

Cross and Crown.

Oh, give me back the golden time Of candor and of truth. When life looked radiant and sublime, Seen with the eyes of youth: When hill and vale and plain and grove Basked in a golden glow That lit the smiling skies above, And bathed the earth below!

KAJI HAMED'S FLUTE.

BY LEW VANDERPOOL.

Low in the East, casting a rosy gleam through the mists of the far-off Red Sea, hung the full moon. Alone and with set teeth, Kaji Hamed rode out toward the luminary, fiercely glad that the coating of night made it possible to start on the long journey to Edfoo, over on the Nile, full six hundred miles away. As he left Gelabo, in the heart of the Oasis of Kurafah, he cast but a single glance to his direct left—a glance full of the hatred he felt for the Mediterranean and the white races beyond it, one man of whom was now forcing him to either renounce Allah or cross the Libyan Desert.

All night long he rode eastward in silence, speaking no caressive word to El-Senek, his favorite horse. Not once throughout that night did Kaji Hamed lift his eyes from the dreary sands. He had but one thought—to put as many miles as possible between himself and Gelabo before the dawn—Gelabo where he had grown rich in trade, but whose white-washed walls and mean, dun-hatched thatches he might never see again.

For four years Kaji Hamed had had three sources of pride, and but three—his daughter, his horses, his ever-growing wealth. And now, because the first was lost to him, he could win no consolation from the rest.

It was true, his belt was full of gold and jewels, and that El-Senek, whom men called the fleetest horse in all Libya, was under him. These were now but a small means to a mighty end—an end, too, which but for them and the over-ful measure of time and care he had given them, might never have faced him, blackening all his hopes, blighting all his days.

But for his horses and his lust for greater wealth, no Frank would ever have found it possible to steal his child's heart under his very eyes. Zelka, his daughter, was his slave also, born of a beautiful Georgian woman he had bought in Cairo twenty years before.

Unlike most Bedouins, he had loved his wife, and as she had gained ruder smatches of refinement from the people she had seen on her way from the Caucasian Mountains to the market-places, he, for her sake, gave up thieving, after the manner of his kindred, and settled in trade, in Gelabo, even before their daughter was born.

From the time her eyes were opened to the light, Zelka became the pride of the Georgian woman and her Arab husband, and of the wild, rude negro town as well, for the little one had never been kept veiled and tented, after the usual custom with Moslem women.

The mother of Zelka had many ambitions beyond those of her race and sphere, and among them was the desire to have her child see the great world of Egypt, and thus be chosen to wife by some worthier man than the Libyan Desert held.

To this dream Kaji Hamed raised no opposition; in fact, it quite fell in with his own wishes. He was growing rich, was a person of importance and influence, even over along the Nile, and so it was natural that he should wish some other than a Bedouin son-in-law. And so, before the end of Zelka's tenth year, her parents were already picturing to themselves the grand, fine husband to whom the little maiden was to be some day given.

Zelka, even then, was a woman in all save years, and far more beautiful than her mother had been, having, as she did, the mingled blood of two shapely, passionate races in her veins. Despite the hot climate in which she had grown, her skin was fairer than that of most of the women of Spain. In her eyes and hair alone was the midnight of the East wholly dominant.

Before she was eleven, a trader made the difficult passage to Gelabo from the northern coast. With him came his son, a youth of eighteen, upon whom the grace and beauty of Zelka made a most remarkable impression.

The parents of the little maid allowed the stranger youth to see more of her than was good for his peace of mind, so eager were they to study the effect of her extraordinary charms upon some one else than desert folk; and so he went away sighing because his back must be turned upon the first person of the subtler sex upon whom he had ever cared to cast a second glance. Zelka, too, was drawn to him, but either fear or some finer maidenly instinct caused her to keep her secret to herself. But she went in silent seclusion for many a night when the young Frank had gone away to the eastward with his father's caravan.

Two years later ambition caused Kaji Hamed to start with his wife and

daughter across the desert, northward for Cairo—an ambition which was twofold. A husband must be found for Zelka and the Gelabo trade must be extended.

Zelka's mother died on the way. Just before they reached Kasr Dakel, two hundred miles from Edfoo, she breathed her last. Dying, she bequeathed her husband to proceed on to Edfoo with Zelka, leave her with his brother, and then return to Kasr Dakel and take her dead body back to Gelabo, so that he might ever be near her tomb till Allah called him also. The prayers of the dying wife were granted. Sheik Ibrahim, of Edfoo, the uncle of Kaji Hamed, was given charge of her while Kaji Hamed went back on his mournful journey to Gelabo.

Old Ibrahim was as advanced in wisdom as he was in years, and to him his brother's ambition was grossest folly. In the sheik's mind, Allah sent men to whatever station and place best suited his high purposes; and if the divine will ever changed concerning any one, the divine radiance would clearly illuminate the way to such migration. Like the thorough Moslem he was, he held it highest sin to follow woman's counselings. It was, hence, all evil to forsake the desert and seek the cities to find a husband for Zelka. In his own good time Allah would send her a husband, wherever she might be. To seek to hasten the coming of Allah's time, and to venture to change his way, only savored of evil. This, in his mind, was why Kaji Hamed lost his wife, and that his ill-advised brother would be still further rebuked. Sheik Ibrahim had no doubt.

It was many months after the burial of his wife at Gelabo before Kaji Hamed rejoined his daughter. Raiders had been coursing the Northern Sahara, and they were at Gelabo, when he arrived, with scores of scores of fine horses, willing to barter them to whoever chose to bid. Kaji Hamed's wealth and station made him the very customer they sought, and no sooner was his dead wife underground than the raiders led him know they were willing to suit their time to his, and stay in Gelabo till the completion of his fitting period of mourning made it proper for him to inspect their herds. Many a week was thus consumed.

When Kaji Hamed was next in Edfoo a year had elapsed since the day he left it to go and bury his wife. His stay, this time, was even shorter than before. Now he was on his way to Cairo to dispose of an abundance of ivory, spices and horses, the fruit of much bartering with many traders; and so he decided that it would not be wise to cumber himself with women, but still left his daughter with his brother at Edfoo.

Sheik Ibrahim smiled joyously. Truly Allah was sending his brother wisdom. He had not only given over husband-hunting, but was bent on building up treasure, some portion of which, he had no doubt, would appease the wrath of Allah, by being devoted to such high purposes as were against heaven's foes.

But the sheik could devise better than he could discern. When Kaji Hamed returned from Cairo the worldly wisdom he had gathered from the traders there had made him more cautious than ever—a needless gain, thought the pious sheik.

It was now Kaji Hamed's purpose to leave Zelka at Edfoo still longer, while he went on to Gelabo and disposed of his possessions there, preparatory to making Cairo his home.

Sheik Ibrahim sighed. Civilization, he thought, was dangerous for Bedouins; it was bad enough for priests—but the latter had to face its perils; the work of Allah had to be done. For Kaji Hamed he trembled, so dire were the fateful things he in fancy saw overhanging him. What could he hope for a man who gave no heed to Allah's plain rebukes? The death of his wife had failed to bring Kaji Hamed to closer conformance with the laws of the Prophet; and so, in his mind's eye, Sheik Ibrahim already saw his brother's daughter and wealth taken from him.

But Kaji Hamed was incorrigible. None of his pious brother's admonitions were anything else than idle croakings to him. He heard them patiently, because his daughter was his brother's guest; but he only followed the counselings of his dead wife and his own heart. Zelka was again left at Edfoo, while her ambitious father pursued his cheerless way to Gelabo. The excitement of money-getting and the entertainment new-found friends had pressed upon him had kept him a long while at Cairo, which, together with his stay at Edfoo, made it now nearly four years since the burial of his wife, to whose place in his affections no other woman had succeeded—another offense on his part against Allah, in the opinion of the sheik, his brother. Once back in the home where most of his manhood had been lived, and beside the tomb of his wife, Kaji Hamed found it difficult to tear himself away from Gelabo and its negro denizens.

Day after day he put off his departure, suffering the most trivial circumstances to delay him. One, two, three months passed, and still the fascinations of the Oasis held him. Finally, just at daybreak, one morning, a messenger came to Gelabo from Sheik Ibrahim.

Zelka was gone—carried off by a young Frank, the son of a trader, whom she seemed to know and went with willingly. The old sheik had done all in his power to regain her and punish her abductor, but without avail. They were as hopelessly gone beyond human reach as smoke is when it melts in the air; so said the messenger. That day Kaji Hamed moved about with a leaden heaviness in his eyes, voiceless and with listless steps.

The people of Gelabo, knowing the reason of his sorrow, mercifully left the silence unbroken. All day long they watched his final preparations for departure from a respectful distance, much as one watches arrangements for a funeral. Toward evening his listlessness was put aside for such impatience as he, Bedouin though he was, found it difficult to repress. At last, when the sun was down, he rode hotly away toward the red and menacing moon, to rend both his daughter and her abductor, as was Allah's due. A hundred miles rewarded that night's wild riding, but for all that he was reluctant to halt, at daybreak, for his horse to rest and avoid death in the sun-heat. In vain did he try to sleep the succeeding day. Pain, rage, bitterness, singly and unitedly, kept him wakeful.

The sheik was right. He had been sinfully ambitious. He had never thought of marrying Zelka to some high-stationed follower of the Prophet; had he never gotten vain about her beauty, exposing her to this accursed Frank, both she and her mother would still be with him. It was the mother's fault, though—all her fault. But for her evil counselings none of these things would have happened. Oh, if he had but put her to lash for her ambitious pratings, as a good Mussulman should, he would not now be so utterly bereft; and, worse yet, the sport of the enemies of Allah as well. This last he must surely change. Allah forbid that flesh and blood of his—a true believer—should be the wanton sport of a Frank, a jeering denier of the Prophet and of true Omnipotence. And so, throughout that day, did he torture himself. More blood-like than he had ever seen it before was the moon when it rose that second night, fittingly symbolizing the red work he had before him.

Poor El-Senek! He wondered why the master, who had ever been so kind to him heretofore, was so hard and heedless that night, so prone to goad his flanks with his spurs till the sands behind them were specked with ruby stains. But Kaji Hamed had no time to think of his horse. All his mind was aflame with vengeance and the great penitential things he would do after that vengeance was accomplished. Once, about midnight, El Senek came to so sudden a halt that he nearly flung his master over his head. An unseen lion, behind sharp crags of rock which jutted up out of the sand beside their very path, terrified the poor beast with his roaring. More sharply yet was the gashing of penetrating spurs; and with a curse upon all distracting circumstances, Kaji Hamed fiercely bade his horse go on. Toward morning, when the moon was casting a sullen grayness over all the desert, a little cloud of sand in the advance betokened the coming of horsemen. For a moment Kaji Hamed halted, wondering, fearfully; then, with still a wider light in his eyes, he pressed on.

What had he to fear? His was a ride of vengeance to Allah; and so, would not Allah protect him? Were Bedouin thieves or devils ahead of him, he would ride them down! Who could withstand whomsoever Allah sent forward?

The whirling sand-cloud, encircling the unknown riders, drew nearer. Faster and faster still sped Kaji Hamed toward them. At last the strangers halted, opening ranks to inclose the man from Gelabo. With guns pointing at him they bade him stop. With a yell of disdain he disobeyed, spurring his horse till he fairly flew through the air. A shower of bullets came after him, but they went wide of the mark, and the fugitive answered them with a shriek of derision. What could the vile robbers of the desert do against one whom Allah was protecting? Then another volley was fired, and what was it—was he dreaming, or did Allah sometimes forget, or was vengeance wrong? He was hit—hit hard—and had fallen off his horse. El-Senek was beside him neighing knowingly, but somehow he could not rise, could not mount the faithful beast. Something, he could not exactly tell what, was wrong. It could not be—oh, no—it could not be that he had suffered fatal hurt, when he was doing the work of Allah; when he was going to devote all his life, all his wealth, all his thought to Allah; when once the stain of the Infidel was cleared from Zelka. Surely, the holy Prophet himself would have interposed in such a case! And yet he could not rise, could not even move. And the robbers had dismounted and were grouped around him, leering into his very face.

"It is the merchant, Kaji Hamed," said one of them. "What a pity we did not shoot the horse instead of the master. He would have paid us the ransom of a prince!"

"Kaji Hamed!" cried another. "Then may the Fiend seize us for our stupidity! Ransom of a prince—he would have paid us the ransom of a king! Do you not know? This is the merchant whose daughter the Frank stole. We are indeed in sad luck. A man will pay thrice for vengeance what he will for life."

As he heard them, Kaji Hamed wondered. Why did they speak of him as if ransom were out of the question? Ransom was the very thing! He would give them any price, even to inflicting utter beggary upon himself, if they would only insure his safe arrival at Edfoo. They were right. Vengeance was far greater than life; for was it not man's highest duty to Allah? But when he opened his lips to treat with them, no sound came forth. Pshaw! Could they not see that his throat was dry from long riding? Why did not some of them give him water?

Water! Ay—that was what he

wanted—all he wanted—all there was in the universe. Just water, water, water! Strange he never valued it so before! What was vengeance, or Zelka, or—yes—or even Allah! He would give all he had, everything, hopes, possessions—restricting nothing—if only he could feel soothing, cooling water once more in his burning throat and mouth. Ah! he would soon have it, for he could hear great floods of it, like the mighty, far-off seas, rolling toward him with deafening roar and surge. Soon relief would come, now. It would lift him up and sweep him away; but that would not matter, for it would also destroy his tormentors, those leering robbers who had first shot him down and then flung the shameful news of having a faithless daughter in his teeth.

"He is dead," said the robbers, spurring his pulseless body with their feet. Securing his horse and the gold and jewels in his belt, they rode away to the northward, fearing that the dead man might have followers close behind him who would run them down and seek redress. Slowly, from this way and that, the air currents swept the shifting sands above the victim of the marauders, until what the jackals and vultures had left of him was hidden from the upper world.

When the passing days had measured a full week the messenger who had summoned Kaji Hamed to Edfoo rode homeward, in charge of the caravan which was bearing the dead man's possessions from Gelabo to the Nile, on the way to Cairo. A bit of cloth, fluttering from a little mound, sent the blood flying swiftly through the veins of the sheik's messenger. Halting, he sprang from his horse and pawed madly at the mound. The shred of cloth, as he had feared, was a part of Kaji Hamed's turban. The bones and the garments, rended by birds and beasts of prey, told the whole tale all too plainly.

As Ibrahim's servant turned sorrowfully away to order the caravan to proceed, a hard, detached substance in the sand came in contact with his foot. Stooping, he picked the object up. It was a flute—a small, ivory flute, with silver mountings, and inscribed with Arabic characters—such an instrument as snake charmers use. The man put it in his tunic. He would take it to the sheik as an evidence that his brother was indeed dead. But, like many another worthy intention, it miscarried. When Edfoo and the quarters of the sheik were reached the flute was not to be found. Whether it had been lost or stolen the man who dugged it out of the sand could not say. Anyway, it was gone.

I, Paolo Girolamo, who have written the foregoing, partly from personal knowledge and partly from subsequent information, am the son of the Venetian trader—the youth who married Zelka.

It is true that I stole my bride away from her uncle, but it is truer still that she was a willing thief, her love having been all mine, the same as mine was all hers, from the day our eyes first met in Gelabo. To tell of the dreams her image filled, from the hour I turned my back on her, in the Africa desert, till fateful chance threw us together at Edfoo, would be to hold up to every man who has loved a woman the familiar mirror of his own experiences. And since to tell them to those to whom love has not yet come would be to invoke upon holy things the sacrilege of scornful doubts, it is better, in either case, that I leave the matter in silence.

Her gods and mine so favored us that we were married and safe out of Egypt before Kaji Hamed knew that his child was overtaken by love. It was not till we had been many months in Venice that we knew how Kaji Hamed died. The death of her father, in itself, caused Zelka but little grief, since she knew that her life would ever be in danger while he lived; but the manner of his passing, our love being its cause, was ever afterward a source of sorrow to her. But in the sweetness of our love-life there was little time for pain. The days sped on like a morning dream till half a score of years were gone, each moment of which was fuller of heaven-sent joy than the one before it. Hours beyond number, as the days went on, did we sit on our balcony, after nightfall, watching the gay groups in the gondolas, listening to their mirth and laughter; and sometimes, when in the mood for it, Zelka would sing some of the plaintive airs of the lute, I accompanying her on the lute.

At such times the people on the lagoon would often hush their music to hear ours, it was so weird and apparently formless—so wholly unlike the rhythmic lyrics of Italy.

One night, when the whole lagoon was listening and Zelka was singing as I had never heard her sing before, and my humble playing was stirred by infection from her to something unusual in force and spirit, a second flute from an adjacent gondola joined mine; and we instantly knew from his manner of playing that the unknown performer was an Arab; for he made no error in following the wild progression and abrupt inconsequence which makes Eastern music so incomprehensible to the rest of the world. When we accented him, the stranger said he was a Moor; and such, indeed, his face, manner, language, made him seem. Whether he was in search of some new Desdemona we never knew.

Several nights he joined us, mingling his music with ours; and when he finally left Venice he gave me, as a souvenir, a flute—a strange little instrument of ivory and silver, covered with inscriptions in Arabic. Some desert Bedouins had brought it to Fez,

from whom our Moroccan friend had obtained it. The quality of its tone was strangely high and pathetic, with an almost human vibrancy. It was a snake-charmer's flute, so Zelka said. She had seen many of them in the desert; in fact, her father had had one very like it.

Perhaps it was only fancy, but strange thrills went through me whenever I played it; and it disturbed Zelka also, for she never sang more than one or two songs when I accompanied her on it, while she generally sang a dozen when I used either of my other flutes.

One night she stopped in the middle of a song and covered her face with her hands. "Please put it by," she said. "I always fancy I can smell sandal wood and soume berries, my dead father's favorite perfume, when you play on that flute."

For a week I did not touch the uncanny thing; and then, one night, she asked me to get it.

"I must not give way to such idle fears," she said. "Mine is a brave race. I must be worthy of it. Play the flute till midnight, and I will overcome my folly and sing with it."

She was as good as her word and sang without a tremor, though, in the moonlight, I thought I saw an ever-increasing pallor overspreading her face. Just at midnight she suddenly fixed her eyes wildly upon mine, let a high note die in her throat and gave a little gasp; but in a moment she had recovered herself and went on singing, so I said nothing. Presently a strong and pungent odor filled my nostrils—unmistakably it was sandalwood and soume berries. Then my wife's voice stopped entirely. Looking toward her, I saw nothing—a strange mist was in my eyes. Nor, try as I would, could I rise. A chill was in all my body, and some will or power which was stronger than mine was holding me motionless.

How long this phenomenon lasted I do not know, but from what I have since been told it was until after the midnight hour was wholly done. To me it seemed longer than the entire span of my former life.

When I was free to move, I sprang to my wife's side. Her eyes were fixed in a vacant stare on some object straight before her. Her throat plainly wore the print of finger-clutches, as if some one had been trying to strangle her, and yet I knew perfectly well that no person could have reached her, as my chair completely blocked the balcony window. Following the direction of her stolid gaze, I glanced over my shoulder. There was a luminous flash, swift as lightning, and then, felled by a sledge-like blow on the head, I dropped backward across the motionless body of my wife.

Sheik Ibrahim came to Cairo two years afterward, where I then was, and where we made a mutual exchange of confidences.

"It was Kaji Hamed's flute which Allah sent you by the Moor," he said. "He had loved it and had played it so much that it was as a part of his life. Since you had stolen his daughter, your playing of the flute was the profanation of a holy thing; and so, summoned by your breath and touch, his soul came into it. At midnight it won power to act. Because she was his own flesh and blood, his soul had mightier compass of will over her than over you, whom, try as he would, he could only strike down."

Was this true, or was the Moor a spy first, and then a murderer, sent by the crafty sheik to avenge his brother's death and release Zelka from what to him was profanation? If the latter is the true explanation, which I doubt, what saved my life? Why did the mere playing of the flute so terrify my wife, and how came the soume, the rare desert berries, in Venice?

Whichever way it was, to one of these causes I owe the death of the sweetest wife the Eastern world ever gave to a Venetian husband.—Independent.

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