

ALFRED J. CHURCH



**STORIES OF
THE MAGICIANS**

**THE SACRED BOOKS
COLLECTION**

#414

Stories Of The Magicians

Rev. Alfred J. Church

Contents:

[Preface](#)

[The Story Of Thalaba](#)

[The Meeting Of The Magicians](#)

[Aswad](#)

[How Abdaldar The Magician Sought For Thalaba](#)

[How Thalaba Went On His Errand](#)

[How Thabala Fared On His Journey](#)

[What Thalaba Saw At Babylon](#)

[The Paradise Of Sin](#)

[How Oneiza Was Saved And Lost](#)

[The Deliverance Of Thalaba](#)

[The Magic Thread](#)

[Leila](#)

[The Sledge And The Boat](#)

[The Doom](#)

[The Story Of Rustem](#)

[Of Zal, The Father Of Rustem](#)

[The First Exploits Of Rustem](#)

[Rustem And His Horse Raksh](#)

[Rustem Fights With Afrasiab](#)

[How King Kaous Marched Against The Land Of The](#)

[Genii](#)

[The Seven Adventures Of Rustem](#)

Sohrab
The Last Victory Of Rustem
The Death Of Rustem

The Story Of Kehama
The Curse
The Glendoveer
Ladurlad
The Ancient Tombs
The Refuge
The Doom

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PREFACE

SOUTHEY'S Oriental Romances, *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehama*, are, I suppose, almost wholly unknown to the younger generation of readers. It must be confessed that they are not commended by their metrical form; but they display great power of imagination, and convey an admirable moral. I have tried to tell these two stories in prose.

I have added the *Story of Rustem*, greatly condensed, from Firdausi's *Shah-Nameh*, or Book of the Kings. I have availed myself of M. Jules Mohl's translation from the Persian, a popular edition of which, in seven octavo volumes, was published under the care of Madame Mohl in the years 1876-78. It was necessary to take some liberties with the story, for the chief of which I may plead the authority of Mr. Matthew Arnold, who, in his beautiful poem of "Sohrab and Rustem," represents the father as believing that the child born to him by his Tartar wife is a girl. In Firdausi's poem he knows that he has a son, but cannot believe that so young a child can be his stalwart antagonist.

The illustrations are taken from Persian and Indian MSS. in the British Museum.

HADLEY GREEN, Sept. 21, 1886.

THE STORY OF THALABA

THE MEETING OF THE MAGICIANS

MANY years ago there was in Arabia a great Society of very powerful magicians. These by diligent practice of their art had learnt such spells that they could do almost what they would, even to making the sun dark at noon-day. There was no end to the wickedness that they did, and the whole country groaned from the tyranny which they exercised upon it. These magicians had their chief meeting-place in a great cave under the sea, which was called the Domdaniel cavern; and here, when this story begins, they were assembled to deliberate about a very grave matter. It had been revealed to them by their art that a child had been born in Arabia who should destroy them and their dwelling, unless indeed they could first kill him. Further, they had learnt that this child was the son of a certain Hodeirah, an Arab chief who lived in the desert. Knowing this, the heads of the Society assembled together, and drew lots who should go to kill Hodeirah and his wife and children. He had eight children, and as the magicians did not know who among the eight should be the Destroyer, it was needful that all should be slain. One of the Society, whose name was Okba, drew the lot, and went immediately to do his errand, and the others waited till he should return; and as he could transport himself by his art in a moment of time whithersoever he would, they had no need to wait long.

There were three that sat together in the cavern; that is to say, three of greater note than the rest, namely, Khawla, the witch, and Lobaba, and Abdaldar. Before these three burned ten flames, that sprang up from the rocky floor of the cavern, and burned without fuel. One flame was the life of Iodeirah, and one the life of Zeinab his wife, and there was a flame for the life of each of his eight children. "Burn

flames," cried Abdaldar, "burn while the race of Hobdeirah lives." As they looked the flames began to grow dim and to waver. "Curse on him!" cried Khawla the witch, "curse on Okba's hasty hand!" The fool has failed; eight only are gone out."

So saying, she turned to inquire of the Teraph, or oracle, which the magicians had set up in their cave. This oracle was the head of a child, fixed on a plate of gold, and on the plate was written the name of an evil spirit. Only the eyes had life, and the mouth could speak. "Tell me," she said, "is the fire gone out that threatens the race of the magicians?"

The head answered, "The fire yet lives."

At that moment came Okba, bearing in his hand a dagger dripping with blood. "See the flames, Okba," said Khawla the witch. "See how they burn; and you know that while they burn, we are in danger. Did your heart fail you? Could you not see? A curse on your weakness."

"Khawla," said Okba, "you should have known me better. Eight times I struck, and I struck home; there needed no second blow. But when I would have struck the ninth time, there came a cloud about me, and my eyes could see nothing. I struck through the cloud with my dagger, and the dagger was driven back upon myself, and I heard a voice that said, 'Cease, son of Perdition. Thou canst not change what is written in the book of fate.'"

Then Khawla turned again to the oracle. "Tell me," she said, "where our enemy is hidden."

The dead lips answered, "I behold the sea, and I behold the land, but the boy is neither on the sea nor on the land."

Lobaba said, "A power that is mightier than we are protects him; but see! one of the Fires burns dim! see, it quivers! it goes out!"

As he spoke, the ninth fire went out; and only the tenth was left, a pale blue flame that seemed to tremble on the floor, as if the darkness would have swallowed it up. But while the magicians looked it grew and grew and spread over all the space where the ten had been.

And from thence it extended itself over the whole cave, so that the eyes of the Teraph, which before had shone so brightly, were dim in comparison with it; and the faces of the magicians were' ghastly pale as they looked at it.

Khawla was the first that regained her courage. She called up the chief of the evil spirits that were her servants, and said, "Tell me, Spirit, where lives the boy whose life is in the fire that burns before us?"

The Spirit said, "I cannot see him either on the sea or on the earth. Ask some believing spirit; I cannot answer thee."

"Bring Hodeirah," said Khawla; and, in a moment, so mighty were her spells, the dead man was laid at her feet, with the blood not yet clotted on his wound, and in his hand the sword which he had grasped in his death.

"Art thou in Paradise?" said Khawla, "or art thou under the throne of Allah? Wherever thou art, thou shalt hear my voice and obey."

And she muttered spells so terrible and so strong that Heaven itself trembled to hear them. And as she muttered them, the eye-balls began to roll and the lips to quiver. She

rejoiced to see that her spells had such power, and cried, "Hodeirah, tell me where is thy son?"

Hodeirah groaned and shut his eyes. "Speak!" cried Khawla again. "Answer me, or thou shalt live for hundreds of years in torture."

Hodeirah cried, "God deliver me from this agony." "Speak!" cried Khawla again, and snatched a viper from the ground and lashed him with it. But in that moment Allah heard his prayer, and Khawla had nothing but a corpse on which to wreak her rage. Then the fire spread from its place, and wrapped the body about with flames, and consumed both flesh and bones. But the sword was left. Then Khawla said, "The boy must be slain; but before he can be slain, he must be found. Let us draw lots who shall go and seek for him."

So they took the arrows of chance, and held them loosely in their hands with their points towards the flame. In a little time the arrow which Abdaldar held began to point to him. So the task fell to the lot of Abdaldar. He was to search through every tribe that dwelt in Arabia; not a solitary tent was he to leave unvisited till the boy should be found.

But how should he know the boy? The way that he contrived was this. He had a wonderful ring upon his finger, and in the ring a stone that was more wonderful still. It was made of dew that had been frozen in the very beginning of the world, and had lain with the whole weight of the Caucasus mountains upon it till it had become as blue as the sea. With this ring Abdaldar approached the fire, and caused by his spells that a spark of it should enter into the stone, for he knew that when he should put his hand having this ring on it upon the boy, the spark of fire would go out of the stone. For, being a part of the Boy's life,

it would join itself at once to that to which it belonged. So Abdaldar set about his search.

ASWAD

WHERE then was Thalaba that the Spirit could not see him either on the land or on the sea? When Hodeirah and his children were slain by Okba the Magician, Zeinab fled into the desert with Thalaba, the one son that was left to her, a lad of some twelve years of age. It was night, and she wandered on, not knowing where she was going or what she should do.

"Mother," said Thalaba, "tell me who slew my father?"

"I know not," answered Zeinab, "I did not think that he had an enemy."

"Well, I will hunt him through the world. Already I can bend my father's bow, and I shall soon have strength to drive an arrow into his heart."

"All that is far in the future, my son; but now we are in the desert."

And she looked round, but could not see even a tree; only the, dark blue sky closing them round on every side like a great dome. She thought to herself, "Why were we saved? we shall die here of hunger and thirst;" and she sat down and wept over the boy.

A moment after he cried out in wonder, and Zeinab lifted up her head, and saw before her a great palace in the midst of a wood. The trees were such that the very cedars of Lebanon could not match them, and the palace more

splendid than any that had ever been built in Egypt or Babylon or Rome. The two went into the wood, and walked on till, under the shade of a mimosa tree, they saw a young man lying on a couch. He had been asleep, but woke at the sound of their steps, and looked with wonder at the newcomers.

"Forgive us," said Zeinab, "distress has made me bold. Help us; God blesses them that help the widow and the fatherless."

"Thank God," said the young man, "that I hear again a human voice. But tell me, who are you that you have found your way into this place which no foot of man has trodden for ages?"

"Yesterday," said Zeinab, "I was a happy wife and mother. To-day I am a widow, and of my children this only is left."

"Heaven has surely guided you hither," cried the young man, "and lifted the veil which has hidden this place for many ages from the eyes of men. But hear my tale."

"This is the Paradise of Irem which King Shedad built in his pride. In the days of my youth this was a populous land and rich. The tribe of Ad inhabited it, and there was none whose sons were braver or daughters more fair. My name then was Aswad—what ages have passed since I heard it! I was of noble birth and rich. My father had a hundred horses in his stables; as for the number of his camels it was not known. We were prosperous and powerful, but alas! we worshipped idols, and we mocked the prophets of God when they bade us turn from our evil ways and repent.

"King Shedad conceived in his heart the desire to make a garden in the wilderness more beautiful than the Garden

of Eden, and to build in the middle of the Garden a palace which should surpass all the palaces upon earth. For this palace gold mines were exhausted, and precious stones, diamonds, and emeralds and rubies and sapphires were gathered from all the world, and ebony, that strange tree which has neither fruit nor leaves, but grows under the earth, where it is discovered by its scent. In the garden there were all the flowers that are known in the world. The trees Shedad transplanted full grown, for he was not content to wait. And in every walk of the garden there were marble statues of chiefs and heroes. Long since the statues have become mere shapeless lumps of stone, but the trees and the flowers remain, for the care of nature has perpetuated them. When the palace and the garden were finished, there came a great drought upon the country of the children of Ad. For three years there was no rain, till the wells were dried up. We prayed for rain, but we prayed to our idols; and it was all in vain. There was neither rain nor dew. At last the King sent a messenger, Kail by name, to the Red Hillock at Mecca, thinking that the gods would hear our prayers more readily from there. And all the while the prophet Houd, who was a messenger of the true God, continued to warn us, crying, 'Turn, ye men of Ad, from the wrath to come;' but we gave no heed to him.

"At this time it chanced that my father died, and was buried. At his grave, after the custom of the country, we tied a camel, and left it to die, that when the resurrection came, he might find it ready to mount. It was his favourite beast, and it had carried me often when I was a child, and one day as I passed by, it knew me, and turned its eye upon me. Sunk it was and dim, for the beast was nearly dead of hunger. I could not bear to see it, and taking my knife, I cut the rope, and let it go free, thinking that there was no man near to see what I did. But Houd the prophet saw me, and

said, 'Blessed art thou, young man, for this good deed. In the day of visitation, God will remember thee.'

"And, indeed, the day of visitation was at hand. King Shedad had now finished building his palace. So he sent out his commands that all his people, men and women, young and old, masters and slaves alike, should come and see his palace, and keep a great feast. On the day appointed they all came. Their tents upon the sands of the desert were as many as the waves of the sea. And the King went up to the top of the highest tower of the palace that he had built, and showed himself. When the people saw him they shouted, 'He is a God! He is a God!'

"Then in the wantonness of his heart he commanded that the Prophet Houd should be brought. He led the man of God through all the courts with their columns of many-coloured marbles, and the rooms shining with gold and jewels. 'Hast thou ever seen such a sight as this?' he said. 'They say that Heaven has made thee wiser than other men. Canst thou then tell the value of these things?' Houd the prophet answered, 'O Shedad, only in the hour of death can a man value such things.'

"But the pride of the King was not one whit abated. 'Hast thou fault to find with the building?'

"The prophet said, 'The walls are weak, for Azrael, the Angel of Death can enter in. The building is ill-secured, for the Icy Wind, which nothing that lives can endure, can pierce it.'

"The King's face fell, and his lips were pale with anger.

"Then he led the Prophet to the top of the tower, and pointed to the multitude; and when they shouted again, 'He

is a God! He is a God!' he asked, 'Say, Prophet, do they not speak the truth?'

"The Prophet said not a word, but when he looked at that great multitude he wept. As he looked there went up a great cry of joy. 'The messenger is come! Kail has returned from Mecca, and he brings back the boon which he sought.' Then we went out, and looked up to the sky, and there was a deep black cloud over our heads. All the people looked up and blest the coming rain. Meanwhile the messenger told his tale to the King.

"I went to Mecca, and knelt at the Red Hillock, and prayed to God for rain. And when I had finished my prayer, I saw three clouds in the sky. One was white like the clouds that hang over the sky at noon; and one was red, like the clouds that have caught the last rays of the sun in the evening, and the third was black and heavy with its load of rain. As I looked, there came a voice from Heaven, 'Choose, Kail, one of these three.' So I chose the black cloud that was heavy with rain.'

"You chose right,' said the King. And all the people shouted 'Right!' But the Prophet stood up and cried, 'Woe to the children of Ad, for death is gone up into her palaces!' Then he turned to the multitude and said, 'Fly from the wrath to come, ye who would save your souls alive, for strong is the hand that holds the bow, and His arrows err not from their mark!'

"Then a few faithful souls came out from the throng and followed him. But the rest answered him with laughter or with curses. And when he was about to depart with the faithful few, he looked back and his eye fell on me. He called me by my name, 'Aswad!' I heard him and trembled. Again he said, 'Aswad!' and I had almost followed; but I

was afraid of the laughter of my friends, and I stayed, and the opportunity was lost.

"When the Prophet had departed the cloud grew blacker and blacker. At length it opened, but there was no rain there, only the Icy Wind of Death. Thousands and tens of thousands fell all around me, till the King and all his people had perished; and I was left alone. Then there came a voice, 'Aswad, in the day of visitation God hath remembered thee!'

"I tried to go forth from the scene of death. The way was open and I could see no barrier, but there was a chain round the place that I could not pass. Twice I attempted to pass. The third time the Voice said, 'Aswad, be content, and bless the Lord. Repent of thy misdeeds, and when thy soul is prepared, breathe thy wish to die, and Azrael shall come.'"

"And here I have lived since that day, I know not for how many ages. I have heard no sound but of the fountain as it rises and falls, and of the tree as it whispers in the wind. My clothing has not grown old, and my sandal is not worn upon my foot. But sinner that I am, I dare not ask to die."

This was the tale that Aswad told. Zeinab said, "You are blessed, Aswad. The Lord who has saved you from destruction will call you when He sees fit. But oh, that when I wished to die Azrael might come for me! This very hour would I go to Hodeirah and my children!"

As she spoke there was heard the rushing of wings, and Azrael stood beside the three. His face was dark and solemn, and indeed he never smiles, but it was not stern. "Zeinab," he said, "thy prayer is heard. Aswad, thy hour is come." When they heard him speak, they fell upon the

ground and blessed the voice. "Me too! me too!" cried Thalaba, "O angel of Death, take me too!"

"Son of Hodeirah," said the angel, "it is not thine hour. Thou art chosen to do the will of Heaven, to avenge thy father's death, and to do the mightiest work that ever was done by man. Live and remember this: "Destiny hath marked thee from mankind." In a moment he was gone. And when Thalaba looked round him, the palace and the gardens had vanished away, and he was alone in the desert.

HOW ABDALDAR THE MAGICIAN SOUGHT FOR THALABA

ABDALDAR travelled over all Arabia, searching for Thalaba. From tribe to tribe, from town to town, even from tent to tent he passed. When he rose in the morning the wish to find the lad was the first that came into his mind, and when he lay down to sleep it was the last thing that he thought. Even in his dreams it was with him: many times did he come upon some lad whose look and bearing seemed to be such as the fated youth should have; but when he had warily applied the ring to him, the fire in the ring still burned, and he knew that he had not finished his search.

At last, when the year was nearly ended, he came to a solitary tent, the cords of which were stretched in a grove of palms. The grove stood in the middle of the desert, like an island in the middle of the sea. There he saw a girl standing under a palm, holding out her apron and looking up to a boy who had climbed into the tree, and was clinging with one arm to the trunk, while with the other he pulled and threw down clusters of dates. Abdaldar approached the tree. He leant upon his staff, and sweat stood upon his

forehead. He looked like a venerable old man, somewhat wearied with his day's journey.

"Will it please you to give me some food?" he said.

The girl offered him dates from her lap, and the boy ran to the tent and fetched him a draught of water. Meanwhile the master of the tent, Moath by name, came out and saluted the stranger, and bade them spread a meal for the traveller. They spread it under a Tamarind tree, rice as white as snow, and dates, and figs, and water from the well. The girl also brought water in which she had steeped the acid fruit of the Tamarind. No one who had drunk of this would wish for wine, so refreshing is it. She blushed for joy when the stranger praised it and drank again. Meanwhile the boy had fetched a melon. He had made a hole in the rind days before, and had closed the wound with wax; and now all the pulp had been changed into a most delicious liquid. This he offered to the guest.

Abdaldar ate and was satisfied. And as he ate he talked of his travels, for he had seen many countries in his life. Moath sat pleased to listen to him; and the girl listened as she took away the dishes, standing with her hands full to hear what he might next say. But none listened so eagerly as Thalaba; and to Thalaba the traveller with seeming kindness chiefly addressed his talk. With round eyes and open mouth the boy sat, and, that he might not lose a word of such delightful talk, came close to the old man. And he, as if in familiar mood, laid his hand on Thalaba's arm, and in a moment the fire out of the ring had fled.

Abdaldar grew pale with joy, for his search was ended. But at the very moment Moath said, "It is the hour of prayer. Let us first make our ablutions, and afterwards praise the Lord."

The boy fetched water from the well; and they made their ablutions according to the law, and bent their heads to the earth in prayer.

Abdaldar did not bend his head, but stood over Thalaba with his dagger in his hand. But before the arm which he had lifted to strike had the power to descend, the Simoom, the deadly wind of the desert, blew. Moath and Thalaba and the girl, Oneiza, did not feel it, for they were prostrate in prayer; but it smote Abdaldar; and when they rose, they saw the traveller lying dead with the dagger in his hand.

When they were about to bury the Magician, Thalaba spied a ring upon his finger and said, "See, Oneiza, the dead man has a ring! Should it be buried with him?"

"Surely," she answered, "he was a wicked man, and all that he had was wicked."

"But see how it catches the sunlight and throws it back again. It is a marvellous stone."

"Why do you take it, Thalaba? Why do you look at it so close? It may have a charm to blind or poison you. Throw it in the grave. I would not touch it."

"And round its rim are large letters."

"Bury it, bury it."

"It is not written as the Koran is written. Perhaps it is in some other tongue. The accursed man said he had been a traveller."

Meanwhile Moath came out of the tent, and asked,
"Thalaba, what have you there?"

"A ring the dead man wore. Perhaps, father, you can read its meaning."

"No, boy; the letters are not such as ours. Heap the sand over it; a wicked man wears nothing holy."

"Nay, do not bury it. Perhaps some traveller may come to our tent who can read it. Or we may find a learned man in some city who can interpret it."

"It were better hid under the sands of the desert. It is likely that this wretched man whom God smote in the very moment of his crime was a Magician, and that these lines are of the language which the demons use. There is, I have heard, a great company of magicians that have their place of meeting in the Domdaniel caverns under the sea."

"And was he who would have killed me one of these?"

"That I do not know. It may be that your name is written in the book of fate as their Destroyer, and that God saved your life that you might do this work."

"Think you that the ring has some strange power?"

"Every gem, wise men say, has a power of its own. Some grow pale or dark and warn the wearer against poison. Some blunt the edge of the sword. Some discover hidden treasures; and others, again, give us power to see spirits."

"Father, I will wear this ring."

"Think, Thalaba, what you are doing."

"In the name of God! if its power be for good, well; if for evil, then God and my faith in Him shall hallow it."

So he put on the ring of gold with the strange letters written on it. After this they laid the body of Abdaldar in the grave, and levelled the dust of the desert over him.

The next day, at sunrise, when Thalaba went to make his ablutions, he found the grave open and the body bare. It was not the wind that had swept away the sand, for the dew lay undried upon the dust about it. Indeed the night had been so calm and still that not a ripe date had been shaken down from the palms.

When Moath heard the story he said, "I have heard that there are places made so holy by holy men having dwelt in them, that if a dead body should be laid in them they cast him out. It may be that this is such a place. Or can it be that this man is so foul with sorcery and wickedness that heaven and earth alike reject him? We had best forsake the station. Let us strike our tent. And see there the vulture! It has already scented its prey. And, indeed, that is the best sepulchre for this accursed one."

Then they purified themselves from the pollution of death. Thalaba drew up the cords of the tent, and Moath furled it, and Oneiza led the camels out of the grove of palms to receive their load. The dew was dried from the ground when they left the Island of palms; when they halted at noon they could see them in the distance, as we see the sails of a fleet far off at sea. At sunset the Island had passed out of their sight. Then they pitched their tent and lay down to sleep.

At midnight Thalaba felt that the ring moved upon his finger. The magicians of the cave knew by their art that he had possessed himself of it, and sent an evil spirit to steal it from him. He called on the name of God, and Moath heard him. "What ails you, Thalaba?" he cried. "Are there robbers in the tent?"

"See you not a spirit in the tent?"

"I see moonlight shining, and I see you standing in it, and I see your shadow, but I see no more."

The lad said no more to Moath, but spoke to the spirit, "Spirit, what brings thee hither? In the name of God, I charge thee to tell me."

"I came for the ring."

"Who was he that slew my father?"

"Okba, the magician, slew him."

"Where does the murderer dwell?"

"In the Domdaniel cavern under the sea."

"Why was my father slain and his children with him?"

"Because we know that the Destroyer was to come of the race of Hodeirah."

"Bring me my father's sword."

"A fire surrounds it. Neither Spirit nor Magician can pierce that fire."