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**THE PRINCE
WHO WAS A THIEF
AND OTHER STORIES**

Kyiv
"ZNANNIA"

THE PRINCE WHO WAS A THIEF

An Improvisation on the Oldest Oriental Theme

The doors of the mosque in Hodeidah stood wide and inviting after the blaze of an Arabian afternoon. And within, the hour of prayer having drawn nigh, were prostrated a few of the more faithful, their faces toward Mecca. Without, upon the platform of the great mosque and within the shadow of the high east wall, a dozen mendicants in their rags were already huddled or still arranging themselves, in anticipation of the departure of those of the faithful who might cast them a pice or an anna¹, so plain is the prescription of the Koran. For is it not written: "And forget not the poor, and the son of the road"? Even so, praise be to Allah, the good, the great.

Apart from them, oblivious of them and their woes, even of the import of the mosque itself, a score or more of Arabian children were at play, circling about like gnats or bats. And passing among these or idling in groups for a word as to the affairs of the day, were excellent citizens of Hodeidah, fresh from their shops and errands — Bhorī, the tin-seller, for one, making his way before going home to a comfortable mabraz², there to smoke a water-

¹ *Pice (paise), anna* — small copper change in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan; paise equals $\frac{1}{4}$ of an anna. (*Here and henceforward — editor's notes.*)

² *Mabraz* (verbatim from Arab. "the place of visible differences") — a long room on the upper floors of the buildings or on

pipe and chew a bit of khat¹; and Ahmed, the carpet-weaver, stopping at the mosque to pray before going home; and Chudi, the baker, and Zad-el-Din, the seller of piece goods, whose shops were near together, both fathers, these, and discussing trade and the arrival of the camel train from Taif. And now came Azad Bakht, the barber, mopping his brow as was his wont. And Feruz, the water-carrier, to offer water for sale. And many others came and went, for this was the closing hour of the shops; soon all would be making for home or the mabrazes after a moment of prayer in the mosque, so near is the hereafter to the now.

But Gazzar-al-Din, a mendicant story-teller, fresh from the camel train out of Taif which within the hour had passed beyond the Chedar gate, was not one of these. Indeed he was a stranger in Hodeidah, one of those who make their way from city to city and village to village by their skill as tellers of tales, reciters of the glories of kings and princesses and princes and the doings of Jinn and magicians and fabled celebrities generally. Yet poor was he indeed. His tales he had gathered on many travels. And though nearing the age of eighty and none too pre-

the open attics, settled with low couches and pillows, in which men gathered to associate and to chew khat.

¹ *Khat* — an evergreen flowering brushwood whose leaves contain alkaloid stimulant which causes excitement, loss of appetite, and euphoria. Its leaves and fresh upper sprouts are used for chewing and brewing tea analogous to the use of coca leaves and are prohibited by religion as alcohol. Still, chewing khat has a history as a social custom in the culture of Yemen, South America and Asia.

possessing of mien, yet so artful was he in the manner of presenting his wares that he had not thus far died of want. His garb was no more than a loin-cloth, a turban and a cape as dirty as they were ragged. His beard and hair had not for years known any other comb than the sands of the desert and the dust of the streets. His face was parchment, his hands claws, one arm was withered.

Taking in at a glance the presence of a score of comrades in misery at or near the mosque door, Gazzar-al-Din betook himself to a respectful distance and surveyed the world in which he found himself. The cook-shop of Al Hadjaz being not far off and some inviting fragrance therefrom streaming to him on the wind, he made shift to think how he could best gather an audience of all who now came and went so briskly. For eat he must. No doubt there were many in Hodeidah who told tales, and by those about the mosque who sought alms certainly an additional seeker would not be welcomed. Indeed there had been times when open hostility had been manifested, as in Feruz where, after gathering many an admirer from an admiring throng, once he had been set upon and beaten, his purse taken, and, to crown it all, a pail of slops cast upon him by a savage she-wolf of their pack. It behooved him therefore to have a care.

Still, all things considered, it was not so poor a life. Many had their homes, to be sure, and their wives and shops, but were there not drawbacks? The best of them were as fixed as the palms and sands of the desert. Once in their lives perhaps they had journeyed to Mecca or Medina, to be preyed upon and swindled, in some in-

stances even to be murdered, by the evil hawks that dwelt there. But in his case now. ...The fragrances from the shop of Al Hadjaz renewed themselves. ...There was nothing for it: he must find a comfortable doorway or the shaded side of a wall where he could spread his cape, belabor his tambour and so attract attention and secure as many anna as might be before he began to unfold such a tale of adventure and surprise as would retain the flagging interest of the most wearied and indifferent. And eventually secure him sufficient anna for his meal and lodging. But to do that, as he well knew, there must be in it somewhere, a beautiful princess and a handsome lover; also a noble and generous and magnificent caliph. And much talk to be sure of gold and power where so little existed in real life. In addition there should be cruel robbers and thieves, and, also, a righteous man too — though in real life, how few. Sometimes as the faces of those addressed showed a wane of interest it was wise to take apart and recombine many tales, borrow from one to bolster up another.

As he walked, looking at the windows and doors of all the shops and residences about him, he eventually spied a deep recess giving into the closed market a score of feet from the public square. Here he seated himself and began softly to thump his tambour, lest those religiously minded should take offense. Also it was no part of his desire to attract the mendicants, who were still before the door of the mosque. Soon they might depart, and then he would feel safer, for in them, especially for such as he — a fellow craftsman, as it were — was noth-

ing but jibes and rivalry. He drummed softly, looking briskly about the while, now at the windows, now toward the mosque, now along the winding street. Seeing two urchins, then a third, pause and gaze, he reasoned that his art was beginning to lure. For where children paused, their elders were sure to follow. And so it proved. Drawing nearer and nearer these first children were joined by a fourth, a fifth, a sixth. Presently Haifa, the tobacco vendor, limping toward the mosque to sell his wares, paused and joined the children. He was curious as to what was to follow — whether Gazzar would secure an audience. Next came Waidi, the water-seller, fresh from a sale; then Ajeeb, ne'er-do-well cleaner of market stalls for the merchants, and full of curiosity ever. And after him came Soudi and Parfi, carriers, an appetite for wonders besetting them; and then El-Jed, the vendor of kindling.

As they gathered about him Gazzar-al-Din ventured to thrum louder and louder, exclaiming: “A marvelous tale, O Company of the Faithful! A marvelous tale! Hearken! A tale such as has never yet been told in all Hodeidah — no, not in all Yemen! ‘A Prince Who was a Thief.’ A Prince Who Was a Thief! For a score of anna — yea, the fourth part of a rupee — I begin. And ah, the sweetness of it! As jasmine, it is fragrant; as khat, soothing. A marvelous tale!”

“Ay-ee, but how is one to know that,” observed Ahmed, the carpet-weaver, to Chudi, the tailor, with whom he had drawn near. “There are many who promise excellent tales but how few who tell them.”

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