

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

MILLIONAIRES OF ARABIA.

Claudius Clear, in the British Weekly, draws a sharp contrast between the millionaires of Arabia and those of the United States as depicted in the American novels of today.

Nobody who has read the "Arabian Nights" in any translation can fail to see that they are profoundly religious. A wind of thought blows through them, and occasionally the story is lost in the moral. We might say that the religion is in the words of the Prescher, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." But it would be more correct to read the lesson as one of the evanescence of all things in time and the eternity of the God Who does not pass.

Perhaps one quotation from "Sindbad the Sailor" will best show what I mean. When Sindbad went to Serendib he found that nothing could exceed the riches and the grandeur of the king. Nothing could excite greater admiration than the magnificence of his palace. When this prince wished to appear in public a throne was prepared for him on the back of an elephant; on this he sat and proceeded between two files composed of his ministers, favourites and others belonging to the court. Before him, on the same elephant sat an officer with a golden lance in his hand, and behind the throne another stood with a pillar of gold, on the top of which was placed an emerald about half a foot long and an inch thick. He was preceded by a guard of a thousand men, habited in silk and gold stuffs, and mounted on elephants richly caparisoned.

When the king was on his march the officer who sat before him on the elephant from time to time cried with a loud voice, "This is the great monarch, the powerful and magnanimous Sultan of the Indies, whose palace is covered with a hundred thousand rubies, and who possesses twenty thousand diamond crowns. This is the crowned monarch greater than ever was Solyma or the great Mihrage."

After pronouncing these words the officer who stood behind the throne cried in his turn, "This monarch, who is so great and powerful, must die, must die, must die." The first officer then replied: "Hail to him who lives and dies not!"

This then is the refrain, Must die, must die, must die. Against the generations that ebb away is set the eternity of God. But not only is there an ever-present sense of the imminence of death; there is side by side with it a continual insecurity. Earthly prosperity, however splendid, is held by the frailest of tenures. In a world full of robbers, assassins, corsairs, evil spirits, malignant powers, no one can afford to exult. The cool hand of reason is laid upon the burning brow of passion. There is perhaps no story, even in the "Arabian Nights," so well sustained in its interest as that of Sindbad, but there are others where the thought is much more subtle, more lofty, more mystical, and more sad. There is, for example, the tale of the Emir Moosa, who searches for the bottle of brass in which Solomon imprisoned disobedient Jinn. After long marches he approaches the City of Brass, with its impenetrable gates and its lofty towers, and stately palaces, and running waters, and gardens still bearing fruit, but with no living man therein. It was a city empty, still, without a voice or a cheering inhabitant but the owl hooting in its quarters, and birds skimming in circles in its areas,

and a raven croaking in its districts and its great thoroughfare-streets, and bemoaning those who had once lived and loved within it. The Emir finds a tablet whereon is written:

"Where are the kings and the peoples of the earth? They have quitted that which they have built and peopled; And in the grave they are pledged for their past actions; there after destruction they have become putrid corpses.

Where are the troops? They repelled not nor profited. And where is that which they collected and hoarded?

The decree of the Lord of the Throne surprised them. Neither riches nor refuge saved them from it."

The Emir finds two slaves watching for ever in the citadel of the City of Brass to see that none touch or rob the corpse of the mighty queen who thus in the writing tells the visitor her tale. This is the very heart of the religion in the "Arabian Nights" — the religion of the Arabian millionaires: "O thou, if thou know me not, I will acquaint thee with my name and my descent. I am Tedmur, the daughter of the King of the Amalekites, of those who ruled the country with equity. I possessed what none of the kings possessed, and ruled with justice, and acted with impartiality towards my subjects. I gave and bestowed, and I lived a long time in the enjoyment of happiness and an easy life, and possessing emancipated female and male slaves. Thus I did until the Summoner of Death came to my abode, and disasters occurred before me. And the case was this: Seven years in succession came upon us during which no water descended on us from heaven, nor did any grass grow for us on the face of the earth. So we ate what food we had in our dwellings, and after that we fell upon the beasts and ate them, and there remained nothing. Upon this therefore I caused the wealth to be brought, and meted it with a measure, and sent it by trusty men who went about with it through all the districts, not leaving unvisited a single large city to seek for some food. But they found it not; and they returned to us with the wealth, after a long absence. So thereupon we exposed to view our riches and our treasures, locked the gates of the fortresses in our city, and submitted ourselves to the decree of our Lord, committing our case to our Master, and thus we all died as thou beholdest, and left what we have built and what we have treasured."

Here is the meditative human mind in face of the fugitive splendour of mortality and the implacable and inscrutable force of nature. Few things in literature are more expressive than that of a starving host dying in the vain of a starving host dying in the vain of glory of jewels and gold that could not satisfy the primary needs of life. "In the name of God the Eternal, the Everlasting throughout all ages: In the name of God who begetteth not and Who is not begotten, and unto Whom there is none like; in the name of God the Mighty and the Powerful; in the name of the Living who dieth not—O thou who arrivest at this place, be admonished by the misfortunes and calamities that thou beholdest, and be not deceived by the world an "beauty, and its falsity and calumny and its fallacy and finery; for it is a flatterer, a cheat, a traitor. Its things are borrowed, and it will take the loan from the borrower, and it is like the confused visions of the sleeper and the dream of the dreamer, as though it were the sarab of the plain which

the thirsty imagineth to be water; the devil adorneth it for man until death. These are the characteristics of the world; confide not therefore in it, nor incline to it, for it will betray him who dependeth on it, and who in his affairs relieth upon it; fall not into its snares, nor cling to its skirts."

There is a very fine and faithful generosity about the Arabian millionaires in the way of conducting business. Sindbad the Sailor tells us in his first voyage that he found a ship with packages on which he saw his name written. He went up to the captain and asked him to whom these parcels belonged. The captain replied that they were Sindbad's who was drowned, and that he had resolved to sell them, and if he should meet with any of his family he might be able to return them the profit he should have made out of the principal. Sindbad declares himself, and at last the captain is convinced. He embraces Sindbad and says: "Heaven be praised that you have survived so great a danger; I cannot express the pleasure I feel on this occasion. Here are your goods, take them, for they are yours, and do with them what you please." "I thanked him and praised him for his honourable conduct, begged him, by way of recompense, to accept part of my recovered merchandise, which, however, he persisted in refusing." When Sindbad finds the valley of diamonds and fills his sack with the finest stones, he entreates the merchant who relieved him to choose for himself as many as he pleases. He contented himself with taking only one, and that too of the smallest size. Sindbad presses him to take more. "No," replied he, "I am perfectly satisfied with this, which is sufficiently valuable to spare me the trouble of making any more voyages to complete my little fortune." On his third voyage Sindbad finds the captain who held his possessions when he was left behind on the island. "God by praised!" cried he, embracing me, "I am delighted that fortune has given me an opportunity of repairing my fault. Here are your goods, which I have preserved with care, and always had valued at every port I stopped at. I return them to you with the profit I have made on them." Sindbad received them with the gratitude that such an action demanded.

What perfect gentlemen some of these men are! When Sindbad went back to the Sultan of Serendib on his last voyage "the prince immediately recollected me, and evinced great joy at my return. 'Welcome, Sindbad,' said he. 'I assure you I have often thought of you since your departure. Blessed be this day in which I see you again.'"

The Arabian millionaires have a constant sense of their duty to the poor. Sindbad, the poor porter in Bagdad, who had heard of the immense riches of Sindbad, could not help comparing his situation, which appeared so enviable, with his own, which was so deplorable, and distressed by the reflection he raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed in a loud voice, "Almighty Creator of all things, be pleased to consider the difference between Sindbad and myself; I daily suffer a thousand ills, and find the greatest difficulty to supply my wretched family with bad barley bread, while the fortunate Sindbad expends his riches with profusion, and enjoys every pleasure. What has he done to obtain so happy a destiny, or I to merit one so rigorous?" He strikes the ground with his foot, as if entirely given up to despair, when a servant