

‘The Odalisque’

The voice of lamentation re-echoed through the palace of once mighty Almurah, the Caliph of Baghdad; and the weeping of his dependents declared that he was no more. Nor were the sounds of grief alone heard in the seraglio of the caliph; for the people, stricken as it were with some sudden calamity, did not restrain their tears. The blithe faces that had smiled under the auspices of their father and friend, who had swayed his empire more by example than rigour, were now moist with the crystal drops of sorrow. Alas ! the high and mighty must fall ! The powerful and rich must perish !

When the news of the caliph’s decease was spread abroad, and while the people were yet overwhelmed with grief, the gay and vicious Aladdin ascended to the throne. Of all the inhabitants of the spacious dominions of the east, every one’s sorrow at the death of Almurah was unfeigned and long unchecked; but the breast of Aladdin was full of joy. He plunged headlong into the pleasures of power, and forgot its accompanying duties and troubles.

The people murmured in vain at the change – punishment followed complaint – and the voice of mourning was lost in the air. ‘Twas now that the love of the omnipotent Allah was visible to the Faithful; and as the mosques daily swarmed with suppliants who breathed in silence their prayers to heaven, the prophet Mahommed vouchsafed his gracious aid, and lent an attentive ear to the desires of his servants.

Ahmed, the grand vizier, was beloved by his friends, and adored by the inhabitants of Irak Arabi at large. His virtues were eclipsed by those of none – his disposition was just and merciful – and the welfare of the poor was his chief consideration. So good and great a man was naturally detected by Aladdin. The caliph was, however, afraid to demand from him the imperial seal of the empire; but he nevertheless determined to seek some opportunity for removing him. His only consideration was the enjoyment of life -- his treasury was rich – his seraglio contained three hundred beauties of all nations – Circassians, Persians, Seljuks, Arabians, Walloons, and Georgians swarmed therein – and he was at peace with nearly all his neighbours. But the virtue of Ahmed threw a gloom upon his joys.

One evening the grand vizier was roaming through the streets in disguise, not even attended by a solitary page or a kiaya, to see if the police did its duty, when the screams of a female near one of the principal gates of Baghdad attracted his attention. He instantly drew his scimitar and proceeded hastily to the spot. There he found three individuals, two of whom were obeying the directions of the third, and forcing a female upon a horse, from which it appeared she had suddenly thrown herself, as the cavalcade had passed through the gate.

‘Whose dogs are ye,’ cried Ahmed in a loud voice, ‘that ye thus maltreat this damsel ? I order you to suffer her to depart.’

He who appeared to be the chief, without uttering a single syllable, made a cowardly cut at the gallant minister, and wounded him in the left arm.

‘Save me – save me, for the sake of all your future hopes in Eiram !’ cried the most melodious tongue in the world. ‘they have torn me from my father’s dwelling.’

‘I will save thee or die, fair one !’ exclaimed Ahmed, catching a transitory glimpse of the lovely girl’s features by the light of a flambeau which one of the persecutors carried in his hand.

‘Then shalt thou die !’ rejoined the voice of the chief.

It was the caliph himself who spoke !

Ahmed was irresolute how to act. He dared not rise his arm against his sovereign – and he would not permit treachery in respect to a young and lovely female to remain unpunished. That instant of deliberation proved the death-blow to the maiden’s hopes of release. Aladdin levelled the grand vizier to the ground; and leaving him in a state of insensibility hastened with his beautiful victim to the banks of the Tigris. A boat was instantly unmoored, and in a few minutes the party were landed at the foot of a flight of marble stairs, leading to the private apartments of the harem. It was some time before Ahmed could be recovered from his state of insensibility by a traveller who took compassion upon him, and had him conveyed to the nearest caravanserai. Several days passed, and at length the minister was again restored to health. He then instantly repaired to the divan, threw himself at the foot of the throne, and placed the imperial seal in a beautiful piece of silk, which he then handed to the caliph. The sovereign received it, and Ahmed departed.

Aladdin was now happy for a short period. He had rid himself of a minister whose presence was hateful to him, and he had possessed himself of the most beautiful woman in the universe. But the image of that fair girl also lingered in the heart of Ahmed; and as he had no longer the duties of office to occupy his attention, he brooded over the hopeless and sudden passion he had formed, until even solitude was hateful.

The morning was bright, and the dew was still upon every flower, when the voluptuous Aladdin roved, unattended, amongst the spacious gardens contingent to the imperial palace. He passed into the most retired walks, and sought a bower, formed by the myrtle and the vine, in which he might safely ponder upon the best plan to accomplish the total ruin of his late minister.

Zulima, the most beautiful of all the women in the harem, and the only one who had ever succeeded in procuring a delay ere she submitted to the embraces of the caliph – the virgin Zulima by accident drew near the bower in which her lord and master was reclining upon an ottoman, and giving way to his wrath in broken sentences. His tone and manner at once excited the curiosity and astonishment of the fair slave.

‘Why,’ said he, ‘should the caliph of the east be eclipsed by a slave, and the son of a slave ? People are daily praising the virtues of the last vizier; and alike with one voice they execrate the vices of the commander of the faithful. Allah ! shall he , who with a word can bid millions perish – in whose hands are the lives of thousands and tens of thousands – shall he longer suffer the insolence of a being who dares to be good ! No – he shall die – and his house shall be razed to the ground ! O Ahmed – your safety reposes not upon the love of the people, but upon the will of your sovereign ! But, hark, methought a distant sound reached mine ears ! Or was the wind rushing through the groves of myrtle ?’

In silent horror, the lovely Zulima this heard the projected death of the virtuous Ahmed; and for some moments she was rooted to the spot in indescribable sorrow. Could she but send him notice of Aladdin’s design, and warn him against the anger that hung over him ? But, alas ! the restrictions of the harem were rigorous, and prevented such communication.

A slight movement of Aladdin in the bower aroused the beautiful slave from her reverie; and she returned with her utmost speed to the halls of the oda.

In those times the harem was situate upon the Tigris, a branch of which divided itself in many rills, and watered plentifully the delicious gardens adjoining the building. The edifice itself was elegant and extensive; and the interior was fitted up with that attention to luxurious comfort so general in the east. Costly baths, supplied from crystal fountains, sent forth unceasingly an odour of perfume that rendered the air fragrant. Beyond the spacious hall, at the commencement of the harem, were four large rooms, opening into each other by massive folding doors. The first served for the women to meet in, and pass away as many hours as they chose with music, embroidery, dancing, or any other female diversion. In every window stood rich vases of flowers, upon pedestals of exquisite beauty. Innumerable kinds of fruits, tastefully arranged upon silver and porcelain dishes, tempted the appetite and graced the tables. Indeed, nothing was wanting to render this retreat charming and attractive.

The second chamber was for the repasts that were served up at certain hours; and in the third were tables plentifully laid out with sweetmeats, every sort of confectionery, and bowls of sherbet.

But the fourth chamber, which communicated by a private door with the interior of the caliph’s palace, was kept for him alone; and on his arrival in that spacious hall, the ladies of the harem were there assembled. Three hundred small doors opened from this apartment, into as many rooms, where slept the inmates of the harem; and the name of every individual was inscribed with golden letters over the sculptured portal.

Despite, however, the luxuries so liberally provided for the seraglio, few were the hearts that beat with perfect happiness ! When Zulima hurried to the first chamber we have described, after she had heard the soliloquy of Aladdin, all was confusion and alarm. A murmur, as of the distant

roaring of the sea, struck upon her ears – the women around were tottering in silent horror – and a shout from without at once convinced Zulima that the people had risen in insurrection. Suddenly the welcome words fell upon her ears – ‘There is but one God who is God, Mohammed is his prophet, and Ahmed is his vicegerent upon earth !’ He, who but a few moments before was condemned by Aladdin to death, was now lord of the east; and his name was re-echoed with applause throughout Baghdad.

Nor was the rebellion alone among the populace. The soldiery, disgusted at the tyranny of Aladdin, proclaimed Ahmed Caliph of Irak Arabi, while he in vain endeavoured to recall the people to a sense of their duty. In the course of a few days the deposition of Aladdin and the elevation of Ahmed was proclaimed throughout the district of Baghdad, and messengers were sent with the tidings to the distant provinces and cities of the empire.

In the meantime, Aladdin’s viceroy, the King of Damascus, was happily victorious against his Seljuk enemies. The bulk of the Seljuk army was routed, and the remainder was compelled to take refuge in Brusa. Cosman, the royal seraskier of the Syrian army, then dictated his own terms of peace, and returned in triumph to Damascus.

One evening he was in his private closet, brooding over the mysterious disappearance of his much-loved daughter, when he was awakened from his reverie by the hasty tread of horses in the court-yard below, and a cry of ‘The caliph !’ met his ears. Cosman immediately hastened to receive the commander of the faithful; but it was with the air of supplication, and not of command, that the deposed Aladdin entered the princely hall, and acknowledged the obeisance of the nobles congregated together. It was with feelings of compassion that Cosman listened to the narrative of Aladdin. His deposition, and the elevation of Ahmed, were speedily unfolded to the astonished divan, and the King of Damascus resolved upon taking up arms in favour of the prince who had sought his protection.

At the expulsion of Aladdin, Ahmed ascended the throne of the east. But this mighty accession of power only served to accelerate his virtuous pursuits; and the people gladly saw a renewal of that peaceful and just reign which had covered every cheek with smiles in the time of Almurah.

But the tidings of approaching hostilities on the part of the viceroy of Damascus, who refused to recognize the supremacy of Ahmed, somewhat damped the general rejoicings at Baghdad. Cosman and Aladdin, at the head of sixty thousand men, had passed the Euphrates, crossed the desert of Algezias (now called Diarbekir), and were advancing rapidly upon Baghdad. Ahmed was still inclined to reinstate Aladdin in the possession of his lost honours; and he probably would have done so, had not a circumstance which now occurred frustrated his intention.

Zulima was the most lovely and accomplished of all the women of the harem; and her intrinsic value equalled the charms of her person. With Zulima alone would Ahmed associate. He entertained for her an affection far apart from mere sensual desire, and was beloved in return.

Often had the new caliph endeavoured to discover the cause of a melancholy which had settled on her mind. He had recognized in her the lovely creature who was the indirect cause of his former disgrace, and when he found her in tears he invariably questioned her relative to the cause of her grief, for he suspected that it was connected with her forcible entrance into the harem.

‘Why assume such a melancholy air, Zulima?’ enquired Ahmed one day, as they roved in the gardens of the palace together.

‘It best becomes my condition,’ was the reply. ‘Since the evening we first met, when you so generously interfered on my behalf, I have seldom known a happy moment; and had not my entreaties prevailed upon Aladdin to suffer a certain time to elapse ere I became his favourite sultana, I should not at the moment have been alive.’

Zulima stropped, and large drops glistened in her dark black eyes. Ahmed redoubled his attentions – his anxiety increased as she insisted upon retaining the secret of her fate – but at length he solved the mystery. His astonishment at what he heard was only equalled by his joy in possessing the means of making her happy.

It was not long after this discovery that a courier stood at the entrance of the pavilion in which Cosman, the viceroy of Damascus, dwelt, upon the banks of the lesser Tigris, where the Syrian army was encamped. He bore despatches from Ahmed, caliph of the east. Having unfolded the paper, Cosman perused with indescribable delight the following words, which, after the usual ceremonious preamble, ran on to depict the tyranny of Aladdin and the news of the discover of Cosman’s lost daughter:

‘I must, in vindication of mine own conduct in occupying the crown, notice the numerous acts of injustice committed by Aladdin, whom Allah, nevertheless preserve! If ever rebellion demand extenuation, the people of Baghdad and soldiery deserve that pardon. What was it that spread comparative ruin over a beautiful land? What is the baneful cause that subverted the morality of chiefs, turned smiles to groans, and contentment to disgust? Why did we read in the faces of a mighty people that dissatisfaction which universal society ought not to wear? Why were the noblest passions of the soul trampled under foot, and their want either ridiculed or disregarded? Had the demon of despair put forth his strength against thousands of individuals? Had ruin combined with tyranny to suppress the natural bursts of freedom, and to expel liberty from the land? Ah – yes! the voice of a weeping nation demanded the origin of causes which could produce such baneful effects, and determined to strangle the monster that laid waste their lands.

Aladdin was found unfit to reign. So great an empire much be governed by vigorous justice; he who undertakes to sway the sceptre of Irak Arabi, and who wishes to keep the hearts of the Faithful free from the contamination of vicious desires and examples must know how to rule himself, and curb his own passions. Totally neglecting all the avocations of his station, Aladdin plunged headlong into that dissipation which proved his ruin. The divan was deserted – injustice

prevailed. Bismillah ! They who remonstrated against the corrupt judges were beaten; and many a headless corpse was nightly thrown from the palaces of the emirs into the waters of the Tigris. On the following morning the lords of those palaces were not to be found !

Much more could I say on this sad story. I am willing to resign a sceptre I never solicited, and to vacate a seat to which I never aspired. But Aladdin shall not again have an opportunity of exercising his tyranny upon those who have put their trust in me. And you, O Cosman – you have undertaken the cause of him who had your daughter dragged away from the solitude in which you had placed her, during your expedition against the Seljuk sovereign. Come, then, Cosman, and let the brazen notes of war cease: let the clash of arms be succeeded by festivity and joy. Ahmed is no usurper – his fate depends upon the wishes of the people. Thy daughter is found – the virgin Zulima, chaste and lovely as before, is safe ! *En la illalla, il resoul alla.* [1]

The joy of Cosman at the receipt of this letter may be readily supposed: described it cannot be. In an instant he despatched six mutes to the pavilion inhabited by Aladdin, and the deposed prince was strangled after vain supplications for mercy and a desperate resistance. The conclusion of the tale may be anticipated: Ahmed proclaimed Zulima his favourite sultana, and reigned for many years over the empire of which Baghdad was the capital.

[1] `There is no God but Allah.'