

A Modern Miracle

It was a sultry December day at Medinet, Habu, Gray haze spread dim over the rocks in the desert. The arid red mountains twinkled and winked through the heated air. I was weary with climbing the great dry ridge from the Tomb of the Kings. I sat on the broken arm of a shattered granite Rameses. My legs dangled over the side of that colossal fragment. In front of me vast colonades stood out clear and distinct against the hot, white sky. Beyond lay bare hills; in the distance, to the left, the meadow Nile, amid green fields, gleamed like a thin silver thread in the sunlight.

A native, in a single dirt garment, sat sunning himself on a headless sphinx hard by. He was carving a watermelon with his knife—thick, red, ripe, juicy. I eyed it hard. With a gesture of Oriental politeness, he offered me a slice. It was too tempting to refuse. That baking hot day, in that ruthless land, though I knew acceptance meant ten times its worth in the end in backstreet.

"Arabi?" I asked inquiringly of my Egyptian friend, which is, being interpreted, "Are you a Mussulman?"

"He shook his head firmly, and pointed with many nods to the tiny blue cross tattooed on his left wrist. "Nusrani," he answered, with a look of some pride. I smiled my acquiescence. He was a Nazarene, a Christian.

In a few minutes there had fallen into close talk of Egypt, past and present; the bad old days; the British occupation; the effect of strong government on the condition of the fellahin. To the Christian population of the Nile valley, of course, the advent of the English has been a social revolution. For ages down-trodden, oppressed, despised, these Coptic schismatics at last find themselves suddenly, in the ends of the earth, co-religionists with the new ruling class in the country, and able to boast themselves in many ways over their old Moslem masters.

I speak but little colloquial Arabic myself, though I understand it with ease when it is spoken, so the conversation between us was necessarily somewhat one-sided. But my Egyptian friend soon grew voluble enough for two, and the sight of the plasters laid in his dusky palm loosed the strings of his tongue to such an alarming extent that I began to wonder before long whether I should ever get back again to the Luxor Hotel in time for dinner.

"Ah, yes, excellency," my Copt said slowly, when I asked him at last about the administration of Justice under Ismail's rule, "things were different then, before the English came, as Allah willed it. It was stick, stick, every month in the year. No prayers availed. We were beaten for everything. If a fellah didn't pay his taxes when crops were bad, he was flogged till he found them; if he was a Christian, and offended the least Moslem official, he was stripped to the skin, and ruthlessly bastinadoed. And then, for any insubordination, it was death outright—hanging, or beheading, slash, so, with a scimitar."

And my companion brought his hand round in a whirl with swishing force, as if he were decapitating some unseen criminal on the bare sand before him.

"The innocent most often have been punished with the guilty," I remarked in my best Arabic, looking vaguely across at him.

"Ah, yes," he assented, smiling. "So Allah ordained. But sometimes, even then, the saints were kind; we got off unexpectedly. I could tell you a strange story that once happened to myself." His eyes twinkled hard. "It was a curious adventure," he went on; "the effendi might like, perhaps, to hear it. I was condemned to death, and all but executed. It shows the wonderful ways of Allah."

These Coptic Christians, indeed, speaking Arabic as they do, and living so constantly among a Mussulman population, have imbibed many Mohamedan traits of thought, besides the mere accident of language, such as speaking of the Christian God as Allah. Fatalism has taken as strong a hold on their minds as of Islam itself.

"Say, on," I answered, lightly, drawing a cigarette from my case. "A story is always of interest to me, my friend. It brings grief to the mill. I am a prin of the pen. I write down in books all the strange things that are told me."

My Egyptian smiled again. "Then this tale of mine," he said, showing all his white teeth, and brushing away the flies from his sore eye as he spoke, "should be worth your money for it's as strange as any of the Thou-

and and One Nights men tell for hire at Cairo. It happened to me near Assiout, in Ismail's days. I was a bold young man then—too bold for Egypt. My father had a piece of ground by the river side that was afterwards taken from us by Ismail for the Dalra.

"In our village lived a Sheikh, a very hard man, a Mussulman, an Arab, a descendant of the Prophet. He was the greatest Sheikh for miles and miles around. He had a large white house with green blinds to the windows, while all the rest of us in the government lived in mud built huts, round and low like bee hives. He had date palms, very many, and dourms, and dourma patches. Camels were his, and buffaloes, and asses, and cows, he was a very rich man; oh, so rich powerful. When he went forth to town he rode on a great white mule, and had a harem, too, three wives of his own, who were beautiful as the day—so girls who had seen them sat, for, as for us, we saw them not—pump women every one of them, as the Khedive's at Cairo, with eyes like gazelle's marked round with kohl, and their nails stained red every day with henna. All the world said the Sheikh was a happy man, for he had the finest dates in the country to eat, and servants and camels in plenty to do his bidding.

"Now, there was a girl in our village, a Nusrani, like me, a beautiful young girl; and her name was Lalla. Her eyes were like those of that child there—Zainabi—who carries the offenders' waterpail on her head, and her cheeks were round and soft as a grape after the inundation. I meant to wed her; and she liked me well. In the evening we sat and talked together under the whispering palm trees. But when the time drew near for me to marry her, and I had arranged with her parents, there came a pestilence from the Sheikh. He had seen the girl by the river as she went down to draw water, with her face unveiled, and though she was a Nusrani, she fired his soul, and he wished to take her away from me to put her into his harem.

"When I heard that word I tore my clothes in my rage, and all Christian that I was, and of no account to the Moslems. I went up to the Sheikh's house in a very white anger, and I fell on my face and asked leave to see him.

"The Sheikh sat in his courtyard, inside his house, and gave audience to all men, after the fashion of Islam. He entered and spoke to him. 'Oh, Sheikh,' I said boldly, 'Allah and the Khedive have prospered you with exceeding great prosperity. You have oxen and asses, buffaloes, and camels, men servants and maid servants, much millet, and cotton, and corn, and sugar cane; you drink Frank wine every day of your life, and eat the fat of the land; and your harem is full of beautiful women. Now in the village where I live is a Nusrani girl, whose name is Lalla. Her eyes are bright towards mine, and I love her as the thirsty hind loves water. Yet, hear, O Sheikh; word is brought me now that you wish to take this girl, who is mine; and I come to plead with you to-day as Nathan the Prophet pleaded with David, the King of the Benl Israel. If you take away my Lalla, my one eye lamb—'

"But at the word the Sheikh rose up and clenched his fist, and was very angry. 'Who is this dog?' he asked, 'that he should dare to dictate to me. He called to his slaves that waited on his nod. 'Take this fellow,' he cried in his anger, 'and tie him hand and foot, and flog him as I bid on his naked back, that he may know, being a Christian, an infidel dog, not to meddle with the domestic affairs of Moslems. It were well he were made acquainted with his own vileness by the instrumentality of a hundred lashes. And go to-morrow and bring Lalla to me, and take care that this Copt shall never again set eyes on her.'

"Well, effendi, at the words, three strong Arabs seized me—fierce sons of the desert—and bound me hand and foot, and beat me with a hundred lashes of the karbasi, till my soul was sick and faint within me. I swooned with the disgrace and with the severity of the blows. And I was young in those days, and I was very angry.

"That night I went home to my own mud hut, with black blood in my heart and took counsel with my brother Sargel how I should avenge this insult. But first I sent word by my mother to Lalla's hut that Lalla's father should bring her to meet us in the dusk, in very great secrecy, by the bank of the river. In the grey twilight she came down. A dahablah was passing, and it was a foreigner,

a very great prince, an American prince of great wealth and wisdom. I remember his name even. Perhaps the effendi knows him. He was Cyrus P. Q. Xenobos, and he came from Cincinnati.

"I have not the honor," I answered, smiling at this very unexpected Western intrusion.

"Well, anyhow," my Copt continued, unheeding my smile, "we hailed the dahablah, and made the American prince understand how the matter stood. He was very kind. We were brother Christians. He took Lalla on board, and promised to deliver her safe to her aunt at Karnak, so that the Sheikh might not know where the girl was gone, nor send to fetch her. And the counsel I took next with my brother was this; in the dead of night I stole up from my hut, and put a mask of white linen over the whole of my face, to conceal my features, and stole out alone, with a flask of oil in my hands, and went to the Sheikh's house down by the bank of the river. As I went, the jackals prowled around the village for food, and the owls from the tomb fitted high in the moonlight.

"I broke into the Sheikh's room by the flat-roofed outhouse (but led to his window, and I locked the door; and there, before the Sheikh could rouse his household, I beat him, blow for blow, within an inch of his life, in revenge for my own leaching, and because of his injustice in trying to take my Lalla from me. The Sheikh was a powerful man, with muscles like iron, and he grappled me hard and tried to wrench the stick from me, and bruised me about the body by flinging me on the ground, and I was weak with my beating, and very sore all over. But still, being by nature a strong young man, very fierce with anger, I fought him hard and got him under in the end, and thwacked him till he was as black and blue as I myself was, one mass of bruises from head to foot with my cudgeling. Then, just as his people succeeded in forcing the door, I jumped out of the window upon the flat-roofed outhouse and leapt lightly to the ground, and darted like a Jackal across the open cotton fields and between the plots of dourra to my own little hut on the outskirts of the village. I reached there panting, and I knew the Sheikh would kill me for my daring.

"Next morning, early, the Sheikh sent to arrest me. He was blind with rage and with the effect of the blows; his face was livid, and his cheeks purple. 'By the beard of the Prophet, Athanasio, he said to me, hitting me hard on the cheek—my name is Athanasio, effendi, after our great patriarch—your blood shall flow for this, you dog of a Christian. You dare to assault the wearer of a green turban, a Prince in Islam, a descendant of the Prophet. You shall suffer for it, you cur. Your base blood shall flow for it.'

"I cast myself down, like a slave, on the ground before him—though I hated him like sin, for it is well to abase one's self in due time before the face of authority. Besides, by that time, Lalla was safe, and that was all I cared about. 'Suffer for what, O my Sheikh?' I cried, as though I knew not what he meant. 'What have I done to your Excellency? Who has told you evil words concerning your poor servant? Who has slandered me to my lord, that he is so angry against me.'

"Take him away," roared the Sheikh to the three strong Arabs. 'Carry him off to be tried before the Cadi at Assiout.'

"For even in Ismail's days, you see, effendi, before the English came, the Sheikh himself would not have dared to put me to death untried. The power of life and death lay with the Cadi at Assiout.

"So they took me to Assiout, into the Mosque of Ail, where the Cadi sat at the seat of judgment, and arraigned me before him a week later. There the Sheikh appeared, and bore witness against me. Those who spoke for me pleaded that, as the Sheikh himself admitted, the man who broke into his room and hanged him so hard had his face covered with a linen cloth; how, then, could the Sheikh, in the hurry and the darkness, be sure he recognized me? Perhaps it was some other, who took this means to ruin me. But the Sheikh, for his part, swore by Allah and by the Holy Stone of the Kaaba at Mecca, that he saw me distinctly, and knew it was I. The moonlight through the window revealed my form to him. And who else in the village had no had a grudge against his justice?

"The Cadi was convinced. The Cadi gave judgment. I was guilty, of rebellion against the Sheikh and against al-Islam; and, being a dog of a Christian, unworthy even to live, his judgment was that after three days' time I should be beheaded in the prison court of Assiout.

"You may guess, effendi, whether or not I was anxious. But Lalla was safe, and to save my girl from that wretch's harem I was ready, for my part, to endure anything.

"Two nights long I lay awake and thought strange things by myself in the white, shed cells of the jail at Assiout. The governor of the prison, who was a European—an Italian, he called him self—and a Christian of Roum, of those who obey the Pope, was very kind indeed to me. He knew me before—I had worked in his field—and was sorry when I told him the tale about Lalla. But what would you have? That was the law of Islam. He could not prevent it.

"On the third evening, my brother came round to the prison to see me. He came with many tears in his eyes, bringing evil tidings. My poor old father, he said, was dying at home with grief. They didn't expect to find him this morning. And Lalla, too, had stolen back from Karnak unperceived, and was in hiding in the village. She wished to see me just once before I died. But if she came to the prison the Sheikh would find her out and carry her off in triumph to his own harem.

"Would the governor give me leave to go home just that one night, to bid farewell to Lalla and to my dying father?"

"Now, the governor, excellency, was a very humane man. And, though he was a Christian of Roum, not a Copt like us, he was kind to the Copts as his brother Christians. He pondered a while to himself and roped his moustache thus, then said to me—'Athanasio, you are an honest man, the execution is fixed for eight by the clock to-morrow morning. If I give you leave to go home to your father to-night will you pledge me your word of honor before St. George and the saints to return before seven?'

"Effendi," I said, kissing his feet, "you are indeed a good man. I swear by the Mother of God and all the saints that dwell in Heaven, that if you let me go, I will come back again a full hour before the time fixed for the execution." And I meant it, too, for I only wished before I died to say good-bye once more to Lalla.

"Well, the governor, took me secretly into his own house, and telling me many things over that he trusted to my honor, and would use his place if it were known he had let me go, he put me forth, with my brother, by his own private door, making me swear on my account to be late for the execution.

"As soon as I got outside, I said to my brother, 'Tell me, Sargel, at whose house is Lalla?'

"And my brother answered and smiled. 'Lalla is still at Karnak, where we sent her for safety, and our father is well. But I have a plan for your escape and I think it will serve you.'

"Never, I cried, horror struck, 'if I am to break my word of honor to the governor of the prison.'

"That isn't it," he made reply. 'I have a plan of my own, which I will proceed in words to make clear before you.'

"What happened next would be long to relate, effendi." But I noticed that the fellah's eyes twinkled as he spoke, like one who passes over of set purpose an important episode. "All I give you leave to go to your father, tonight through the good governor lay awake, wondering whether or not I would come home in time and blaming himself in his heart for having given such leave to a mere condemned criminal. Still, effendi, though I am but poor, I am a man of honor. As the clock struck six in the prison court next morning, I knocked at the governor's window, with the appointed signal, and the governor rose and let me in to my cell, and praised me for my honor and was pleased to see me. 'I knew, Athanasio,' he said, roping his moustache once more, 'you were a man to be trusted.'

"At eight o'clock they took me out into the courtyard. The executioner was there already, a great, black Nubian, with a very sharp scimitar. It was terrible to look round. I was greatly frightened. 'Surely,' said I to myself, 'the bitterness of death is past. But Lalla is saved; and I die for Lalla.'

"I knelt down and bent my head. I feared, after all, no respite was coming. The executioner stood forth and raised the scimitar in his hand; I almost thought I heard it swish through the air; I saw the bright gleam of the blade as it descended. But just at that moment, as the executioner delayed, a loud commotion arose in the outer court. I raised my head and listened. We heard a voice cry, 'In Allah's name, let me in. There must be no execution.' The gates opened wide, and into the inner courtyard there rode with long strides a great white mule, and on its back, scarcely able to sit up, a sorry figure.

"He was wrapped round in bandages and swathed from head to foot like a man sore wounded. His face was bruised and his limbs swollen. But he upheld one hand in solemn warning, and in a loud voice again he cried to the executioner, 'In Allah's name, Athanasio, let there be no execution.'

"The lookers on, to right and left, raised a mighty cry, and called out with one voice, 'The Sheikh! the Sheikh, who can have thus distinguished him?'

"But the Sheikh himself came forward in great pain, like one whose bones ache, and, dismounting from the mule, spoke aloud to the governor, 'In Allah's name,' he said, trembling, 'let this man go, he is innocent. I swore to him falsely, though I believed it to be true. For, see, last night, about twelve o'clock, the self same dog who broke into my house before, entered my room with violence, through the open window. He carried in his hand the self same stick as last time, and had his face covered, as ever, with a linen cloth. And I knew by his figure and his voice he was the very same dog that had previously beaten me. But before I could cry aloud or rouse the house, the infidel was upon me once more, and thwacked me, as you see, within an inch of my life, and covered me with bruises, and then bid me take care how I accused innocent people like Athanasio of hurting me. And after that he jumped through the open window, and went away once more. And I was greatly afraid, fearing the wrath of Allah if I let this man Athanasio be killed in his stead, though he is but an infidel. An I rose and saddled my mule very early, and rode straight into Assiout, to tell you and the Cadi I had some false witness, and to save myself from the guilt of an innocent soul on my shoulders.

"Then all the people around cried out with one voice, 'A miracle! a miracle! And the Sheikh stood trembling beside, with faintness and with terror. 'But the governor drew me a few paces aside.

"Athanasio, you rascal,' he said, half laughing, 'it is you that have done this thing. It is you that have assaulted him. You got out last night on your word of honor on purpose to play this scurvy trick upon us.'

"Effendi," I made answer, bowing low, 'life is sweet; he beat me, unjustly, first, and he would have taken my Lalla from me. Moreover, I swear to you, by St. George and the Mother of God, when I left the prison last night I really believed my father was dying.'

"The governor laughed again. 'Well, you can go, you rogue,' he said. 'The Cadi will soon come round to deliver you. But I advise you to make yourself scarce as fast as you can, for sooner or later this trick of yours may be discovered. I can't tell upon you, or I would lose my place. But you may be found out, for all that. Go, at once, up the river.'

"That is my hut that you see over yonder, effendi, where Lalla and I live. The Sheikh is dead. And the English are now our real lords in Egypt."—Grant Allen.

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