheld it filled with troops, the number of which none knew but God (whose perfection be extolled, and whose name be exalted!) clad in coats of mail. They brought forward to me five marked horses, with saddles of gold, set with varieties of pearls and precious stones; and I took a horse from among these and mounted it. The four others proceeded with me; and when I mounted, the ensigns and banners were set up over my head, the drums and the cymbals were beaten, and the troops disposed themselves in two divisions, right and left. I wavered in opinion as to whether I were asleep or awake, and ceased not to advance, not believing in the reality of my stately procession, but imagining that it was the result of confused dreams, until we came in sight of a verdant meadow, in which were palaces and gardens, and trees and rivers and flowers, and birds proclaiming the perfection of God, the One, the Omnipotent. And now there came forth an army from among those palaces and gardens, like the torrent when it poureth down, until it filled the meadow. When the troops drew near to me, they hailed, and lo! a king advanced from among them, riding alone, preceded by some of his chief officers walking.”

The king, on approaching the young man, alighted from his courser; and the young man, seeing him do so, alighted also; and they saluted each other with the most courteous salutation. Then they mounted their horses again, and the king said to the young man, “Accompany us; for thou art my guest.”

So the young man proceeded with him, and they conversed together, while the stately trains in orderly disposition went on before them to the palace of the king, where they alighted, and all of them entered, together with the king and the young man, the young man's hand being in the hand of the king, who thereupon seated him on the throne of gold and seated himself beside him. When the king removed the litham from his face, lo! this supposed king was a damsel, like the shining sun in the clear sky, a lady of beauty and loveliness, and elegance and perfection, and conceit and amorous dissimulation. The young man beheld vast affluence and great prosperity, and wondered at the beauty and loveliness of the damsel. Then the damsel said to him, "Know, O king, that I am the queen of this land, and all these troops that thou hast seen, including every one, whether of cavalry or infantry, are women. There are not among them any men. The men among us, in this land, till and sow and reap, employing themselves in the cultivation of the land, and the building and repairing of the towns, and in attending to the affairs of the people, by the pursuit of every kind of art and trade; but as to the women, they are the governors and magistrates and soldiers."

And the young man wondered at this extremely. And while they were thus conversing, the vizier entered; and lo! she was a grey-haired old woman, having a numerous retinue, of venerable and dignified appearance; and the queen said to her, "Bring to us the Kádee and the witnesses." So the old woman went for that purpose. And the queen turned towards the young man, conversing with him and cheering him, and dispelling his fear by kind words; and, addressing him courteously, she said to him, "Art thou content for me to be thy wife?" And thereupon he arose and kissed the ground before her; but she forbade him; and he replied, "O my mistress, I am less than the servants who serve thee." She then said to him, "Seest thou not these servants and soldiers and wealth and treasures and hoards?"

He answered her, "Yes." And she said to him, "All these are at thy disposal; thou shalt make use of them, and give and bestow as seemeth fit to thee." Then she pointed to a closed door, and said to him, "All these things thou shalt dispose of; but this door thou shalt not open; for if thou open it, thou wilt repent, when repentance will not avail thee." Her words were not ended when the vizier, with the Kádee and the witnesses, entered, and all of them were old women, with their hair spreading over their shoulders, and of venerable and dignified appearance. When they came before the queen, she ordered them to perform the ceremony of the marriage-contract. So they married her to the young man. And she prepared the banquets and collected the troops; and when they had eaten and drunk, the young man took her as his wife. And he resided with her seven years,

passing the most delightful, comfortable, and agreeable life.

But he meditated one day upon opening the door, and said, "Were it not that there are within it great treasures, better than what I have seen, she had not prohibited me from opening it." He then arose and opened the door, and lo! within it was the bird that had carried him from the shore of the great river, and deposited him upon the island. When the bird beheld him, it said to him, "No welcome to a face that will never be happy!" So, when he saw it and heard its words, he fled from it; but it followed him and carried him off, and flew with him between heaven and earth for the space of an hour, and at length deposited him in the place from which it had carried him away; after which it disappeared. He thereupon sat in that place, and, returning to his reason, he reflected upon what he had seen of affluence and glory and honour, and the riding of the troops before him, and commanding and forbidding; and he wept and wailed. He remained upon the shore of the great river, where that bird had put him, for the space of two months, wishing that he might return to his wife; but while he was one night awake, mourning and meditating, some one spoke (and he heard his voice, but saw not his person), calling out, "How great were the delights! Far, far from thee is the return of what is passed! And how many therefore will be the sighs!" So when the young man heard it, he despaired of meeting again that queen, and of the return to him of the affluence in which he had been living. He then entered the mansion where the sheykhs had resided, and knew that they had experienced the like of that which had happened unto him, and that this was the cause of their weeping and their mourning; wherefore he excused them. Grief and anxiety came upon the young man, and he entered his chamber, and ceased not to weep and moan, relinquishing food and drink and pleasant scents and laughter, until he died; and he was buried by the side of the sheykhs.

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